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South Africa: A Closer Look at the May Election [REDACTED]

The results of the May whites-only general election in South Africa have been widely interpreted as a dramatic shift to the right in white politics. We believe, however, that this analysis ignores important changes that have occurred in the policies of South Africa's political parties and in white opinion. Just as white attitudes have changed in recent years, so has the alignment of parties along the political spectrum. Although the election results show a shift to the right in the composition of parliament, we do not believe, based on polling data, that they reflect a rightward shift in white ideology. [REDACTED]

Background to Realignment

Assessing the relationship between voter attitudes and support for political parties is complicated by the changes in white politics since the 1981 election. In recent years the National Party—once the party of “grand apartheid”—has undertaken—at least in its view—significant racial reforms, including scrapping the Mixed Marriages Act, amending the Immorality Act, modifying or eliminating more than 30 laws relating to Influx Control, and establishing a multiracial, tricameral Parliament. The party is now considering formulas to provide blacks some form of political participation at the national level. As a whole, these policies are significantly more reformist than the party's platform in the 1981 election. [REDACTED]

Other developments since the 1981 election have also changed the relationship of opposition political parties to the electorate. In 1982, 17 National Party parliamentarians created a right-of-center party when they defected to form the Conservative Party. On the other side of the spectrum, the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) in recent years has moved still further to the left, calling for the unbanning of the ANC and negotiations with blacks without preconditions. The PFP has even inched away from the entrenched racially based “group” concept of South African politics. [REDACTED]

The 1987 Election

Although for the first time since 1948 more votes were cast for opponents to the right of the National Party than for candidates on the left, we believe the May election returns reflect a repositioning of parties on the political spectrum rather than a dramatic rightward shift of the electorate. [REDACTED] surveys of white opinion and election results indicates that white voting behavior was guided by attitudes on two key issues—security and reform. Election returns, for example, tend to confirm surveys that whites have moved slightly leftward on reform issues in recent years, but remain steadfast in their concern for security. Parties most clearly associated with strong security postures—the National Party, Conservatives, and Herstigte Nasionale Party—received almost 83 percent of the total vote, roughly equivalent to the level of white concern over security-related issues expressed in surveys. At the same time, however, far more whites voted for varying degrees of reform than in any previous election. Whereas in 1981 only the PFP was clearly associated with major reforms of apartheid, by 1987, it was clear that voters also viewed the Nationalists as a proreform party. Parties favoring varying degrees and paces of reform—the Nationalists, PFP, and the small New Republic Party, and proreform independents—received about 60 percent of the vote, close to the combined percentages of whites who in recent polls either supported or expressed ambivalence toward key reform questions. [REDACTED]

The ruling party did well in the election, in our view, because its platform of reform and repression encompassed these two key elements in white opinion. In contrast, the opposition parties' platforms were attractive to narrower segments of the electorate. The leftwing parties offered accelerated reform but paid

little attention to whites' security concerns, while the rightwing parties matched the National Party on the security issue but staunchly opposed any further reform. (S NF)

A Divided Afrikaner Electorate; a Heterogenous National Party

The recent election apparently revolved more around issues than party loyalty, and these issues sharply divided the Afrikaner electorate. With the ruling party's move toward reform, a significant loss of conservative—particularly Afrikaner—support to the right was inevitable, in our view. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] however, that Nationalist leaders were surprised when they lost approximately 50 percent of the Afrikaner vote to rightwing parties. New support from the English-speaking community, however, saved the party's healthy parliamentary majority. Almost 60 percent of English speakers voted for the Nationalists, probably, according to the US Embassy, because they have lost confidence in the leftwing parties as vehicles of reform and out of concern for the left's failure to assure white security above all else. [REDACTED]

As a result, the National Party is no longer the party of a virtually united Afrikanerdom. Instead, it is supported by a fluid coalition of whites who have diverse cultural backgrounds and widely varied priorities—security, reform, and the economy. The shifting voting patterns of the election suggest to us that the Nationalists' new constituency—unlike the Afrikaners—will not be firmly dedicated to the party. [REDACTED]

The National Party After the Election

The ruling party is likely to take a middle-of-the-road position. Party leaders will continue to combine reform and repression on the assumption that reform must be coupled with coercion to contain the black opposition. We believe Nationalist leaders will tend to err on the side of satisfying whites. Change will be implemented very slowly to minimize white concern, and the party will always stress tough security responses to black unrest. [REDACTED]

Party leaders, however, will be sensitive to changes in white attitudes that could lead to increased support for the Conservative Party or defections from the Nationalists' new English constituency. Therefore, if party leaders come to believe that the ruling party stands to lose more white support to opposition parties, we believe the party will move to postpone the scheduled 1989 election. As a last resort, we would even expect the Nationalists to consider a suspension of parliament to attempt to prevent the collapse of their party [REDACTED]

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