

Thabo Mbeki and the Afrikaners, 1986-2004

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Introduction

After 13 years of democracy, the oldest liberation movement on the African continent has entrenched its dominant position in South African politics. The transition to a democracy in 1994 was the product of negotiations – whether an agreement between elite groups or not. Fact remains that the National Party (NP) surrendered its political power to the African National Congress (ANC) without an incessant revolution.

Clandestine talks between representatives of the South African government and the ANC were conducted inside South Africa (especially with Nelson Mandela), while a group of prominent Afrikaners (mostly academics and businessmen) held secret talks with the exile component of the ANC in Britain. Thabo Mbeki led the ANC deputation during these meetings from the mid-1980s and also was the key figure in talks with Afrikaners. After the ANC assumed power, Mbeki continued talks with Afrikaner groups before and after he became President in 1999. This article examines the nature and scope of these interactions, and shows how Mbeki niftily used his diplomatic skills to convert different Afrikaner groups to accepting the ANC's goodwill towards Afrikaners as a minority ethnic group, notably during the last four years of the 1980s, up to the end of his first term as President of a democratic South Africa. The study is by far not the last say on the topic, but hopefully offers a first orientation of the role of meaningful bilateral discussions between different sections of the Afrikaner community and a number of influential ANC leaders (Mbeki in particular) in order to bring about a better

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understanding of each others' fears and aspirations. Furthermore, it attempts to fill a gap in existing studies, which hardly consider Mbeki's attitudes towards Afrikaner groups from 1994 up to the end of his first term as President of the country.

Note on terminology

Definitions of ideologies or political trends are dynamic and may change over time. For instance, "conservative", "liberal", "right-wing" or "left-wing" are terms that should be used within the context of the period or society which is being studied. By the middle of the twentieth century, Afrikaners in general could be described as "conservative", which encompassed their religion, philosophy on life, and political convictions. Most of them who supported the NP were exponents of Afrikaner nationalism and a racial policy of segregations (later apartheid). From the late 1960s, however, differences regarding the application of apartheid split the Afrikanerdom. At the time Professor Willem de Klerk coined the following terms to describe the two groups: the *verligtes* (those who are enlightened) questioned the viability of apartheid on moral, as well as economic grounds and pressed for reforms. They also stood for a broader and more inclusive vision of Afrikaner nationalism. On the other hand were the *verkrampes*, the conservative and obdurate Afrikaners who opposed deviation from the original apartheid policy, and espoused a more exclusive form of Afrikaner nationalism. They parted with the *verligtes* in the early 1970s and in subsequent years numerous right-wing organisations were formed, of which the Conservative Party (established in 1982) was the most influential. The *verligtes* went on to support the reform and eventual demolishing of apartheid. This article includes various Afrikaner groups with different convictions who were engaged in talks with Mbeki.

For the sake of clarity the following terms used in this article are explained: *Afrikaners*: a collective term used when all factions of Afrikanerdom are implied; *verligte Afrikaners*: those Afrikaners who supported changes to the existing racial policies; *right-wing Afrikaners*: a collective name for conservative Afrikaners who rejected the idea of a multiracial society without group rights; *far-right*: extremist Afrikaners who supported apartheid, and on occasion resorted to violence; *liberal Afrikaners*: Afrikaners who endorsed the principles of liberalism, including equal opportunities, rule of law, no interference of the state in the economic life, and the protection of individual rights. They opposed apartheid since its inception and were members of liberal parties such as the Progressive Federal Party.

Mbeki's road to power¹

Born on 18 June 1942 in Mbewuleni (near the market town of Idutywa) in rural Transkei, Mbeki completed his schooling through correspondence. After the ANC was outlawed in 1960, he did underground work in South Africa for the party, simultaneously studying by correspondence for a degree in Economics at the University of London. In 1962 he was commanded by the ANC to go into exile, and continued his studies at Sussex University, where he obtained a master's degree in Economics. His major political schooling was formed in the ANC's London office, where he worked for an extensive period as political secretary for the president of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, and simultaneously as director of information and publicity. His experience in diplomacy includes various African countries and in 1975 he became a member of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC.²

Although Mbeki was never a military leader, he underwent military training in the Soviet Union and also received political training at the Lenin Institute in Moscow. Never a fervent communist, Mbeki's historical consciousness was nevertheless underpinned by a Marxist analysis of South African society. According to his oversimplified view, the central theme of South Africa's history was one of enslavement of the black people through an agreement between Afrikaners and English-speakers to obtain cheap black labour. Thus blacks had become the "exploited producers". He lavishly quoted Marx and Engels in his earlier writings. In a speech in Beichlingen in August 1971, he expressed his trust in "Leninist vanguardism".³

Yet Mbeki demonstrated an open mind toward diverse ideological forces. He recognised, for instance, the influence of Black Consciousness

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1. Useful biographical studies of Mbeki's early career are: T. Mbeki, *Africa The Time has Come* (Tafelberg/Mafube, Cape Town/Johannesburg, 1998); W.M. Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2005), pp 35-37; M. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki The Dream Deferred* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg/Cape Town, 2007), chapters 1-12. Also see: T. Lodge, *Politics in South Africa From Mandela to Mbeki* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2002), pp 241-243.
 2. Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 37; P. van Niekerk and B. Ludman (eds), *Mail & Guardian A-Z of South African Politics 1999 The Essential Handbook* (Penguin Books, London, 1999), p 179.
 3. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 297; Mbeki, *Africa The Time has Come*, pp 9, 20, 22, 26, 41-42; 63. Ronald Roberts rejects a suggestion by James Myburgh that Mbeki was a Stalinist in the 1970s. See R. Roberts, *Fit to Govern The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki* (STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007), p 55.

(BC) especially among young black intellectuals and although he had reservations about the racial exclusivism of the movement, he thought that ANC members should reach out to BC members as potential political allies.⁴ Although a stern exponent of non-racialism as entrenched in the ANC's Freedom Charter, Mbeki was also an Africanist, with commitment to the cause of the continent of his birth. One of his biographers, Lucky Mathebe, portrays him as a traditionalist, who is rational, progressive and reasonable, and whose thinking and leadership has been formed within the ANC. He is no ruthless, manipulative leader, but his politics are rooted in the historical situation in exile, which fed into the "invented" or "familial" tradition of the ANC. An African at heart, Mbeki romanticises the great African past: the pyramids of Egypt, the sculptured stone buildings of Aksum in Ethiopia, African music, dance, and so on. Mathebe acknowledges that Mbeki is also a pragmatic politician, but that does not exclude his devotion to the "familial" tradition. Mathebe ascribes Mbeki's use of race as a weapon on occasion to his concept of race which is once again entrenched in his historical tradition.⁵

Mbeki was among ANC leaders who believed that the South African Defence Force was by far too powerful to be defeated by military means,⁶ and that diplomatic contact with influential whites would in the long run be beneficial to the ANC. Tambo agreed with this analysis and commissioned Mbeki in the early 1980s to coordinate the ANC's diplomatic campaigns. One of the new strategies of the party was to involve more white South Africans in anti-apartheid campaigns. One of the most important meetings to this effect took place on 13 September 1985, when the ANC met with leading South African businessmen in Zambia. Encouraging for these people, who were not representing Afrikaner interests *per se*, but those of business, the ANC gave the assurance that it was not interested in the nationalisation of industries, and that it was also seeking peace. Knowledge that Mbeki

4. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 317-318.

5. L. Mathebe, *Bound by Tradition The World of Thabo Mbeki* (University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2001), pp 31, 36, 52, 60-61, 76, 86, 121, 154, 166, 189.

6. S. Zunes, "The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, March 1999, pp 140-141, 145. Mbeki believed that, instead of overthrowing the NP government, so many people had to be turned against apartheid that the government would be forced to abandon the policy. His philosophical view was that it was braver to talk than to fight. See Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 500. Essop Pahad confirms Mbeki's views on the matter, but maintains that Mbeki always acted within the framework of the strategy of ANC's NEC. Personal interview, Author with Doctor Essop G. Pahad, 29 January 2008.

never preached Soviet socialism or its Eastern European equivalent, nor African socialism, probably pacified business leaders and enabled them to talk to him. Tambo also regarded negotiations as essential, and convinced other sceptics in the party, such as Chris Hani.⁷

During the rest of the 1980s, Mbeki's ground-breaking talks with Afrikaners in Britain helped to pave the way for official constitutional talks which culminated in the acceptance of a new constitution. In the new political dispensation, Mbeki was appointed as First Deputy President in the Government of National Unity, and under the final democratic Constitution he became Deputy President, playing an increasingly important role in governance, especially with regard to economic and foreign policy. The acid test for his support in his own party came when Mbeki and Cyril Ramaphosa were candidates for the position of Deputy President of the ANC. Without a strong power base of his own, Mbeki again manoeuvred behind the scenes to ensure the support for him by the NEC.⁸

The decline of Afrikaner power⁹

From 1948 until the early 1970s, Afrikaners had a prosperous time. Their control of the state meant a dramatic improvement in the Afrikaners' role in the economy. The gap between the income of English-speaking South Africans and that of Afrikaners steadily narrowed. The economy in general grew at a rate of 4,5 per cent per year. The thriving position of whites was ensured by the systematic and ruthless application of apartheid, while protest was mercilessly smothered. Hendrik Verwoerd not only pursued white control, but also Afrikaner hegemony. The NP as the vehicle of Afrikaner power went from strength to strength.

7. Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 38-39.

8. Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 46-49.

9. The period 1961-1985 has been discussed by a number of scholars, including R.M. Price, *The Apartheid State in Crisis Political Transformation in South Africa 1975-1990* (Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, 1991), chapters 2-9; H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners Biography of a People* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003), chapters 14-17; H. Giliomee, "Broedertwis": Intra-Afrikaner Conflicts in the Transition from Apartheid", *African Affairs*, 91, 364, July 1992, pp 342-357; M. Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid South Africa, 1910-1986* (David Philip/Wildwood House, Cape Town/London, 1989), chapters 2, 3, 8 and 9; D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Raven Press, Randburg, 1996), chapters 5-18.

However, by the middle and late 1960s, the class base of the NP had changed significantly. Increasingly Afrikaners (also Nationalists) had obtained a foothold in the economy and started to question apartheid's restrictions on the availability of black labour. B.J. Vorster, Verwoerd's successor, realised that Afrikaner nationalism would not endure if the interests of all Afrikaners were not looked after. Small apartheid changes were made, which caused a split in Afrikaner ranks in the late 1960s, though not significantly so.

Crises in the 1970s (the Durban strikes by black workers; the withdrawal of the Portuguese from Africa; and the Soweto uprising of 1976) necessitated drastic racial reforms, but both Vorster and his successor, P.W. Botha, vehemently opposed a unitary state.¹⁰ The most drastic step was the creation of the Three Chamber Parliament, which excluded black people. The result was the most serious insurrection in twentieth-century South African history. The United Democratic Front, which was formed in August 1983 to oppose the constitutional changes, effectively made the black townships ungovernable. Not even two states of emergency could end the violence in the country.

The unity of the ruling NP was further eroded by a more serious split, when the Conservative Party (CP) was established in 1982. The CP soon drew the majority of Afrikaner votes away from the NP. A myriad of right-wing groups (some extremely radical) came into being, mostly exponents of a *volkstaat* (nation-state) idea. Pressure from Western countries further weakened the state's position, while more pressure came from *verligte* Afrikaners to negotiate with the ANC.¹¹

What must also be understood, is that it was not only the NP government that was under pressure at this stage. The collapse of the

10. Afrikaner reflections on the viability of apartheid to protect the *volk* have been analysed in Hermann Giliomee's brilliant article "'Survival in Justice': An Afrikaner Debate over Apartheid", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36, 3 (July 1994).

11. A study based on questionnaire responses shows that by 1988, prominent Afrikaners felt pessimistic about the government's ability to protect their interests any longer. The turmoil in the country after 1984, spurred on by black resistance, was seen by respondents as a major threat to stability, but not necessarily a threat caused by apartheid. Thus, Afrikaners' fears for safety and the loss of identity were just as salient as the threat to their material position. Communism was widely regarded as a driving force behind the threat. K. Manzo and P. McGowan, "Afrikaner Fears and the Politics of Despair: Understanding Change in South Africa", *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, 1 (March 1992), pp 10-14.

communist system in Europe meant that the ANC was deprived of financial and logistic support. For instance, their main source of finance, the Soviet Union, was no longer capable of financing the ANC. The organisation therefore faced a similar crisis.¹²

Mbeki's meetings with Afrikaners during the 1980s

One of the earliest known meetings between Mbeki and an Afrikaner took place in December 1984, when Piet Muller, a *verligte* and independent thinker, who was deputy editor of the Afrikaans paper *Beeld*, met Mbeki in Lusaka. In a *Beeld* leader, Muller afterwards advised that the government should start talking to the ANC, even if in secret.¹³

Another important meeting followed in June 1986. Amidst the turmoil in the country, Mbeki talked to the chairman of the secret Afrikaner Broederbond and principal of the Rand Afrikaans University, Pieter de Lange, who was also a *verligte* Afrikaner. The two men were attending a Ford Foundation Conference on Long Island, New York.¹⁴ This was the first overt conversation Mbeki had with a leading nationalist-establishment white Afrikaner about a political settlement in South Africa.¹⁵ Although the conversation was productive, Mbeki was nevertheless sceptical afterwards, because his impression was that Afrikaners tended to advocate change when abroad, but to revert to silence when back home again. Apart from that, he was doubtful whether a radical mind-shift was possible with P.W. Botha in the President's seat.

12. W. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town/Oxford, 1994), p 254; Personal interview, Author with Professor Sampie Terreblance (Professor of Economics at the University of Stellenbosch), 10 July 2007.
13. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 501.
14. A. Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country The Inside Story of South Africa's Negotiated Revolution* (Struik, Sandton, 1994), p 72; P. Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (Viking, London, 1997), pp 68-69.
15. It should be made clear that the talks with Muller and De Lange were not the first meeting of Afrikaans-speaking white men with Mbeki. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, who was leader of the liberal opposition against the NP government, the Progressive Federal Party, had already talked to Mbeki in October 1985 in Lusaka when the executive of the PFP had gathered with prominent members of the ANC leadership. Later Slabbert's liberal organisation, the Institute for a Democratic Alternative (Idasa) which had been established in November 1986, had several meetings with the ANC in the late 1980s. See F. van Zyl Slabbert, *Duskant die Geskiedenis 'n Persoonlike Terugblik op die Politieke Oorgang in Suid-Afrika* (Tafelberg/Jonathan Ball Publishers, Kaapstad/Jeppestown, 2006), p 55; Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 496-497.

De Lange's views on the possible scrapping of the Mixed Marriages and the Group Areas Acts were however illuminating to Mbeki. De Lange thought that the disappearance of these laws would prove to Afrikaners that their survival was not dependent on the existence of legislation. It strengthened Mbeki's own belief that Afrikaners were approachable if an understanding of their deepest fears were to be demonstrated.¹⁶

Significant efforts to establish contact between the government and the ANC were to follow. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) which had been gathering information about the ANC – indirectly via visits to President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and by infiltrating the organisation – was determined by 1987 to arrange a meeting between the external wing of the ANC and the South African government. NIS head, Niel Barnard, had the same view as Mbeki, namely that South Africans should come to an agreement without outside interference.¹⁷ P.W. Botha was informed about NIS plans to establish contact with the ANC, but he did not want to get involved, because at the time the government policy was not to negotiate with a “terrorist” organisation. Botha however seems to have had second thoughts, because the government subsequently decided that informal contact with the ANC should be established. Barnard was instructed to approach Willie Esterhuysen, Professor of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University and a *verligte* Afrikaner, to obtain information on behalf of the government on the strategies of the ANC and to report via the NIS to Pretoria.

Regular talks between Thabo Mbeki and Esterhuysen followed, and a friendship developed between them, which has lasted to date.¹⁸ While Mbeki was the polished diplomat, Esterhuysen was described by one author as “a rougher diamond [than Mbeki], his thick Afrikaans accent almost a badge of cultural identity”.¹⁹ An academic with some standing, he was also a practical thinker,²⁰ and a man whose integrity was never disputed.

At this stage, Tambo himself was anxious to meet influential Afrikaners with access to the South African government or other

16. Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country*, pp 73-74; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, p 69.

17. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 491-492; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, p 75; Personal interview, Author with Doctor Essop Pahad, 29 January 2008.

18. Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country*, pp 78-79; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, pp 73-80.

19. Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, p 77.

20. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 41.

influential bodies. Facilitated by Michael Young, head of Communications and Corporate Affairs at Consgold, meetings between white Afrikaners²¹ and an ANC delegation (without Mbeki) took place in October 1987 at a hotel in England, the Compleat [sic] Angler at Marlow. Initially both parties were apprehensive about a meeting between “enemies”. At first the atmosphere was tense and no agreement was reached, but the parties at least talked, instead of demonising each other. They also agreed to meet again.²²

The next meeting was held at Eastwell Manor Hotel, Kent, England between 21 and 24 February 1988. Mbeki, as Director of Information of the ANC, led the team, while Esterhuysen headed the Afrikaner delegation and reported continuously to Barnard about proceedings. Esterhuysen was adamant that these talks should not be made public.²³ Mbeki was master of the situation. He was charming, articulate and persuasive. Smoking his pipe, he listened attentively to the white group’s expression of Afrikaner fears of living under a black government. He impressed South Africans with his equanimity. His answers were rational and persuasive, while his charm was, as one writer describes it, “a game of strategy”.²⁴

More of these meetings – now held at Mells Park House in Mells, Somersetshire, and one at Flitwick Park in Bedfordshire – were to follow. All in all, 12 meetings took place between November 1987 and May 1990. All the time, as mentioned above, the NIS under the leadership of Barnard, was briefed by Esterhuysen, while Mbeki reported to the ANC leadership in Lusaka. Though not explicitly confirmed by Esterhuysen, other commentators and writers are fairly sure that P.W. Botha was aware of (and informed about) proceedings, while Mbeki was also aware of Botha’s knowledge. At that stage, official talks with the ANC were still not sanctioned by the South African government.

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21. Most of these Afrikaners could be described as *verligte*, “establishment” Afrikaners belonging to Afrikaner organisations and/or supporting the National Party government. Although in favour of reform, they were also referred to in some circles as the representatives of the “regime”. Sources differ about the names of the Afrikaners that attended the first meeting.
 22. R. Harvey, *The Fall of Apartheid The Inside Story from Smuts to Mbeki* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003), pp 127-129.
 23. Personal interview, Author with Professor W.P. Esterhuysen, 10 July 2007.
 24. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 499, 544. Also see: Harvey, *The Fall of Apartheid*, pp 133-139; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, pp 77-79; Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country*, pp 76-86.

The meetings were held in a relaxed atmosphere, with ample quantities of excellent Scotch whisky to enhance the cosiness. A mutual understanding of each others' motives, ambitions, doubts and expectations developed.²⁵ There were in fact two sets of discussions: those by the group, as well as private discussions between Mbeki and Esterhuysen. A series of critical topics were discussed: racial barriers and tensions in South Africa, the armed struggle, the state of the South African economy, international sanctions, the possibility of Mandela's release and political developments in general. The ANC delegation wanted first-hand information on the views of the Afrikaans churches and more specifically the debates within the Dutch Reformed Church about apartheid. Esterhuysen requested Reverend Ernst Lombard to draw up a document in this regard. What was perhaps the most decisive factor in producing successful talks between the two groups (according to Esterhuysen) was to involve Afrikaner businessmen as requested by the ANC. Thus the influential Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut (Afrikaner Commercial Institute) was also represented. There was nevertheless a condition made by the ANC group: all the members of the Esterhuysen group were not to be present during talks with Afrikaner businessmen. This caused some friction within the Afrikaner group. Talks with businessmen were nevertheless productive and significant, with people such as Marinus Dahling forming strong ties with Mbeki. His background in Economics at Sussex and continuing interest in the subject enabled Mbeki to demonstrate a sound understanding of political economy and the world economy in general.²⁶ One of the Afrikaner group, economist Sampie Terreblanche, believes that Mbeki by then had already accepted the neo-liberal American-British model concerning economic policy. This, according to Terreblanche, contained the seed of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). Pressure from the major Western countries and influential organisations such as the World Bank on the ANC also played a role in Mbeki's plan for economic growth in the country once the ANC had taken over the government.²⁷

25. Doctor Willem (Wimpie) de Klerk recalls that talks started on Friday and continued throughout the weekend, and often about two-thirds of Monday as well. He and Mbeki were friendly towards each other and on one occasion had a long walk together, talking about a variety of topics, excluding politics. Personal interview, Author with Doctor W.J. de Klerk, 13 February 2007.

26. Personal interview, Author with Professors W.P. Esterhuysen and S.J. Terreblanche, 10 July 2007; Personal interview, Author with Doctor Essop Pahad, 29 January 2008; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, pp 78-80.

27. Personal interview, Author with Professor S.J. Terreblanche, 10 July 2007.

Mbeki also met another group of Afrikaners in July 1987. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, Executive Director of Idasa (who had had several meetings with the ANC in exile in the late 1980s) invited a group of white South Africans, predominantly Afrikaners, to accompany him to Dakar, Senegal, to hold talks with an ANC delegation led by Mbeki. The group of sixty included academics, economists, writers, artists and theologians. Unlike the Mells Park House group, the Dakar group were not typical “establishment” Afrikaners. There were *verligtes*, some more liberal than others, and a few from the far left. The topics that were discussed during the ten days in Dakar correlated to an extent with those dealt with in Mells, England: sanctions and boycotts against South Africa, the role of the Communist Party, the free market system and a future bill of rights. Mbeki opened the meeting with the words: “I am Thabo Mbeki. I’m an Afrikaner”. Journalist Max du Preez, who attended the conference, described Mbeki as a clear thinker, a sincere person with a sense of humour, intelligent and charming.²⁸ The term “seducer” was also attached to Mbeki by other political commentators and authors.²⁹

Further talks between the NP government and the ANC

At a secret meeting on 12 September 1989 which took place between Mbeki and senior agents of the NIS, procedures for the return of the ANC to South Africa in order to take part in negotiations, were discussed.³⁰ The general public was, of course, neither aware of any talks between the ANC and the NIS, nor of meetings with Afrikaner groups in England. Neither did they know that Barnard was feeding P.W. Botha with information. Unlike Botha, F.W. de Klerk, who had received regular letters from his brother Willem about the discussions with the ANC in Britain, refused to read these reports (according to Willem) and was opposed to the talks until late October 1989. De Klerk then finally agreed to authorise the continuation of the secret talks with the ANC and was

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28. M. du Preez, *Pale Native Memories of a Renegade Reporter* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2004), pp 147, 150-151, 156-157; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, p 74; Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 510-515; F. van Zyl Slabbert, *Afrikaner Afrikaan Anekdoten en Analise* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1999), pp 78-79; Slabbert, *Duskant die Geskiedenis*, p 37.
29. Mark Gevisser, for instance, chose as the caption of chapter 32 of his biography of Mbeki, “The seducer”.
30. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 531. In October 1989, Mbeki convinced the Commonwealth to accept the OAU’s Harare declaration which embodied the ANC’s conditions for a negotiated settlement. At the same time, at a National Executive Meeting of the ANC, some members strongly favoured intensified military confrontation with the South African government.

briefed about developments at Mells Park.³¹ He however kept this knowledge to himself and when he delivered his speech of 2 February 1990, only his cabinet members had been informed. Ordinary Afrikaners and NP members were kept in the dark about the “leaders’ pact”, and this contributed to the division in Afrikaner ranks.

Mbeki had his own problems within the ANC. His initiatives with Afrikaners were not unanimously accepted. Nelson Mandela was furious when Barnard informed him about the talks, interpreting it as an attempt by government agents “to drive a wedge between me and the external wing”. He felt aggrieved that he had not been consulted.³² In addition, an influential group within the exile corps was disgruntled with Mbeki’s lack of accountability concerning talks with Afrikaners. Especially Joe Slovo, Chris Hani and Ronnie Kasrils vigorously defended their strategy of using negotiations only as a front for continuing the armed struggle.³³

The momentum brought about by the talks in Britain about a peaceful settlement was however stronger than individual reservations. The debates within the ANC were no longer about the merits of talking, but rather about the timing. As Essop Pahad remarked, Mbeki did not deviate from the ANC’s strategy to combine the armed struggle with constitutional talks, which was in line with the Harare Declaration, but he fully realised that the apartheid regime was not on its knees. Its war machine was formidable, and apart from that, it already had preliminary talks, mainly through the NIS, with some of the frontline states. To consolidate the feelers which had been sent out, Mbeki applied himself to preparing the ground for greater things to come.³⁴

From late 1985, Nelson Mandela was also engaged in secret talks with Kobie Coetsee, the then Minister of Justice, Police and Prisons, as well as the Director of the NIS, Niel Barnard, and his colleague Mike Louw. Mandela proved to be conciliatory, a particularly reasonable and sensible man with no grudge against Afrikaners or any other white groups. His main concern was to accomplish a real democracy and a united nationhood. Like Mbeki, he won the NP politicians and officials, who were mostly Afrikaners, over.³⁵ By the end of 1989, the scene was set for open

31. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 544-545.

32. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 546.

33. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 552-553. Essop Pahad points out that differences within the ANC were to a large extent about the timing of the talks. Personal interview, Author with Doctor Essop Pahad, 29 January 2008.

34. Personal interview, Author with Doctor Essop Pahad, 29 January 2008.

35. Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country*, pp 19, 21, 37-39, 48-56; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, pp 86-106.

constitutional talks to move the country irreversibly away from apartheid and Afrikaner dominance. In his speech of 2 February 1990, F.W. de Klerk announced the end of apartheid, the lifting of bans on political parties, and the beginning of negotiations for a new political dispensation.

Although Cyril Ramaphosa was on the forefront in the negotiations at Codesa I and II, Mbeki played a key role behind the scenes in bilateral talks between the government and the ANC. As the ANC's chief negotiator at Working Group III, he took responsibility for the design of an interim government which would take the country to democracy. Working behind the scenes – his most successful negotiating strategy – Mbeki and Jacob Zuma played a pivotal role in persuading Inkatha to take part in the 1994 elections. After the collapse of Codesa II, Mbeki met with *verligte* Afrikaners with whom he had had contact in the late 1980s, including Pik Botha and Dawie de Villiers, to discuss outstanding issues regarding the Codesa negotiations. He strongly advocated power-sharing as a transitional measure before democracy.³⁶

Mbeki and the right-wing Afrikaners

While the Codesa talks were reaching a crucial phase, Mbeki's first major encounter with a section of the Afrikaners within the country took place. His involvement was determined by a perceived threat from extremist far-right Afrikaners. These included organisations such as the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), led by Eugène Terre'Blanche (with a military wing named Stormvalke, and affiliates such as the Wenkommando and Boere-Brandwag), and the Boerestaat Party with its military wing, the Boereweerstandsbeweging. Given the fact that the right wing did not enjoy much political support in the referendum of March 1992, it might come as a surprise to many that these groups would pose a serious threat to the state, but both President Mandela and Mbeki were nevertheless wary of the influence the right wing still wielded at the time of the 1994 election, especially in the Police and Defence Force.³⁷

36. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, pp 607-611; Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 43.

37. Esterhuysen recalls that Mbeki took copious notes of discussions between the Esterhuysen group and the Mbeki group as far as the threat of the right-wing Afrikaners was concerned. Tambo was also informed by Mbeki (Personal interview, Author with W.P. Esterhuysen, 10 July 2007). Pahad confirms that the ANC was concerned about the far-right, and considered Constand Viljoen as a moderate leader who had wide influence among the security forces. However, the ANC leadership also thought that an encounter with right-wing leaders might be useful to create a mutual understanding of each others' expectations and aspirations (Personal interview, Author with Doctor Essop Pahad, 29 January 2008).

Hadland and Rantao claim that the number of extremist far-right groups had grown to more than 200 by 1993, and acts of sabotage and other forms of violence increased considerably after December 1991. Some of these groups openly declared that they would not accept a black government and would even take the law into their own hands, if necessary.³⁸ Stephen Ellis' study shows how disruptive and dangerous covert actions of clandestine forces had become by the early 1990s.³⁹

Amidst mistrust among many right-wing Afrikaners about a negotiated settlement with the ANC, General Constand Viljoen, former Head of the Defence Force, was approached by right-wing Afrikaners to provide strategic leadership outside the ambit of organised politics. The main objective was to secure self-determination for Afrikaners, particularly concerning their language and culture. These aspirations would be best realised within an own *volkstaat*.⁴⁰ Viljoen, himself an expert on revolutionary warfare, also believed that South Africa's problems should be addressed along political lines and not by military means.

He and his supporters established an umbrella Afrikaner organisation, the Afrikaner Volksfront (Afrikaner People's Front), on 11 March 1993. Both the NP and the ANC were perturbed about this development, especially when a directorate of generals (including Viljoen) was formed. Besides, more right-wing groupings were formed. In October 1993 the Vryheidsalliansie (Freedom Alliance) came into being, which included the Volksfront, Mangosutho Buthelezi's Inkatha, the Conservative Party (CP) and the Afrikaanse Volksunie (Afrikaner People's Union).

Through mediation of Viljoen's twin brother, Professor Abraham Viljoen (a liberal Afrikaner) and Jurgen Kögl, a friend of Van Zyl Slabbert who applied himself tirelessly to prevent a right-wing insurrection, Constand Viljoen as well as Mangosuthu Buthelezi became

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38. A. Hadland and J. Rantao, *The Life and Times of Thabo Mbeki* (Zebra Press, Rivonia, 1999), pp 78-79. According to this source, Mbeki had already sensed the potential danger of the right wing by 1991, and tried to establish contact with the Conservative Party. For a discussion of far-right organisations up to 1991, also see B.M. du Toit, "The Far-Right in Current South African Politics", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29, 4, December 1991, pp 642, 644-645, 651-652, 661-663.
39. S. Ellis, "The Historical Significance of South Africa's Third Force", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 2, June 1998, pp 280-299.
40. R. Southall, "The South African Elections of 1994: The Remaking of a Dominant-Party State", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32, 4, December 1994, p 631.

part of the negotiation process.⁴¹ The directorate of the Volksfront decided to negotiate directly with the ANC (in September) instead of the Kempton Park negotiators on the question of Afrikaner self-determination in a new South Africa. In turn, the Viljoen supporters would prevent the outbreak of right-wing violence. Mandela, Mbeki and a few other heavyweights formed the ANC team, with Mbeki as the leader of the delegation. People with more diverse backgrounds and worldviews than the two chief negotiators, can hardly be imagined. Both were thoughtful, bright men with strong leadership qualities. Viljoen – an honest, straightforward Afrikaner – was a strategist in the science of warfare, a man with common sense. Mbeki drew his vast knowledge of politics and diplomacy from his own wide readings and diplomatic experience overseas, plus the first-hand knowledge of developments in the country, provided by the groups of Afrikaners who had met with Mbeki in Britain. Viljoen found Mbeki as leader of the ANC delegation to be a very intelligent man and an extremely skilful negotiator. The Volksfront prepared thoroughly on international protocols regarding the concept of self-determination. An important document to cement an agreement would have been signed at the Carlton Hotel, Johannesburg, on 21 December 1993.

The agreement committed both parties to a non-racial country, taking into account the endeavour of many Afrikaners to fulfil their aspirations in a *volkstaat* nation-state. Similarly the aspirations of other groups would be respected. The dangerous conflicts between members of their respective constituencies would be addressed urgently. It was also agreed that a working group of the two parties would be formed. Most of its obligations would be to examine the workability of a *volkstaat*. The Volksfront in turn would oppose any destabilisation of the transitional process. Finally, it was decided that the leadership would meet soon.⁴²

However, Ferdi Hartzenberg, in his capacity as chairman of the Afrikaner Volksfront's Executive Council, advised Viljoen on 20 December 1993 from Cape Town not to sign the agreement, as Buthelezi was not prepared to co-operate with the ANC. Viljoen adhered to the request, which he later regretted, because this clearly illustrated the division in Afrikaner ranks to Mbeki. Nevertheless, Jacob Zuma, who was to sign as the ANC representative, told Viljoen that as far as he was

41. Slabbert, *Duskant die Geskiedenis*, p 23.

42. Memorandum of Agreement between the African National Congress and the Afrikaner Volksfront [December 1993], pp 1-5 (document in the possession of General C.L. Viljoen).

concerned, it was an “unsigned document”, endorsing an agreement between the Freedom Alliance and the ANC.⁴³

Although negotiations almost stalled in January 1994, Mbeki and Viljoen maintained their contact. Mbeki indicated that according to international law, the concept of self-determination for a community could be legitimised if there were “substantial proof of support” for such a group. Such proof, according to Viljoen, was impossible to provide before the 1994 election. He thus tried to get the support of F.W. de Klerk to propose that a *volkstemming* (referendum) be held, but De Klerk was not interested. Thereupon Mbeki suggested to Viljoen that if the Volksfront would take part in the 1994 election, the ANC would regard every vote for the Volksfront as a vote for self-determination. Furthermore, Mbeki was prepared to accept less than 50 per cent support from Afrikaner votes for the Volksfront (in fact 35 per cent would satisfy him) as “substantial proof of support” for the principle of self-determination. Reflecting on the matter, Viljoen’s conclusion was that Mbeki had actually done more for the Afrikaners at that time than F.W. de Klerk.⁴⁴ Mbeki must have been extremely careful in handling this issue, because when the *volkstaat* idea was submitted to the Committee on the Demarcation/Delimitation of States, Provinces and Regions in February 1994, both Cyril Ramaphosa and Nelson Mandela discarded any notion of a *volkstaat*.⁴⁵ Working with his two colleagues as well as Viljoen, required a balancing trick of the first order from Mbeki.

Although Viljoen had achieved much to bolster the case for self-determination, many members of the Volksfront found it difficult to agree with the concept on which he and Mbeki had been working. The right-wing Afrikaners were by now seriously divided, and it became increasingly difficult for Viljoen to handle some of the more radical elements within the Volksfront. Especially the failed attempt by Eugene Terre’Blanche and some of his AWB followers to invade Bophuthatswana to provide military support to Lucas Mangope, was a serious embarrassment to Viljoen (the AWB was part of the Volksfront). Viljoen reiterated that violence was no option in solving political problems.⁴⁶

43. Interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

44. Interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

45. Y.G. Muthien and M.M. Khosa, “The Kingdom, the Volkstaat and the New South Africa: Drawing South Africa’s New Regional Boundaries”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 2, June 1995, p 309.

46. Interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

When neither the Volksfront, nor the Vryheidsalliansie was prepared to consider taking part in the 1994 election, Viljoen resigned from the Volksfront and formed the Vryheidsfront (FF – Freedom Front). On 23 April 1994 an important agreement was signed between the Freedom Front, represented by Viljoen; the ANC, represented by Mbeki; and the NP government, represented by Roelf Meyer. The accord considered Constitutional Principle 34, dealing with self-determination as well as other provisions of the 1993 Constitution and the unsigned agreement of 21 December 1993 between the ANC and the Afrikaner Volksfront. The essential points regarding the agreement of 23 April 1994 dealt with the matter of substantial, proven support for self-determination at national and local level, including the concept of a *volkstaat* and a *volkstaatraad* (nation-state council), the latter serving as an advisory body. All agreements would be concluded by a process of negotiation.⁴⁷

The road to the election was, however, not as easy as newspapers reported and authors portrayed it.⁴⁸ In fact, a drama unfolded in which emotions could easily have exploded. The problem, Viljoen explained, was that the signing of the document was postponed several times and that he (Viljoen) began thinking that he had been misled by the ANC. After a meeting at De Deur (near Vereeniging) where emotions ran high, he thought about “letting the dogs free”, which could have meant only one thing: armed conflict. However, through mediation of a good friend of Viljoen in the United States Embassy, the document was signed three days before the 1994 election.⁴⁹

In the meantime, Viljoen supporters (the Volksfront at that time) had mobilised between 50 000 and 60 000 men (according to Viljoen’s estimation) countrywide as a military force. Since military strategy, together with political action and propaganda, were strategies of Viljoen supporters, they believed that they should be able to show some muscle to their opponents. Viljoen however realised that a real military confrontation would be futile. He would have been unable to muster sufficient support from Defence Force members, who traditionally were very loyal and disciplined. His own force, which was not heavily armed, had no chance against the South African Defence and Police forces.

47. Accord on Afrikaner Self-determination between the Freedom Front, the African National Congress and the South African Government/National Party, 23 April 1994, pp 2-15 (document in the possession of General C.L. Viljoen).

48. See for instance: F.W. de Klerk, *The Last Trek – a New Beginning the Autobiography* (Macmillan, London, 1998), pp 311-316; Sparks, *Beyond the Miracle*, p 4; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, pp 238-240, 246-247, 250.

49. Interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

Besides, the Police were informed about all the Volksfront's plans.⁵⁰ According to Hilton Hamann, it seemed as if two other SADF generals with substantial support, George Meiring and Magnus Malan, also dismissed the idea of military action, even though they were approached to take the lead.⁵¹

In the 1994 election, which took place on 27 April, the ANC won conclusively, polling 62,7 per cent of the vote. Viljoen's Freedom Front polled nearly 640 000 votes on a provincial level and 424 555 votes on a national level, which Viljoen calculated as 37,5 per cent of the Afrikaner vote⁵², whereas Mbeki had required 35 per cent for "substantial proof of support" for self-determination. The FF (which won nine National Assembly seats) now also had a document according to which self-determination had to be built into the transitional Constitution. Provision was duly made in the interim Constitution for mechanisms to accommodate the aspirations of those who desired an area where they could live in accordance with their traditions. Self-determination of the Afrikaner, with a geographical dimension, was also enshrined in Article 185, as well as Article 235 of the permanent Constitution in 1996. Under the heading Self-Determination it states:

The right of the South African people as a whole to self-determination, as manifested in the Constitution, does not preclude, within the framework of this right, recognition of the notion of the right of self-determination of any community sharing a common cultural and language heritage, within a territorial entity in the Republic or in any other way, determined by national legislation.⁵³

Mbeki truly demonstrated sympathy towards the aspirations of the right wing before and after the election. At the beginning of 1994, he suggested to Viljoen that a Volkstaat Council should be formed in order to give structure to the *volkstaat* idea. This was realised by June that year. The Volkstaat Council was to become a statutory body and Mbeki himself delivered the inauguration speech in the Old Raadsaal in Pretoria on 16 June 1994. On that occasion, 20 members of the Volkstaat Council were ceremoniously sworn in. In his speech, Mbeki expressed his confidence in the Council and said that it was the only official and constitutional vehicle to address the fears of the Afrikaner nation. The

50. Interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

51. H. Hamann, *Days of the Generals: The Untold Story of South Africa's Apartheid-Era Military Generals* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2001), pp 209-213.

52. Personal interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

53. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, pp 101-102, 131.

Council would become instrumental in addressing Afrikaner aspirations towards self-determination.⁵⁴

Although it appeared that enthusiasm for the *volkstaat* subsided somewhat in the following two years, talks nevertheless took place between the FF and the ANC. One of these talks was held on 8 March 1997. On this occasion, the FF presented documents concerning various significant issues in the country at the time, dealing with attitudes and perceptions of the people (whites were not singled out in some categories mentioned). It analysed the factors that played a role in feelings of disillusionment and mistrust across a broad spectrum.⁵⁵ It then discussed specific matters of concern, such as education, law and order, affirmative action, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and the mood amongst Afrikaners. In one of the documents the general economic climate was discussed and a few areas identified where the ANC government and the FF could cooperate. Stability in the region of Southern Africa and the role which the FF could play to assist in this regard, were also addressed. In addition, there was a document containing FF proposals on self-determination for Afrikaners, including their constitutional rights in this regard, but also some suggestions about possible territories for the establishment of a *volkstaat*.⁵⁶

When Mbeki and a FF delegation again met in Gauteng on 14 July 1997 for top-level talks, the FF was still determined to seek “agreement in principle to the creation of an Afrikaner *volkstaat*, or an ANC acceptance of a *volkstaat* as a solution to the cultural and political aspirations of the Afrikaner *volk*”. By then, the party had already suggested that such an “embryo state” could possibly develop in the Northern Cape between Orania and the West Coast, with other potential development regions in Centurion and Mpumalanga.⁵⁷ Not much was published about the outcome of the meeting, but judging from the

54. *The Cape Times*, 17 June 1994 (“Mbeki praises Freedom Front”).

55. Melissa Steyn’s book “*Whiteness Just isn’t What it Used to be*” *White Identity in a Changing South Africa* (State University of New York Press, New York, 2001) contains insightful descriptions of South African whites’ experiences and attitudes towards the new dispensation after 1994, but the author did not make a distinction between Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans in her analysis of the respondents’ answers.

56. *Bilateral meeting between the ANC and the Freedom Front – 8 March 1997*, Document 1, Introduction, pp 1-3; Document 2, pp 1-13; Document 3, pp 1-7; Document 4, pp 1-8 (documents in possession of General C. L. Viljoen).

57. *The Citizen*, 14 July 1997 (“Mbeki and Viljoen to discuss concept of *volkstaat*”).

statement of the FF Chairman Pieter Mulder afterwards, Mbeki did not commit himself to any concessions or promises.⁵⁸

Although the acceptance of self-determination in the transitional and permanent Constitution could be regarded as a significant achievement by the FF, it remained unlikely, to say the least, that the ANC government would have been content with an Afrikaner homeland with exclusive rights to white Afrikaners. Would the ANC leadership have been prepared to go all the way to enable Viljoen and his supporters to realise their *volkstaat* ideal? The answer indubitably is “no”. There was no chance that Mandela or Mbeki would permit an ethnically based territory in a democratic South Africa because they would thereby renounce the essence of what they believed had been wrong with apartheid. Viljoen’s assurance that his *volkstaat* would not be another apartheid state,⁵⁹ would not change their minds. Yet the ANC was prepared to hold out the carrot. As journalist Patty Waldmeir sketched the situation, the ANC made Viljoen believe that they were seriously considering the idea of a *volkstaat*. They cleverly placed the ball in his court to indicate where and how such a state would be positioned. In the end they were willing to sign a vaguely formulated document in order to placate the Afrikaner right wing.⁶⁰

Viljoen had also noticed that relations between Mbeki and himself were not as cordial as they used to be. After the 1994 election, President Mandela (Viljoen recalled) had thanked him sincerely for his role in securing peace during the election, and assured him that his (Mandela’s) door would always be open to Viljoen for discussing any matter concerning the Afrikaners. Viljoen confirmed that he merely telephoned Mandela’s secretary and had been received at the President’s office as soon as possible, but with Mbeki it was different. After Mbeki had become Vice-President of South Africa in 1997, he informed Viljoen that Viljoen would have to work through Charles Nqakula if he wanted an appointment. To Viljoen this was the first indication of deteriorating relations between himself and Mbeki. From then on, Mbeki (conscious of the division in Afrikaner ranks) was also less receptive to the *volkstaat* idea for which, of course, provision had been made in the final Constitution. Mbeki, said Viljoen, had in the course of time cooled down considerably towards the case for the Afrikaner, and reminded Viljoen that he represented a minority within a minority.⁶¹

58. *Beeld*, 15 Julie 1997 (“Eenheid vs etnisiteit: die pendulum swaai”).

59. *The Citizen*, 17 June 1994 (“Volkstaat Council has our confidence: Mbeki”).

60. Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, pp 239-240.

61. Personal interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

By January 1996, the right-wing threat had ostensibly subsided to such an extent that Mbeki in all probability deemed it unnecessary to appease Viljoen any longer. He turned to straight talk, declaring that Afrikaner self-determination could not possibly be achieved through a separate homeland. Although his government did not want to see the destruction of the Afrikaans culture and language, the solution to Afrikaner fears was not the establishment of ethnic or racial states, Mbeki said.⁶² The newspaper *Die Burger*, possibly speaking on behalf of many Afrikaners who were positioned to the left of the FF, thereupon suggested that the *volkstaat* idea had never been viable – it was all bluff (“*n blufspul*”),⁶³ but the Volkstaat Council issued a statement to the effect that the Afrikaners’ quest for their own territory would continue to grow in the future.⁶⁴ Doctor Pieter Mulder, Chairman of the Freedom Front, confirmed this view.⁶⁵ Meanwhile Mbeki was blowing hot and cold about a *volkstaat*. While still prepared to discuss the possibility of such a development in July 1997, he told journalist Freek Swart barely five months later in an interview that a *volkstaat* would be a “ghetto” that would marginalise Afrikaners and harm the process of transformation in the country.⁶⁶

Both Constand Viljoen and Pieter Mulder stressed the important contribution of the FF during July 1997 and maintained that self-determination took time – it would not come overnight.⁶⁷ Both men however were aware at the time that the Volkstaat Council’s budget had been cut by 60 per cent for the following financial year. In the following year Viljoen still discussed FF proposals about the position, frustrations and aspirations of Afrikaners with Mbeki,⁶⁸ while Corné Mulder (Pieter’s brother) complained that the ANC had not adhered to their election promises before 1994 concerning Afrikaners’ desire for self-determination.⁶⁹ This however was the right wing’s swan song on the issue of designated Afrikaner territory.

62. *The Citizen*, 9 January 1996 (“Mbeki no to volkstaat”).

63. *Die Burger*, 12 Januarie 1996 (“Blufspul oor volkstaat”).

64. *Beeld*, 11 Januarie 1996 (“Raad sê regering kan nie volkstaatstrewende onderdruk”). See also Viljoen’s speech in *Hansard*, 11 February 1997, column 60.

65. *Beeld*, 11 Januarie 1996 (“Selfbeskikking steeds Vryheidsfront-doelwit”).

66. *Rapport*, 21 Desember 1997 (“Mbeki reik na Afrikaners”).

67. *Die Burger*, 23 Julie 1997 (“Afrikaner het reg op plek”); *Beeld*, 15 Julie 1997 (“Eenheid vs etnisiteit: die pendulum swaai”).

68. *Beeld*, 6 Junie 1998 (“VF-leier, Mbeki praat oor selfbeskikking”).

69. *Eastern Province Herald*, 8 June 1998 (“Leaders find the answers”).

In August 1998, the announcement was made that the Volkstaat Council would dissolve in 1999. Its last project would be to research the economic development of four areas in South Africa that were identified as possible regions where Afrikaner self-determination might be realised in future.⁷⁰ In March 1999, the Volkstaat Council was finally dissolved. In future, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities – subsequently renamed the Cultural Rights Commission – was to take care of *volkstaat* ideals.⁷¹ Constand Viljoen, in spite of participation in all activities generated by the Freedom Front, ten years later expressed the view that he had never been particularly enthusiastic about the Volkstaat Council, as there had been endless altercations within the council. In addition, Viljoen in retrospect came to the conclusion that although the idea of a *volkstaat* was laudable, it was not acceptable to most Afrikaners. He himself realised that it would not work for South Africa in the late 1990s.⁷²

Willie Esterhuysen points out that Constand Viljoen's intervention, although crucial shortly before and after the 1994 election, should not be seen in isolation. Esterhuysen himself had had talks with the NIS as far back as August 1987, during which the question of extremism from the right as a threat to peaceful political discussions had been mooted.⁷³

The African Renaissance

Speaking with philosophical affection of the continent where the origins of humanity are to be found, Mbeki laments the ordeal of people who, he maintains, were exploited and reduced to a source of cheap labour, their countries providing raw materials to the developed Western World. In his view colonialism, slavery and racism impoverished sub-Saharan Africa. The legacy of such inhuman practices was so pervasive that political independence of African countries could not elevate them to higher levels of development. They remained dependent on developed countries.⁷⁴ Similarly to Mbeki's analysis of the repression of black

70. *Die Burger*, 29 Mei 1997 ("Volkstaatraad op sy sterfbed"); *Frontnuus*, 31 Julie 1997 ("VSR se toekoms bespreek"); *Die Volksblad*, 6 Augustus 1998 ("Volkstaatraad gaan in Maart 1999 ontbind ná bestaan van sowat 5 jaar").

71. P.M. Sebetlela, "Nation-building in South Africa: Mandela and Mbeki Compared." M. Phil. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2003, p 2.

72. Personal interview, Author with General C.L. Viljoen, 9 February 2007.

73. Personal interview, Author with Professor W.P. Esterhuysen, 10 July 2007.

74. T. Mbeki, *Africa Define Yourself* (Tafelberg/Mafube Publishing, Cape Town/Randburg, 2002), pp 89-91, 94, 136-137 (Address at Third African Renaissance Festival, 31 March 2001).

people in South Africa (as mentioned earlier in this article), Mbeki's analysis of Africa's ordeal is not nuanced and contains crude oversimplifications of Africa's history, but Mbeki never doubted his assumption of Africa's trauma. He articulated his ambition of an African Renaissance in June 1997. Since then he has often reinforced the widely-used concept. Its roots lie in African tradition, legacy and heritage; its values, institutions and relationships are those of communities in pre-colonial times. Africans should be their own liberators, and "the success of the African Renaissance depends on the transformation of the cultural consciousness of all Africans".⁷⁵ The people of Africa should develop an African identity.⁷⁶ To shed the dependent image of the continent and Afro-pessimism, Africans should define themselves: "[We must] determine who we are, what we stand for, what our vision and hopes are, how we do things, what programmes we adopt to make our lives worth living, who we relate to and how".⁷⁷ To realise this ambition, more than pride and the idealisation of Africa's past is required. Economic development, facilitated by foreign investments, is crucial and that is what the African Union and NEPAD should strive for.⁷⁸

Mbeki did not exclude whites or Afrikaners, yet some of his utterances in 1997 pointed in the opposite direction from Afrikaner *volkstaat* ideas. He advised Afrikaners to reach out to other groups and cooperate with them instead of staying within the "laager". The premise that Afrikaners were being threatened and that they should stand together to defend themselves, was wrong. Afrikaners should make their influence count in decision making, for instance in the field of health care. Referring to the specific example of F.W. de Klerk, Mbeki remarked that Afrikaner leaders set the wrong example for their followers by equating democracy with disempowerment.⁷⁹

75. L. Mathebe, *Bound by Tradition*, pp 120-121.

76. P. Vale and S. Maseko, "South Africa and the African Renaissance", *International Affairs*, 74, 2, April 1998, p 280.

77. Mbeki, *Africa Define Yourself*, p 72 (Address at the University of Havana, Cuba, 27 March 2001).

78. An alternative explanation for Mbeki's great African vision is that he needed to establish an image of his own and not merely follow in the footsteps of Nelson Mandela when becoming the next President of South Africa (Personal interview, Author with Professor H.B. Giliomee, 11 July 2007).

79. *The Citizen*, 28 April 1997 ("Mbeki hails involvement of Afrikaners"); *Beeld*, 1 November 1997 ("Afrikaners hoef nie bedreig te voel, sê Mbeki"); *Die Burger*, 1 November 1997 ("Afrikaners moet eerder saamwerk as laer trek"); *Rapport*, 21 Desember 1997 ("Mbeki reik na Afrikaners").

Mbeki talking to a wider spectrum of Afrikaners, 1997-1999

The talks between the FF and Mbeki emphasised the profound division within Afrikaner ranks which had been prevalent since the late 1960s. The loss of political power after 1994 clearly did not result in ethnic mobilisation of Afrikaners to resist ANC dominance, but Mbeki's willingness to meet with various Afrikaner groups at least kept the flame of Afrikaner expectations burning. As the celebrated Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach pointed out, conversations with Mbeki stimulated internal debates amongst Afrikaners.⁸⁰ The intriguing question, however, was: who represented the Afrikaners?

Prominent Afrikaners across the spectrum of Afrikanerdom responded positively to the olive-branch offered by Mbeki to Afrikaners. Comments of approval came from diverse groups in Afrikaner society such as the Afrikanerbond (AB), the Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV) and the Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut (AHI). Individuals, including Theuns Eloff, Beyers Naudé and Constand Viljoen, also reacted positively.⁸¹ The influential newspaper *Beeld* commended the initiative, but accentuated the division in Afrikaner ranks. The paper advised that Afrikaner leaders had to decide on a joint strategy before starting talks.⁸²

Mbeki was skilful enough also to embrace conservative (but not far-right) and *verligte* Afrikaners. At the ANC's national conference at Mafikeng in December 1997, he announced that he and Mangosuthu Buthelezi would embark on a programme of reaching out to Afrikaners and other communities in 1998. This certainly implied talking to a much broader constituency of Afrikaners. The ANC's NEC endorsed Mbeki's plans, stating that Afrikaners required special rapprochement, as they perceived themselves to be under threat.⁸³

Prominent Afrikaners expressed reservations about other aspects as well. Political scientist Deon Geldenhuys emphasised the need for conversations about contentious issues such as education, the detrimental effects of affirmative action and race quotas for Afrikaners. He lamented the ANC's habit of forcing Afrikaners continuously into the dock, and also claimed that the ANC's overt African orientation made Afrikaners

80. *Die Burger*, 12 Maart 1998 ("As Mbeki Afrikanerdebat stimuleer, sal dit pluspunt wees").

81. *Beeld*, 19 Desember 1997 ("Afrikaners bly oor Thabo-plan").

82. *Beeld*, 19 Desember 1997 (Hoofartikel: "Mbeki-olyftak").

83. *Die Burger*, 23 Februarie 1998 ("ANC hoë wil Mbeki Afrikaner se hart help wen").

feel alienated.⁸⁴ Constand Viljoen, by now a seasoned negotiator with the ANC, warned that the ANC had broken their promises in the past and as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had reflected, hatred for Afrikaners was still prevalent, as Afrikaners were solely blamed for apartheid. Speaking perhaps from his own experience, Viljoen said that the ANC's invitation was welcome, but that talks should be more substantial than the mere offering of a hand of friendship.⁸⁵

Talks about talks continued in 1998. During the first half of the year, various formal and informal Afrikaner groups gathered to decide on the matter, but all emphasised that they were not speaking on behalf of all Afrikaners. The Stigting vir Afrikaans (Foundation for Afrikaans) announced that an interim Afrikaner conference representing twenty-six Afrikaner cultural organisations was preparing for a conversation with Mbeki. This grouping claimed to reflect a "healing" or reconciliation between the constituent organisations.⁸⁶ Whether such "healing" was possible, given the profound differences amongst Afrikaners about their role in the new South Africa, was questionable. Ensuring that they were not positioned with right-wing Afrikaners, New National Party (NNP) leader Marthinus van Schalkwyk, as well as the Deputy Chairman of the AB, Professor Piet Steyn, rejected the suggestion by the National Chairman of the ANC, Mosiuoa Lekota, that the ANC would negotiate with white Afrikaners only. In their opinion, all Afrikaners, irrespective of race or gender, had to participate.⁸⁷

Another informal group also had a meeting with Mbeki at Magaliesburg during the first weekend in May 1998. This group comprised Constand Viljoen; CP leader Ferdi Hartzenberg; Chris Swanepoel (Chairperson of the FAK); Izak de Villiers, former editor of *Rapport*; student leaders and local cultural leaders. This delegation called itself the Afrikaner-Leiersberaad 2000 (Afrikaner Leaders' Conference 2000), and wanted to link up with other Afrikaner groups in an attempt to decide who would talk to Mbeki and the ANC.⁸⁸ Later in May, Mbeki and Buthelezi had discussions with more Afrikaner

84. *Rapport*, 15 Februarie 1998 ("Vier vrae voor Afrikaner-gesprek").

85. *Beeld*, 24 Februarie 1998 ("ANC se toenadering met voorbehoude verwelkom"); *Sunday Tribune*, 1 March 1998 ("Afrikaners welcome Mbeki's hand of peace with reservations").

86. *Beeld*, 24 Februarie 1998 ("ANC se toenadering met voorbehoude verwelkom").

87. *The Citizen*, 14 March 1998 ("Don't limit talks to whites only – NP tells ANC").

88. *Beeld*, 4 Mei 1998 ("Regse Afrikanerleiers in Magaliesburg byeen").

groupings (Buthelezi had other obligations at times and could not attend all of the meetings). Arguably the most important meeting to take place during 1998, was with the AB. Tom de Beer, Chairperson of the AB, told Mbeki that his organisation spoke on behalf of AB members, but not on behalf of the broader Afrikaner community. Mbeki was told that it was the experience of Afrikaners that their values, cultural interests and institutions were under severe pressure from the government. Government assurances and guarantees to Afrikaners had been given from time to time, but these had not been honoured in practice. De Beer said he was sure that if the opportunity to express their “Afrikanerness” within the South African context could be afforded, Afrikaners would participate in building the country with conviction. Other matters that AB executive members raised, were farm murders, crime, the importance of the Afrikaans language and mother-tongue education, as well as indiscriminate affirmative action.

Mbeki explained that he wanted firsthand information about how Afrikaners were experiencing transformation and which problems and needs could be addressed by the government.⁸⁹ In Parliament he reported that he and Buthelezi had found conversations with Afrikaner groups very encouraging. Mbeki acknowledged that these groups felt powerless, threatened and marginalised, but added that they generally seemed positive about change. The military still seemed to be important to him, because he specifically referred to his encouraging talks with generals from the former Defence Force.⁹⁰

Within the ranks of liberal Afrikaners (not bound together by any meaningful organisation) unease about Mbeki’s Afrikaner rapprochement started developing. In March 1999, Breyten Breytenbach, André P. Brink, Ampie Coetzee and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert published a statement reaffirming that Afrikaners were by no means a homogenous group any longer. They criticised Mbeki for legitimising Afrikaner groups that were identified with the previous Afrikaner establishment, such as the FAK, AB and ATKV.⁹¹ This highlighted the need to talk to diverse groups within the Afrikaner society, driven apart by divergent ideological visions of a tenable racial policy.

89. *Rapport*, 24 Mei 1998 (“AB bespreek kommer met Mbeki”).

90. *Hansard*, 29 May 1998, column 3441; *Die Burger*, 30 Mei 1998 (“Mbeki ‘bemoedig’ ná gesprek met Afrikaners”).

91. *Die Burger*, 20 Maart 1999 (“Watse, wiese Afrikaners?”).

The question of definition and representation had become a debate within a debate, with more and more seasoned Afrikaans journalists, politicians, writers and academics participating throughout the late 1990s. One academic aptly redefined the term Afrikaner by pointing out that older Afrikaner definitions (those identified with the Great Trek, Boer Republics, et cetera) had been replaced by a modern description of a group that was bound not by race, but by language. They were also represented by a variety of political organisations, with different agendas, unlike the old Nat and Sap division.⁹² A well-known journalist and political commentator had earlier expressed similar views, stressing the division in Afrikaner ranks.⁹³ The view of the far right was best articulated by Jaap Marais, who maintained that the true representatives of Afrikanerdom had been those who had been following in the footsteps of Hertzog, Malan, Strijdom and Verwoerd.⁹⁴

However, Mbeki's initiatives had gained such momentum that he obviously did not reconsider his position concerning discussions with various Afrikaner individuals and groups. His succession of Nelson Mandela, who had retired in May 1999 as President of South Africa, was ensured, and a form of agreement with minority groups became one of his political goals. In March 1999, less than three months before the second democratic election, Mbeki submitted a final report to Parliament on the investigation that he and Buthelezi had undertaken. His basic conclusion about Afrikaner experiences in the new South Africa reiterated what he had said in Parliament in May 1998. He demonstrated once again that he had an understanding of Afrikaner feelings of alienation because of their perception that the government was antagonistic towards the Afrikaans language, culture and religion, Afrikaner schools, the medium of instruction at universities, and Afrikaners' disillusionment with affirmative action.

In this report Mbeki was more specific and promised that provision would be made after the election for a commission to promote and protect the rights of language, cultural and religious communities. A structure for all minority groups would be created in the President's office, to pursue constitutional goals in cooperation with Pansalb (the Pan South African

92. *Sunday Times*, 25 April 1999 (Willie Breytenbach, Professor of Political Science at the University of Stellenbosch: "Still on the Great Trek to freedom").

93. *The Sunday Independent*, 14 March 1999 (Harald Pakendorf: "Afrikaners united only by language").

94. *Die Afrikaner*, 8 April 1999 ("Jaap Marais vat Afrikaanses vas oor aanmatigende houding").

Language Board). Educational boards should be created by national and provincial departments to ensure full participation of parents in school management commissions, while the Educational Act should be applied in accordance with constitutional language, cultural and religious rights. Mbeki assured Afrikaners that the government was committed to looking after their interests, as it would do for other communities. He closed his speech with a poem by another famous Afrikaner poet, D.J. Opperman, “*Gebed om die gebeente*” (“Prayer around the skeleton”).⁹⁵

Reaction to the speech varied from unbridled endorsement to cautious optimism, with one or two disgruntled voices. For Willie Esterhuysen, Mbeki’s long-time partner in negotiating a new South Africa, the conversation between the government and Afrikaners had only started with Mbeki’s speech of March 1999. In Esterhuysen’s view, Mbeki had outlined the framework within which such a conversation would take place very clearly (“[Mbeki] *het ook die raamwerk waarbinne so ’n gesprek moet verloop baie duidelik uitgestippel*”). He also expressed the opinion that talks would be fruitful only if the ideal of a non-racial democracy obtained meaningful content. Mbeki’s national strategic vision had also been enhanced by meetings with Afrikaner businessmen.⁹⁶ Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, R.F. (Pik) Botha, shortly afterwards expressed his satisfaction with Mbeki’s understanding of the role that Afrikaners could play in the country. Botha had also held a personal conversation with Mbeki a few days before.⁹⁷

The Interim Afrikaner Council, one of the bodies that pursued Afrikaner unity, welcomed Mbeki’s report in a less buoyant spirit. It indicated that Afrikaners were still concerned about issues such as self-determination (which did not imply a *volkstaat*) and the existence of separate Afrikaans universities.⁹⁸ Doctor Christo Landman, a spokesperson of one of the Council’s constituent organisations, Afrikaner 2000, in a letter to *Beeld* accused the ANC of dragging its feet since 1994 in failing to implement the Commission for Group Rights (Article 185 of

95. *Hansard*, 24 March 1999, column 3128-3138; *The Cape Times*, 25 March 1999 (“Govt perceived as hostile”); *Beeld*, 25 Maart 1999 (“Mbeki gaan self haakplekke uitstryk om taal en kultuur”; “Regering belowe om na Afrikaner belange om te sien”).

96. *Beeld*, 27 Maart 1999 (“Gesprek het begin oor Afrikaners se rol in toekoms”).

97. *Die Burger*, 12 April 1999 (“Mbeki glo Afrikaners is noodsaaklik, sê Pik”).

98. *Interim Afrikaner Council meeting with Mr Mbeki, Report in Parliament 24 March 1999* (Document in the possession of General C.L. Viljoen); *Cape Argus*, 25 March 1999 (“Cautious welcome for Mbeki’s Afrikaner talks”).

the Constitution). There was still no entrenchment of the position of Afrikaner educational institutions. He also mentioned matters that caused friction, such as affirmative action. Afrikaners, he wrote, had to debate these issues critically themselves, instead of merely affirming the government's views.⁹⁹ Journalist Johan de Wet praised Mbeki for his conciliatory attitude towards Afrikaners, but also intimated that despite good intentions "towards Afrikaans speakers, much of it is still just kind and vague promises" (*"Hoewel Mbeki 'n paar mooi dinge gesê het oor goeie voornemens jeens Afrikaanssprekendes, is baie daarvan nog net mooi beloftes, en vaag ook"*).¹⁰⁰

Mbeki must have sensed that the AB, though completely transformed from the previously powerful secret society, still had considerable influence among moderate, reasonable Afrikaners who were prepared to assist in building the new South Africa. By now he had more confidence, having had more than five years of experience in negotiating with Afrikaners since the ANC had assumed power. At the meeting in the City Hall of Pretoria on 27 July 1999, he spelled out his own vision for Afrikaners. He saw them becoming an integral part of the country, while also moving into the ambit of the African Renaissance. He reminded them that they were Africans. History, he said, had forced Afrikaners and Africans to walk on different roads. He asked whether it was "better to proceed on different roads, each alone, that become increasingly narrow as we travel, or whether it is possible to build one road through which we can all travel forward faster together". Building bridges was required. He urged Afrikaners to work with other groups to attain peace, stability and economic development on the African continent. Afrikaners, he assured his audience, would be protected "under the umbrella of a broader South African identity". The challenge for the Afrikaans idea was to "be transformed and broadened such that it becomes an integral part of the process of African Renaissance, so that each one of us benefits from our rich heritage".¹⁰¹

Up to this point, reaction to Mbeki's utterances concerning Afrikaners had evoked mostly positive public response, mixed with some concerns and scepticism. The Pretoria City Hall address was no exception. Both journalists Charles Naudé and Henry Jeffreys encouraged Afrikaners not to retreat into the laager (Naudé), but to

99. *Beeld*, 30 Maart 1999 (Brief: C. Landman).

100. *Beeld*, 26 Maart 1999 ("Deel van Afrika: Afrikaners praat Mbeki se taal").

101. *Cape Argus*, 28 July 1999 ("Mbeki urges Afrikaners to join Renaissance"); *Pretoria News*, 28 July 1999 ("You are Africans, Mbeki tells Afrikaners").

become pioneers in Africa once more and to take the opportunity to utilise the cultural elbow-room offered by Mbeki (Jeffreys).¹⁰² Veteran columnist Chris Moolman felt that Mbeki's statement to embrace Afrikaners as Africans could be far-reaching and meaningful, but that Afrikaners' worries about mother-tongue education, language rights and affirmative action had to be considered seriously by the ANC government.¹⁰³ Constand Viljoen's outright message to Mbeki was that he now had to give concrete substance to the government's commitment to Afrikaners' basic constitutional rights. Without doing so, nicely worded speeches ("*mooi bewoorde toesprake*") would have little meaning.¹⁰⁴

Mbeki's Pretoria speech also evoked responses in other quarters. A notably different view came from three black intellectuals, Professors Siphoo Seepe, ThandwayiZizwe Mthembu and Doctor Mashupye Kgaphola, who challenged Mbeki's pronouncement that Afrikaners were Africans. The Pretoria speech "makes no sense in that it is ahistorical, defies logic and would be found wanting when subjected to the rigour of academic, intellectual and conventional scrutiny", they claimed. In their opinion, it was unthinkable to conflate the unique history, cultural development and present problems of blacks with the very different white traditions to form one African nation with common ideals and interests.¹⁰⁵

Talks during Mbeki's presidency to 2004

Understandably Afrikaner groups were uncertain about how Thabo Mbeki would respond to Afrikaner interests after assuming power in 1999. As President of the country, his responsibilities obviously had increased considerably. To replace an international icon such as Mandela was difficult enough; besides, there were internal conflicts – more than just differences of opinion – within the leading party that the new President had to handle.

Although building nationhood – with Mandela as the prime force – remained a priority, Mbeki's major mission was to eradicate the inequalities between white and black. He fully utilised the Westminster model in his grand scheme of affirmative action. That, of course, did not mean that he would ignore minority groups.

102. *Beeld*, 29 Julie 1999 ("Simboliese begin"); *Beeld*, 4 Augustus 1999 ("Ons' Afrikaners").

103. *Rapport*, 1 Augustus 1999 ("Afrikaners se rol as wit Afrikane").

104. *Die Burger*, 30 Julie 1999 ("Mbeki 'moet nou tot daad oorgaan'").

105. *Sunday World*, 15 August 1999 ("Not all SA citizens are Africans").

Compared with the period 1998 to 1999, the frequency of discussion between Mbeki and Afrikaners seems to have tapered off after he became President, but contact did not cease altogether. Mbeki entrusted to the new Deputy President, Jacob Zuma, certain constitutional responsibilities such as the question of minority rights. In January 2000, Zuma met three influential Afrikaners, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, Hermann Giliomee and Ton Vosloo. This meeting, which could hardly be regarded as useful, had followed an open letter to Mbeki signed by 24 Afrikaners in October of the previous year, requesting a charter of minority rights to be incorporated into the Constitution. Mbeki did not reply personally, but his spokesman, Parks Mankahlana, replied in vague terms that more similar inputs concerning the language, cultural and religious rights of communities would be required before this could be considered.¹⁰⁶

In his capacity as head of state, Mbeki still pursued rapprochement with Afrikaners. On various occasions in 2000 and 2001 he showed understanding and goodwill. It would be wrong, he said in September 2000, to put the sole blame for apartheid on the shoulders of Afrikaners just because they were Afrikaners. Some Afrikaners (like Bram Fischer) had been instrumental in efforts to break down that system. Others (such as Constand Viljoen) had done their utmost to ensure that the country did not degenerate into a state of civil unrest before the 1994 election.¹⁰⁷ At a press conference in London in June 2001, he assured his audience that Afrikaners were now participating in building the new South Africa. He referred to the AB's efforts to improve the infrastructure of the province of Mpumalanga by means of assistance offered by civil engineers.¹⁰⁸ In the same month, he told Parliament that he knew too many Afrikaners who had applied themselves to change in the country to believe that all Afrikaners were possessed with irrational fears. "... nobody will convince me that the Afrikaners as a whole fear that I might stalk them in the night to wreak vengeance on unsuspecting women and children".¹⁰⁹

Mbeki believed F.W. de Klerk still had a role to play in South African society, and had a meeting with him as part of his efforts to reach national consensus which would transcend racial and party-political barriers. The two men discussed government policy in general and the meeting was apparently sufficiently successful for a second meeting to be arranged for

106. *Beeld*, 24 Januarie 2000 ("Afrikaners, Jacob Zuma bekyk regte"); Personal interview, Author with Professor H.B. Giliomee, 11 July 2007.

107. *Beeld*, 21 September 2000 ("Nie net Afrikaners skuldig oor verlede").

108. *Rapport*, 17 Junie 2001 ("Die Afrikaners bring hul kant").

109. *The Citizen*, 23 June 2001 ("Mbeki says whites have place in South Africa").

a later date. When serving in the Government of National Unity, the two had enjoyed a cordial relationship and De Klerk was no longer regarded as a threat to Mbeki. De Klerk's experience of Mbeki (especially when the latter was President) was particularly favourable.¹¹⁰ An optimistic De Klerk later said that the democratic South Africa was a better place.¹¹¹ In October 2001, Mbeki spent another weekend with De Klerk at a *bosberaad* (informal workshop) initiated by the F.W. de Klerk Foundation. The intention was to find a solution for racial division and to unite South Africans. De Klerk was accompanied by a group of leaders, mostly Afrikaners. Among those present were the chairman of the AB, Francois Venter, the Chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch, Elize Botha, and the chairman of Barlowrand, Warren Clewlow. The President regarded the talks as so important that no less than a quarter of his cabinet was present. This ministerial group included Kader Asmal, Thoko Didiza, Charles Nqakula and Essop Pahad.

Although spokesmen for both parties described the discussions as cordial and constructive, no definite decisions for further action were made. Proceedings included the identification of "several problem areas about the ills of society", suggesting "ways of resolving problems in inter-community relations and ways of mobilising South Africans to become more involved in addressing the many challenges facing the country" and "join[ing] forces to make the country a better place for all".¹¹² The *bosberaad* could hardly be described as groundbreaking and no follow-up meeting realised.

Afrikaner opinion about government efforts to fully address Afrikaner needs and fears continued to oscillate. On the basis of research carried out under the auspice of the University of Stellenbosch, two Afrikaner intellectuals, Willie Esterhuysen and J.P. Landman, enthusiastically proclaimed that Mbeki had realised 65 per cent of promises he had made in the parliamentary opening session of 2001. However, two black political analysts, Siphon Seepe and Dumisani Hlope, were highly critical of this interpretation. Hlope, in particular rejected the general findings of the report, pointing to the fact that the study was based on speeches and media statements. Hlope was of the opinion that Mbeki was attempting to flatter Afrikaners with the idea that they were more committed to the country than English-speaking whites. A case in

110. Personal interview, Author with Doctor W.J. de Klerk, 13 February 2007; Personal interview, Author with Professor H.B. Giliomee, 11 July 2007.

111. *Financial Mail*, 17 May 2002 ("New partner in a joint venture").

112. *The Citizen*, 28 October 2002 ("Mbeki, FW and Afrikaners hold bosberaad").

point was Mbeki's singling out of Afrikaners such as Landman and Esterhuysen together with Afrikaans institutions like the University of Stellenbosch.¹¹³

Contrary to almost unbridled optimism about Mbeki's success in creating a new nation, scepticism and reservations still existed among certain Afrikaners. Journalist and historian Leopold Scholtz pointed out that Afrikaners should accept the hand of friendship, but that they should also expect of the government to execute the language stipulations of the Constitution, stop discriminating against Afrikaners and end affirmative action.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, it appeared that radical far-right politics were again looming on the political horizon. In October 2002, bomb blasts occurred in Bronkhorstspuit and Soweto and the far-right was implicated. The Freedom Front's Pieter Mulder, although condemning the method used, asserted that frustration among Afrikaners was on the rise. The newly-formed Afrikaner grouping, Groep 63 (Group 63), arguably made a blunder by stating that Afrikaner frustrations provided a legitimate reason for the bomb blasts and that violence might continue.¹¹⁵ Groep 63 encompassed a diverse body of Afrikaners bound especially by commitment to the preservation of the Afrikaans language.

On 5 August 2003, Mbeki also reached out to the major Afrikaans religious institution, the Dutch Reformed Church. The meeting with the church's leadership lasted for only an hour, and no decisions emanated from these discussions. The Moderator, Doctor Coenie Burger, told the President that there was a deep-seated apprehension amongst Afrikaners that other communities did not regard them as part of South Africa. As a gesture of goodwill, Mbeki attended a church service in the Groot Kerk, Cape Town, on 31 August 2003. What the Afrikaners' church meant to them should not be forgotten just because there was a history of wrongs, he said.¹¹⁶

Group 63's concern about the language and cultural aspirations of Afrikaners was not shared by another larger group of more than 110 Afrikaans speakers (described as "prominent people") who sent

113. *Beeld*, 20 Februarie 2002 ("Skeptisisme oor Mbeki se goeie punt in 'belofte-toets'; wedersydse gepamperlang").

114. *Die Burger*, 8 Februarie 2002 ("Teenprestasie nodig vir Afrikaner-samewerking").

115. *The Citizen*, 9 November 2002 ("Afrikaans intellectuals 'do not speak for all'").

116. *Beeld*, 6 Augustus 2003 ("NG Kerk, Mbeki praat oor vrese"); *Die Burger*, 1 September 2003 ("Niks skort vandag met NG Kerk").

Mbeki a letter of support in May 2004. He was congratulated on his re-election as President and appreciation was expressed for his leadership. Calling themselves the 10 x 10 + 10, the group consisted of businessmen, academic leaders, farmers, religious and other society leaders, as well as housewives. It was again Willie Esterhuyse who took the initiative and Ton Vosloo, Matthews Phosa, Franklin Sonn, Whitey Basson, Christo Wiese, G.T. Ferreira, Rudolf Gouws, J.P. Landman, Chris Brink, Theuns Eloff and Johan Kirsten were among the signatories.¹¹⁷

If there was hope among some *verligtes* that Mbeki would possibly go as far as cementing a formal agreement with Afrikaners, then scepticism about the realisation of Afrikaner interests also intensified – already during Mbeki’s first term as President. Individual Afrikaner intellectuals were now regularly expressing criticism about the government’s unfulfilled promises. While his predecessor was committed to deracialise the country, Mbeki has increasingly viewed contentious issues through a racial lens. He also showed intolerance toward criticism. As far back as May 1998, his “two nations” speech (one white and affluent; the other black and poor) in particular had been received with considerable hostility, and not only by Afrikaners.

As Mbeki’s pacification of Afrikaners has gradually faded away, Afrikaners have become increasingly impatient, if not disillusioned, because their language has not been afforded what they regard as its rightful place in society. This resentment has become entangled with other serious tribulations which concern all South Africans: crime (Afrikaners have been particularly enraged by farm murders), corruption, the deterioration of local government, poor service delivery, the indiscrete application of affirmative action, Mbeki’s neglect to taking a stand against Robert Mugabe, the government’s contentious HIV/AIDS policy and the President’s refusal to get rid of incompetent ministers. That may partly explain why Afrikaners in general have shown little or no interest in the African Renaissance.

Conclusion

During the period under discussion, Thabo Mbeki, a stranger to ordinary Afrikaners before 1990, made a favourable impression upon Afrikaners across the whole political spectrum, excluding the far-right. His sharp mind, composure, willingness to listen to other viewpoints and his ability

117. *Sunday Independent*, 30 May 2004 (“Afrikaners rally around president”); *Pretoria News*, 31 May 2004 (“Prominent Afrikaners backing Mbeki”).

to state his case soberly and logically, opened doors for him in his efforts to address the ambitions and fears of Afrikaners. In this regard he often succeeded. He was determined to fulfil this mission despite the opposition by the “hawks” in the exile ANC group who accused him of acting without deliberation with the NEC.

Before the informal discussions of the late 1980s in England, Afrikaners in the NP and other political groups had known very little about the ANC. The reverse was equally true. The two groups had feared and distrusted each other. It was the meetings in Compleat Angler, Eastwell Manor Hotel, Mells Park House and Flitwick Park (Bedfordshire) that eradicated misapprehension, bias, reproaches and ill-informed knowledge about each other to a considerable extent. Together with clandestine conversations between Kobie Coetsee (and thereafter Niel Barnard) with Nelson Mandela, the meetings in Britain between the ANC groups (led by Mbeki) and Afrikaner groups (led by Esterhuysen) were vital in pulling off the formal negotiations following De Klerk’s speech on 2 February 1990.

A moot point in many circles is that the Afrikaners’ philosophy of life in many respects resembles that of the ANC, rather than that of South African liberals. In 2005, nearly twenty years after his meetings with Afrikaners in Britain, Mbeki told one of his biographers, Mark Gevisser, that he preferred negotiating with Afrikaners rather than with English-speaking South Africans, because Afrikaners are forthright and “you know where you stand with them”.¹¹⁸ Ironically, since the late 1990s, South Africans (including Afrikaners) have often complained that they do not know where they stand with Mbeki. He has often been described as an enigma.

Mbeki’s commitment to black empowerment in South Africa and to uniting the countries of the African continent certainly enjoyed a much higher priority than Afrikaners as an ethnic minority in South Africa.¹¹⁹ For instance, his weekly online columns in *ANC Today* from 1999 to 2004 commented on achievements by the government, social issues and the international world. Afrikaners were hardly ever mentioned in *ANC Today*. Understandably this weekly commentary is meant for a specific audience; nevertheless one gets the impression that as far as Mbeki was concerned, Afrikaner interests were more or less meaningless to the black masses.

118. Quoted in Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p 505.

119. Personal interview, Author with Doctor W.J. de Klerk, 13 February 2007.

A particularly shrewd negotiator and a strategic thinker, Mbeki was well aware of the value of the skills, expertise and experience of Afrikaners, particularly in the private sector. He was also aware of how divided Afrikaners really were. So, with the onslaught from the Afrikaner rightwing neutralised (at least for the time being), he was ready to endear himself to a number of organised groups of Afrikaners, including many influential *verligtes*. He found these groups equally responsive and he could afford to provide assurances and extend invitations for cooperation, without relinquishing ANC principles. Although scepticism among Afrikaner intellectuals about Mbeki's resolution to provide tangible results were on the increase since the late 1990s, Mbeki must have concluded that the price for risky diplomacy in dealing with his erstwhile enemies was surprisingly low.

Abstract

Thabo Mbeki's clandestine contacts from 1985 to 1990 with influential individuals and groups of "establishment" Afrikaners, notably the envoys to Britain, largely facilitated formal negotiations between the NP government and the ANC, culminating in the transition to democracy in 1994. He was also instrumental in negotiating an agreement with Constand Viljoen, thereby preventing a possible insurrection from the Afrikaner rightwing. While demonstrating sympathy with Afrikaners' sentiments of self-determination, he firmly rejected an ethnic Afrikaner state (*volkstaat*) as envisaged by right-wing Afrikaners. Talking to various organised Afrikaner groups, Mbeki impressed with his intellect and willingness to listen to their concerns. He showed understanding of their fears and aspirations, and Afrikaners assumed that Mbeki would provide leverage for Afrikaners to live their ideals, notably the protection of the Afrikaans language and Afrikaans educational institutions. However, Afrikaners in due course became impatient with Mbeki's apparent inertia to implement practical measures to protect their rights. Although talks with him continued, by the early 2000s doubts about Mbeki's resolve to translate words into action had become pervasive among Afrikaners.

Opsomming

Thabo Mbeki en die Afrikaners, 1986-2004

Thabo Mbeki se geheime ontmoetings van 1985 tot 1990 met invloedryke individue en groepe van "*establishment* Afrikaners" – veral die afvaardigings na Brittanje – het grootliks formele onderhandelinge tussen

die ANC en die regering moontlik gemaak, wat uitgeloop het op die oorgang na demokrasie in 1994. Sy rol in die ooreenkoms met Constand Viljoen om 'n moontlike regse opstand te verhoed, was ook deurslaggewend. Hoewel Mbeki simpatie met Afrikanersentimente rakende selfbeskikking getoon het, het hy die totstandkoming van 'n etniese Afrikanerstaat (volkstaat), soos deur die Afrikanerregtervleuel voorsien, op ferme wyse teengestaan. In sy gesprekke met verskillende georganiseerde Afrikanergroepe, het Mbeki beïndruk met sy intellek en sy bereidwilligheid om na hulle besorgdhede te luister. Hy het begrip vir hulle vrese en aspirasies getoon, en Afrikaners het aanvaar dat Mbeki die geleentheid vir Afrikaners sou skep om hulle ideale, veral die beskerming van die Afrikaanse taal en Afrikaanse opvoedkundige instansies, te verwesenlik. Met verloop van tyd het Afrikaners egter ongeduldig begin raak met Mbeki se skynbare traagheid om praktiese maatreëls in te stel om hulle regte te beskerm. Hoewel gesprekke met hom voortgeduur het, het daar teen die vroeë 2000's wydverspreide twyfel by Afrikaners bestaan oor Mbeki se wil om die daad by die woord te voeg.

Key words

African National Congress; Africanist; Afrikaans culture; Constand Viljoen; discussions in Britain; far-right Afrikaners; liberal Afrikaners; National Intelligence Service; National Party; Niel Barnard; rapprochement; right-wing Afrikaners; self-determination; Thabo Mbeki; *verligte* Afrikaners; *volkstaat*; Willie Esterhuise.

Sleutelwoorde

African National Congress; Afrikanis; Afrikanerkultuur; Constand Viljoen; gesprekke in Brittanje; liberale Afrikaners; Nasionale Intelligensiediens; Nasionale Party; Niel Barnard; regtervleuel-Afrikaners; selfbeskikking; Thabo Mbeki; toenadering; “verligte” Afrikaners; ver-regse Afrikaners; volkstaat; Willie Esterhuise.