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# South Africa: The English-Speaking Opposition



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**An Intelligence Assessment**

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# South Africa: The English-Speaking Opposition

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This assessment was written by [redacted]  
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**South Africa:  
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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 15 September 1982  
was used in this report.*

South Africa's English-speaking opposition parties favor significant reforms of the country's racial policies, but since 1948 these parties have been unable to challenge the control of the government by the Afrikaner National Party (NP). The major reason for the English opposition's impotence has been the political cohesion of the Afrikaners, who account for 60 percent of South Africa's whites. We believe, however, that voting trends among Afrikaners may eventually allow the English speakers to regain a more influential role in the South African Government after more than 30 years in the political wilderness.

If the Afrikaners continue to split their votes among competing parties, the NP, which is now proposing moderate racial reforms, may over the long term be compelled to seek support from English speakers. In such an event, the English parties might be able to press the government into implementing more extensive racial reforms.

The Progressive Federal Party (PFP) is the largest and most important English political group. Under the leadership of Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, an Afrikaner, the PFP has formulated a coherent alternative to the policies of the NP.

The PFP advocates a national convention of representatives of all races to negotiate a new constitution for South Africa. The PFP maintains that it would uphold two nonnegotiable principles during such a convention:

- Full citizenship for all South Africans with participation in all levels of government.
- Constitutional and other safeguards for the rights of minority groups.

The other English opposition group, the New Republic Party (NRP), is a declining force in South Africa's national politics. Its weakness, in our view, is that its racial reform proposals differ little from those of the NP. The NRP's political influence is limited to Natal Province, where it attracts the support of conservative English speakers who prefer not to vote for the NP.

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**Preface**

This paper, one in a series of basic studies of South African politics, is based almost entirely on public information. For 30 years, the English-speaking political parties have been unique for their openness in an otherwise closed society, and they have been examined in detail by South Africa's aggressive English-language press and by foreign journalists and scholars. This has produced a consensus that the parties are powerless, devoid of practical solutions to South Africa's problems, and represent a shrinking constituency. As Afrikanerdom's political solidarity has begun to fray, however, these parties appear to have been handed some new opportunities.



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**South Africa:  
The English-Speaking  
Opposition** [redacted]

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**Introduction**

Since 1948, when the Afrikaner National Party (NP) gained control of parliament, the English-speaking opposition parties have been unable to challenge Afrikaner rule and have had virtually no influence over policymaking within the South African Government. Although the NP has increased its parliamentary majority from 51 percent in 1948 to 69 percent in 1982, it has suffered two potentially serious setbacks during the past year that could eventually benefit the English-speaking opposition:

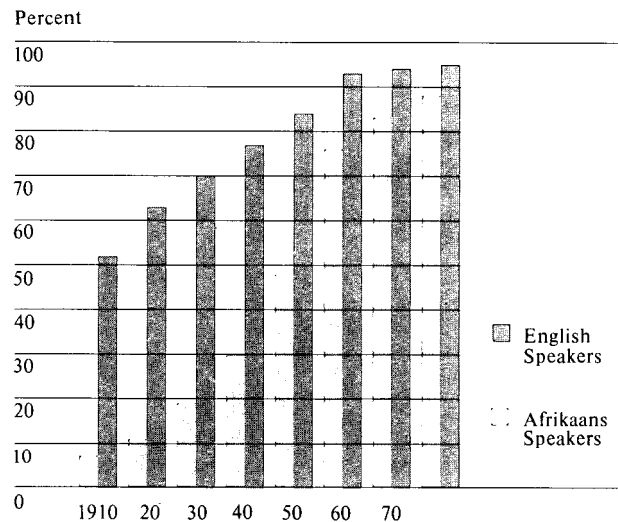
- In the 1981 national elections, the NP lost votes, not only to the major English opposition group, the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), but to two conservative Afrikaner parties. Although these Afrikaner parties won no seats in parliament, they received over 15 percent of the total vote and about 30 percent of the Afrikaner vote.
- In March 1982 some NP parliament members left the party because of their opposition to Prime Minister P. W. Botha's racial reform program. They formed the new Conservative Party of South Africa (CPSA), which has become the first Afrikaner parliamentary opposition to the NP. [redacted]

This trend among Afrikaner voters to divide their loyalties among several competing parties, we believe, could lead to parliamentary deadlocks in which the English opposition would hold the balance of power. The potential for the English parties to influence governmental decisionmaking would be further enhanced if they were to begin capturing substantial numbers of Afrikaner votes. [redacted]

**Factors Affecting the Strength of the English  
Opposition**

The two parties that now represent the political interests of the bulk of South Africa's English speakers are both of relatively recent origin. The PFP, which is the largest and the only English party with a national following, is the current heir to the long

**Figure 1  
South Africa: Whites—Urbanized by  
Language Group**



[redacted] 25X1

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tradition of progressive, modern liberal views in the more cosmopolitan English-speaking community. The NRP, which is more or less the lineal descendant of the United Party that governed in the first half of the century, is little more than a regional party in Natal Province. [redacted] 25X1

English-speaking parties have been out of power for three and a half decades for good reason. Demographically, the odds have long been against English speakers, and the higher birth rate among Afrikaners has ensured that their numerical margin would continue and even widen. English speakers have also had to buck the remarkable cultural unity of the Afrikaners, which has been exploited by Afrikaner politicians to mobilize the vote. [redacted] 25X1

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*There was a Time. . .*

*Before 1948 there were several English-Afrikaner governing coalitions; the most successful were the United Party governments led by Afrikaner Gen. Jan Smuts, who served as South Africa's Prime Minister from 1919 to 1924, and again from 1939 to 1948. English-Afrikaner political cooperation was undercut by the emerging force of Afrikaner nationalism, and in the elections of 1948 the National Party and another small Afrikaner group gained control of parliament. The United Party never recovered from its defeat, and, by the elections of 1958, the National Party had gained the support of over 55 percent of the electorate.*

[redacted]

Finally, the English-speaking opposition has failed to overcome its reputation as a group incapable of more than moral outrage over apartheid. Since 1948, English political parties have failed to develop comprehensive alternatives for dealing with the country's "black problem" that could compete with the NP's increasingly sophisticated apartheid policies. [redacted]

**The Progressive Federal Party**

The PFP, formed in 1977, has been painfully aware of the failings of the English opposition and has tried aggressively to overcome these obstacles. In five years, the PFP has become the most important English political party. The PFP gained 26 parliamentary seats in the 1981 elections, compared with the 18 it won in the 1977 campaign, when it became the official opposition in parliament. [redacted]

South African political observers attribute much of the PFP's recent success to the leadership of its national chairman, Frederick van Zyl Slabbert. Slabbert, a young, articulate Afrikaner academic, was elected PFP leader in 1979. Since then Slabbert has won raves, even from the Afrikaans-language press, for his skill as opposition leader in parliament. [redacted]

**Proposals for Reform.** We believe that the PFP—unlike previous English-speaking parties—has succeeded in formulating a coherent political program that offers an alternative to the policies of the National Party. Slabbert hopes that the PFP's political platform will attract not only English-speaking voters but those young, urban, white-collar Afrikaners who, according to public opinion polls, are increasingly receptive to racial reforms of significance in South Africa, such as the limited inclusion of blacks in the national government. [redacted] 25X1

Slabbert has long argued that Pretoria's racial policies, no matter how well intentioned, are doomed from the start because government officials fail to consult with nonwhite leaders as the policies are being developed. The PFP is cool toward the President's Council, a multiracial advisory body established by Pretoria, because most Colored and Asian political leaders have refused to participate in the group, and, most important, because the Council excludes representatives of South Africa's 22 million blacks. The key element in the PFP's plan for change is its proposal for a national convention of representatives of all races to negotiate a new constitution for South Africa. [redacted] 25X1

The PFP has stated that it would uphold two nonnegotiable principles during such a national convention:

- Full citizenship for all South Africans with participation in all levels of government. 25X1
- Constitutional and other safeguards for the rights of minority groups.

The PFP has also announced the proposals it would advance at the convention: a federal government with regional decentralization, a universal franchise, the dismantling of discriminatory laws, a national assembly with minority veto on some issues, and an executive council with representatives of all races. [redacted] 25X1

The National Party publicly condemns the PFP's proposals on the grounds that they deprive whites of the opportunity to determine their own future. Slabbert, argues the NP, cannot guarantee whites that an equitable constitution would emerge from the national convention. Slabbert contends that it is shortsighted

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Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, PFP leader. *Grandfather was a United Party member and his father belonged to the NP. Studied at Stellenbosch University and has a Ph. D. in sociology. Was a university professor when he won his first parliament seat in 1974.* Financial Mail ©

for whites to believe that they can indefinitely continue to make unilateral decisions that affect all of South Africa's peoples. Slabbert maintains that Coloreds, Asians, and especially blacks will become more radical and unforgiving in their demands if whites do not hasten to include them in government deliberations.

**Growing Local Strength.** In March of 1981, the PFP narrowly missed an opportunity to put some of its ideas to work at the local government level when it fell one seat short of winning majority control of the Johannesburg City Council. One of the party's major weaknesses is that it has never been in power, and managing the Johannesburg area, where about one-seventh of South Africa's whites live, would have afforded the PFP an opportunity to dispel voters' doubts about the party's abilities and intentions. At the same time, however, PFP strategists wanted the Johannesburg elections to provide the party with a clear mandate for its reforms, and thus its candidates did not seek to tone down their campaign rhetoric. The PFP's uncompromising reform platform—which included calls for the desegregation of many municipal facilities—probably accounted for its defeat, but

the party was nevertheless encouraged by the significant support within the electorate for changes in racial policies. [redacted] 25X1

**Splits in the PFP.** Although the PFP has reunited much of the English-speaking opposition, the public record shows it still has problems maintaining unity among its members and supporters, and there is wide disagreement within the party on several issues. [redacted]

The PFP's "left wing," for example, has become particularly critical of the South African Government's increasing use of force, not only against its black insurgent foes, but against neighboring African states. During the PFP's party congress last November, the group's more liberal members sought to pass a resolution condemning South African cross-border operations "which appeared to extend beyond defense." Harry Schwarz, the PFP's spokesman on defense and economic issues and the leader of the party's "right wing," led the fight to defeat the resolution, but milder motions were carried calling for the option of alternative service for conscientious objectors and recommending that the PFP not support Pretoria automatically on all defense issues. [redacted]

On economic issues, PFP liberals believe that South Africa's capitalist system is partly to blame for the development of apartheid. Industrialists, they argue, have benefited significantly from the labor surpluses and low wage structures that the apartheid system has fostered. Other PFP members, however, contend that South African businessmen, particularly English speakers, are a progressive force for change. Apartheid, they argue, has forced businessmen to resort to uneconomical and inefficient practices. This debate over the relationship between capitalism and apartheid is particularly touchy for the PFP leadership because English-speaking businessmen are important financial supporters of the party. [redacted] 25X1

The most fundamental question that divides the PFP, and one which will become even more pressing during the next few years, is how the party should respond to Prime Minister Botha's reform initiatives. Although the party has applauded some of the changes, such as

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reforms in the labor laws, the PFP has condemned most of Botha's proposals, particularly his efforts to grant some political participation to Coloreds and Asians but not blacks. Not all PFP adherents, however, have been equally critical of the Prime Minister, and one member left the party last year because of the PFP's refusal to participate in the President's Council. As Botha introduces still more changes, we believe it will become more difficult for the PFP to decide whether his reforms constitute the first steps in a long process of evolutionary change, or whether they amount to too little, too late. [redacted]

**The New Republic Party**

The NRP, which for the most part draws its membership from the more conservative former United Party stalwarts, is, in our view, a declining force in South Africa's national politics. It has a narrow political base centered almost exclusively on the predominantly English-speaking white population in Natal Province. Seven of the NRP's eight parliament members represent districts in Natal and the party heads municipal and provincial governments there. More than two-thirds of Natal's whites are English speakers, and many public opinion polls indicate that Natalians are more conservative on political and race issues than most other South Africans of English extraction. [redacted]

Under the leadership of Vause Raw, a veteran United Party politician, the NRP has attempted to occupy the middle group between what it describes as the "dangerously conservative" National Party and the "dangerously radical" Progressive Federal Party. Prime Minister Botha, however, is now casting the NP as the party of moderate reform, and the NRP's policies are increasingly indistinguishable from those advocated by the government. [redacted]

The NRP's plans for sharing political power at the local level call for close formal cooperation with the province's Colored and Indian populations, and for consultations with Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, leader of the 5 million Zulus whose homeland is in Natal. The proposals, however, do not include blacks as full partners, and the party does not advocate equal black participation in the national government. The NRP's policies thus differ little from National Party proposals that call for the inclusion of Coloreds and Asians

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**South African Whites—A Profile**<sup>1</sup>

*Most Afrikaners probably:*

- Grew up in the country or in a small town.
- Work for the government, a parastatal corporation, or on the land.
- Are members of one of the Dutch Reformed Churches and read the Bible daily.
- Usually vote for the National Party.

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*Most English speakers probably:*

- Grew up in a city.
- Work in private industry, commerce, or their own business.
- Are Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Jews, or atheists.
- Usually vote for the PFP or NRP.

<sup>1</sup> Derived from the statistical surveys published in South Africa: The Prospects for Peaceful Change.

[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1  
in government at all levels, but which limit black participation in the national government to the homeland structure [redacted] 25X1

Many South African political observers predicted last year that the NRP would soon lose much of its political clout in Natal because of the party's increasingly close identification with National Party policies. In the elections last year, however, the NRP lost only one parliament seat and strengthened its control [redacted] 25X1 the Natal provincial government. As long as Natal's whites prefer to support a conservative English party instead of the Afrikaner-dominated NP—no matter how similar their policies are—the NRP will remain an important political force at the provincial level. We believe, however, that it will remain unable to attract support from more liberal English speakers in Cape and Transvaal Provinces. [redacted] 25X1

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**Reactions to the President's Council**

In May, the President's Council recommended a series of constitutional changes for South Africa, which the NRP has moved quickly to support. The Council's recommendations for the inclusion of Coloreds and Asians in local governments coincide with the NRP's own views. The suggested changes at the national level—Colored and Asian participation in the cabinet but the retention for the time being of an all-white parliament—also dovetail with the NRP's more conservative approach to multiracial government at the national level. [redacted]

Other English speakers, particularly in the PFP, have been less sanguine about the Council's recommendations. The PFP, however, has so far not condemned the Council's suggestions outright. Because of its own commitment to reform, the PFP leadership has a difficult choice:

- Reject the proposals completely, even though the changes could in time lay the groundwork for more fundamental racial reform.
- Support the Council's recommendations and thus risk associating the party with incomplete reforms that may only serve to antagonize further the country's black population. [redacted]

In his public and private statements so far concerning the Council's recommendations for a multiracial government, Slabbert has avoided committing himself and his party to either course. Slabbert and other PFP spokesmen, however, have been openly critical of the Council's proposal that South Africa modify its parliamentary system to include a strong executive president. According to the Council's recommendations, such an executive president would be chosen by an electoral college composed of parliament members, but once in power the president would be able to appoint and dismiss his cabinet members without having to seek parliament's approval. The president would also have the power to dissolve the legislature. [redacted]

Prime Minister Botha has publicly argued that South Africa's racial problems need the attention of a strong executive president who can rise above the political infighting of parliament. The PFP and other critics of the government—including the rightwing Afrikaner

parties—believe, however, that a powerful president could eventually usurp most of parliament's powers. The PFP fears that such a diminution of parliamentary authority is the real intention behind the proposal for an executive presidency. If the parliament did evolve into little more than a rubberstamp organization, PFP gains in the legislature would become meaningless. Slabbert, in fact, has stated that he would leave the legislature rather than condone a situation in which "parliamentary opposition simply became a decorative extension of executive control." [redacted]

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Whether or not the PFP chooses to support the President's Council's recommendations, Prime Minister Botha almost certainly will be able to get the reform package through parliament. Constitutional amendments require only a simple majority. In our view, however, the National Party would prefer to have the support of the PFP because its backing would enhance the reform proposals' international credibility. [redacted]

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Whatever the PFP's final decision, we anticipate in the next few months some intense political bargaining among the government, the National Party, the opposition groups, and Colored and Asian leaders. We anticipate that the PFP will seek to trade its support for the President's Council's proposals for guarantees that the role of Coloreds and Asians in the government will be expanded and, most important, for assurances that blacks will eventually be brought into the reform process. Without those guarantees, we doubt that the PFP will back the Council's proposals. [redacted]

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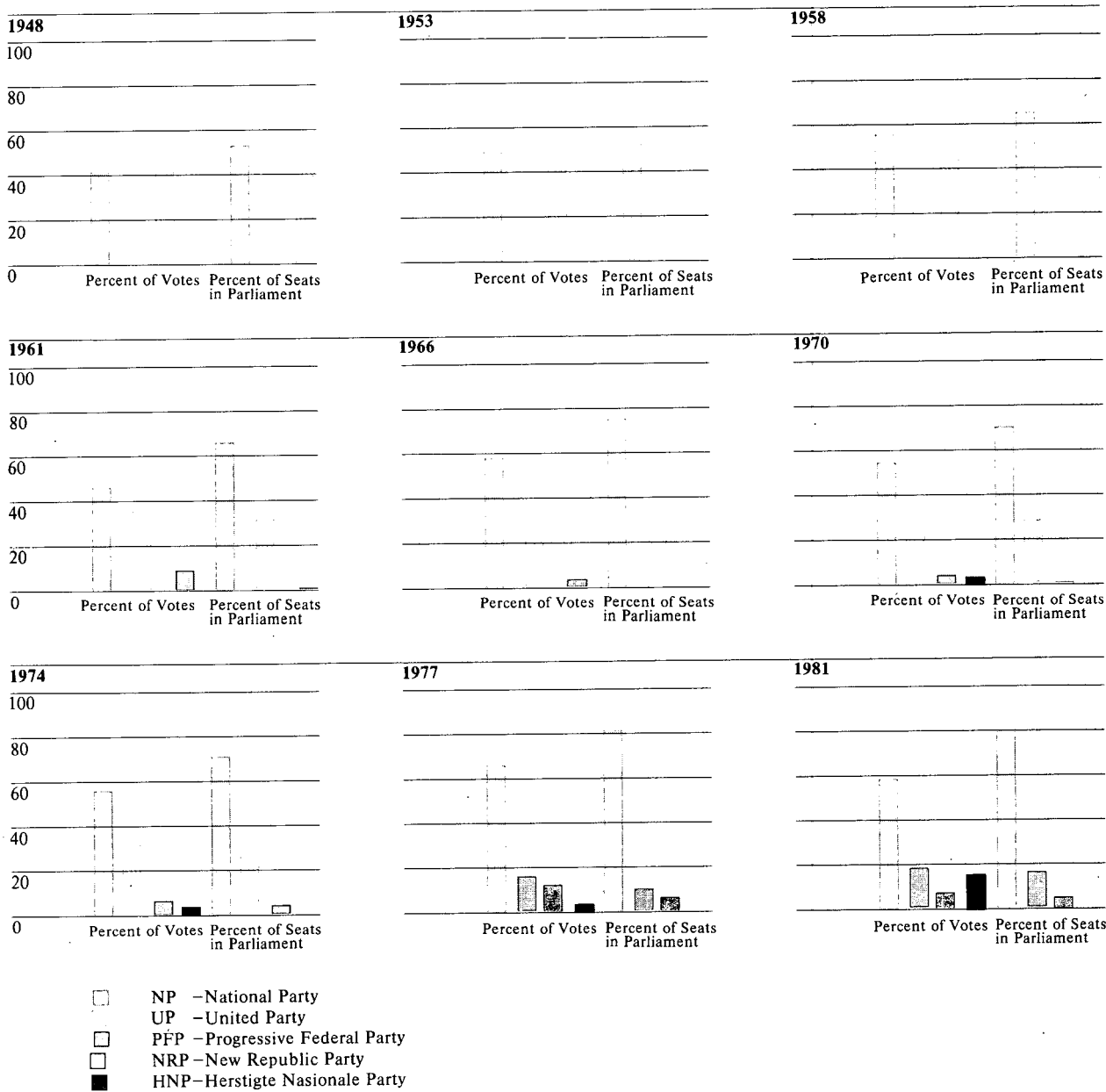
**The English Opposition's Future**

Assuming the NRP stays a regional anomaly, we believe the PFP will remain the primary national political vehicle for English speakers. If the parliamentary system gives way to a strong executive, the PFP, by Slabbert's own admission, could lose much of its potential for influencing South Africa's racial policies. This would be true unless Prime Minister Botha or his successors chose to bring PFP members

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**Figure 2**  
**South Africa: Election Results, 1948-1981**



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into the national government. The President's Council, in its proposals for a new, cabinet-level executive committee, recommended that this committee be non-partisan. The appointment of someone such as Slabbert to lead an important government ministry would do much toward gaining credibility outside the country for South Africa's racial reforms. [redacted]

The PFP leadership would at that point have to decide whether an invitation to join the cabinet was intended to co-opt the party into supporting the government's limited reform policies or whether it was an indication of Pretoria's genuine interest in fundamental reform. We believe that PFP participation in a national cabinet would in the short term provide the party with its best opportunity to influence South Africa's racial reform policies. [redacted]

Barring a move toward a strong executive presidency, the PFP will continue to attempt to transform itself from an ethnic-based party into a legitimate competitor for national political power. The recent signs of division in the Afrikaner electorate have encouraged the PFP leadership, but the party still faces an uphill task in wresting a significant number of seats from the NP. [redacted]

The NP's success in structuring South Africa's electoral system to favor Afrikaner candidates poses the single most difficult obstacle for the PFP. Rural constituencies, which are defined as those districts with less than 13,000 eligible voters, elect over 40 percent of the members of parliament. These rural districts are populated almost exclusively by Afrikaners. In the 1981 elections, the PFP won less than 3 percent of these rural seats, and the party leadership realizes that it stands little chance of increasing its support in these conservative, Afrikaner strongholds. [redacted]

The PFP did much better in urban electoral districts, winning about 30 percent of these seats in the 1981 elections. The National Party, however, still won about 60 percent of the urban electoral districts. Even in urban regions, the NP has succeeded in drawing many of the electoral districts along ethnic lines, thus forcing the PFP to compete with the National Party in many largely Afrikaner suburbs and urban areas. [redacted]

The PFP thus will probably have to attract a significant number of Afrikaner votes to challenge the NP at the national level. According to postelection polls, however, the PFP won only 5 percent of the Afrikaner vote during the 1981 balloting. To date, the significant movement by Afrikaners away from the National Party has been in a conservative direction. [redacted]

We believe, therefore, that the PFP's long-term prospects depend upon developments within the National Party and that some sort of formal or informal cooperation with the Nationalists offers the most realistic chance for South African's English speakers to regain national political influence. This analysis derives from our judgment that the factionalism in the Afrikaner political community is more than a passing phenomenon and that the NP will continue to lose Afrikaner votes to the new conservative parties. If so, the PFP and the people it represents will increasingly be courted by moderate NP politicians interested in maintaining their control of the government. While Botha is obviously too much the Afrikaner to embrace PFP politicians in the near future, we also believe he would be unwilling to abandon completely modest reform proposals in order to halt the loss of Afrikaner votes to the conservative parties. [redacted]

The NP, however, probably will not have to turn to the PFP for support soon. The NP is unlikely, for example, to lose control of parliament in the next national election, which does not have to be held until 1986. The NP would retain an absolute majority even if it lost an additional 31 seats to opposition parties. [redacted]

Perhaps the most serious obstacle to PFP political influence is the possibility that the NP's policies will gradually be accepted by enough nonwhites to convince many English speaking voters to support the NP. In such an event, which could be in the back of Botha's mind, the NP would attract enough English votes to compensate for its losses among Afrikaners. Such a development would be a political setback for the PFP, but it could, in our judgment, result in real gains for English speakers. Their support for the NP would essentially transform it from an Afrikaner party into a centrist white party. [redacted]

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