

Whites Drift Right

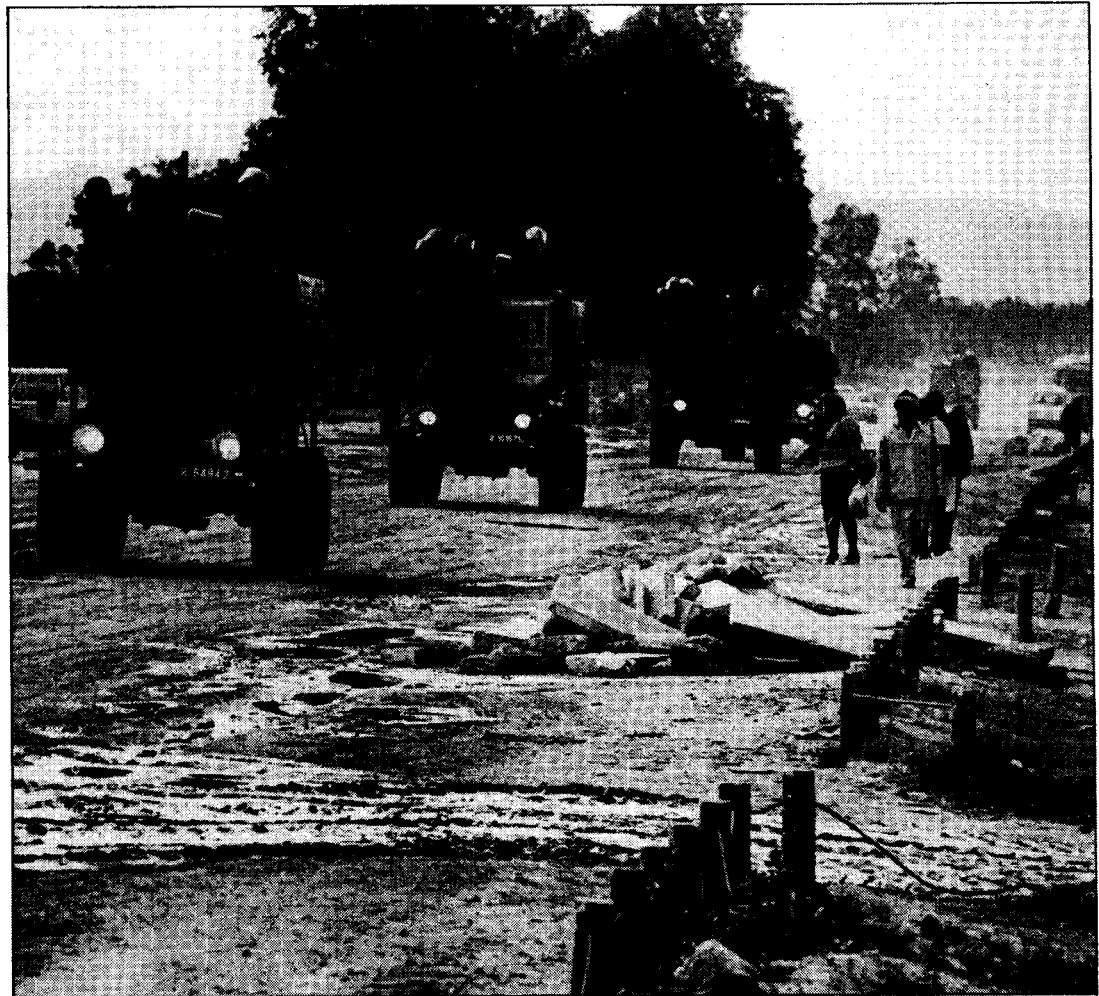
The campaign for the parliamentary elections in South Africa on September 6 is drawing together the threads of all the major conflicts in the country. Deprived by the Conservative Party (CP) of its monopoly of the Right and the blood-and-guts race issues that go with that position, the ruling National Party (NP) is becoming increasingly confused. PW Botha's graceless resignation on national tv was calculated to damage party leader FW de Klerk, whom Botha dislikes with a deadly intensity. But he knew it would also damage the NP in the elections and is clearly too embittered to care.

This may turn out to be a prophetic view of the party's future. Internal and external pressures continue to propel it in a reformist direction, but it remains anchored in its commitment to white hegemony. The ultra-right CP is squeezing it on the one side and the left-of-centre Democratic Party on the other, and it has been unable to adjust to its new role as a centrist party.

The NP holds 123 of the 166 elected seats in the whites-only House of Assembly. Some analysts think this total could be reduced to less than the 84 seats required for a bare majority, but a more realistic estimate is around 100 seats. For the first time too since 1953, the National Party total vote is likely to fall below 50%. This would be a shattering result for it.

The Conservatives, already the official opposition party, hope to double their 22 seats and then start inviting defections from the NP. Aware of this possibility, the Democratic Party (DP) believes the NP will then have to approach it for a pact. The DP's price for such a pact would be a democratised South Africa, although it would not necessarily seek transfer of power to the black majority.

Elections will also be held on September 6 for the 80



No prospect of change for the blacks with no votes in the squatter camps

elected-member House of Representatives (Coloureds) and the 40 elected-member House of Delegates (Indians). These two chambers, created in 1984, are highly unpopular in the Coloured and Indian communities, and the 'mass democratic movement' (comprising the United Democratic Front, Cosatu and so on), has called for a boycott of the elections. Africans have no representation in parliament and the Coloured and Indian chambers are seen as puppets of the white chamber. Such is the hostility towards the two chambers that the government has resorted to the extraordinary strategy of allowing Coloured and Indian voters to cast their votes over a five-week period: voting by stealth so that they cannot be identified as supporters of the system and exposed to the wrath, verbal and physical, of their communities. The mass democratic movement

(mdm) has not called for a boycott of the white elections as such, but some white liberals, to the distress of the DP, have announced their intention to stay away from the polls.

The mdm has chosen the pre-election period to launch a civil disobedience campaign, and the first demonstration - black patients presenting themselves at whites-only hospitals for treatment - was remarkably successful. Most doctors were happy to treat the patients and armed police kept out of sight, avoiding a confrontation that would be grist to the CP's mill. No doubt, after the elections, the police will be less tolerant, although even then, if repression is too severe, it could discredit the 'negotiations' the government hopes to have with black leaders.

The mdm is buzzing with speculation on these proposed 'negotiations' and the

role Nelson Mandela might play in them. Many mdm supporters are highly suspicious of the whole idea, which they see as a government trick to disarm them. The civil disobedience campaign, a more sophisticated version of the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign of the 1950s, is a counter to 'negotiations'.

The ANC, under pressure from the Soviet Union and some front line states, has now produced its own initiative, which is that South Africa follow the Namibian example: free and fair elections for a constituent assembly which would then draw up a constitution for a democratic South Africa. Pretoria, of course, will see this as a demand for a transfer of power to the black majority and reject it. This is just the beginning of another phase in the war of attrition that Pretoria and the mdm wage against each other. ● Stanley Uys