

Vorster's success is linked to the decline of black Africa's moral credibility

# Southern Africa: A Cataclysm Averted?

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In a time when idiocies such as the domino theory comprise a substantial part of American foreign policy one has to look hard for evidence that authentic national interest is anywhere being invoked as a rationale for external relations. That the Republic of South Africa seems to be a world power demonstrating innovation in diplomacy and putting shibboleths in their rightful place says something about the general bankruptcy of Western statecraft. While Ford and Kissinger flail about seeking justifications for American failures and misalliances, a moldy, outcast regime in Pretoria has embarked upon a path of diplomatic initiative which has effectively breached the wall of isolation that has surrounded it for two decades. The motives of the regime of John Vorster may be sinister and base, but there appears to be a far more sophisticated perception of long-term interests in Pretoria than in Washington. Vorster has defied the diehard *verkrampies* and pressed on with a policy of dialogue with the black states to the north. Although diplomatic virtuosity in the service of apartheid is no virtue, diplomatic obtuseness in the service of the shopworn platitudes that mark U.S. foreign policy is no mean vice.

The transformation of South African policy can be misinterpreted by those disposed to look for signs and wonders. It is not true that the Vorster government has merely been carried along by the torrent of events following the April, 1974, military coup in Portugal. It is true that the decision of the Portuguese to divest themselves of their overseas territories opened gaping holes in the *cordon sanitaire* that had provided a white buffer between the Republic of South Africa and the black states to the north. Yet by 1974 Vorster's program of accommodation with black Africa was already well advanced. Vorster's black African *démarche* is

more than an expansion of the policy of his predecessor with certain modifications. Yet the strategies of Vorster are best seen in terms of their continuity rather than of their novelty.

Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, who was stabbed to death by a deranged parliamentary messenger in 1966, was the spiritual progenitor of the present policy. Although critics of the Nationalist regime in South Africa are sometimes reluctant to admit it, recent Nationalist leaders did not oppose the granting of independence to the colonies of the north. Nor has their attitude toward the independent African states been one of unremitting hostility. In a very real sense the new sovereignties were irrelevant. Their importance, from the perspective of the Nationalist Party, stemmed from the tendency of the independent nations to equate their own past domination with the present plight of their brethren in South Africa—a model both Verwoerd and Vorster considered highly *malapropos*.

Whether black men or white men ruled in Lagos or Kampala was of little consequence to the Nationalists, in and of itself. When, however, in the councils of the Organization for African Unity or the United Nations aggressive black leaders asserted the indivisibility of black liberation, it became a matter of great consequence. The South African leadership was calm, almost cordial, in greeting the independence of the three former British High Commission Territories—Swaziland, Lesotho, and Botswana. The emergence of these independent states, which are either adjacent to, or enclosed by, the territory of South Africa, fortuitously provided South Africa with both a pretext and opportunity for unfolding its outward-looking policy. The presence, moreover, of two neighboring and highly vulnerable black republics—Malawi and Zambia—served to increase the scope of receptivity to South Africa's position.

As interlocutors between South Africa and black Africa, the three former High Commission Territories

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were well-nigh perfect. They were sufficiently autonomous to be looked upon as equals by the black states, yet so dependent upon South Africa as to preclude outright defiance of Pretoria. In the case of Malawi and Zambia, their freedom of political action is more nearly perfect, but economic realities dictate some measure of reliance on the South African economy as a source of employment for their citizens and as a natural trading partner. The truth is that the Republic of South Africa is a regional power of considerable importance. By virtually any measure—military strength, GNP, exports, industrial production, or population—South Africa looms at least as large in its regional context as does Iran in its. As the world's foremost producer of gold, South Africa has a claim on the international economy equivalent to that of major producers of petroleum.

South Africa's regional preeminence was reinforced by the fact that, despite the hostile fulminations of the Organization of African Unity members north of the Zambezi River, it was comfortably ensconced behind a wall of states that were either too weak to challenge it or largely in accord with its internal policies. Angola to the northwest, Mozambique to the northeast, Rhodesia and Botswana to the north—all served to heighten the awareness of South Africa's leaders that they were unassailable in the event that black Africa chose to throw down the gauntlet.

The prospect of such an attack, however, was probably never assigned a very high priority by Pretoria. Despite years of menacing rhetoric and ominous threats, the enormity of the problems facing the independent black states relegated the idea of a Pan-African army on the banks of the Limpopo to the domain of fantasy.

Far more unsettling was the possibility that South Africa's magnificent isolation might turn out to be its Achilles' heel. The South African leadership could not have felt entirely secure behind ramparts defended by an archaic fascist relic such as Portugal or a vastly outnumbered clutch of country squires in Rhodesia. Although the fortunes of nationalist movements in Rhodesia and the Portuguese territories had waxed and waned over the years, the South Africans knew that such insurgencies would be a major factor sometime in the future. They took some comfort in the fact that FRELIMO in Mozambique and the three nationalist movements in Angola were encountering stiff opposition from a Portuguese army of considerable strength. In Rhodesia, however, with a white population of only 250,000, any serious outbreak of internal war would be beyond the capacity of the Rhodesian army to suppress.

The vulnerability of Rhodesia was deemed serious enough for South Africa to dispatch paramilitary police units to Ian Smith's forces when the threat was simply sniping by the Zambian army and forays by guerrillas

from FRELIMO-controlled areas of Mozambique. When attacks well within Rhodesia (in the Centenary area) began in earnest last year, the prospect of large-scale involvement by South African army units became more real. What had originally been projected as a forward strategy gave indications of turning into an open-ended commitment to a massive counterinsurgency struggle by South Africa.

Then the Portuguese coup took place, presenting Pretoria with the very vivid prospect of transforming Rhodesia from a strategic outpost to an exposed and indefensible salient. As the likelihood increased that the new Portuguese government would negotiate with FRELIMO for Mozambiquan independence, Vorster was presented with a disquieting set of alternatives; all of which would be, in some measure, extensions of existing policies. He could, on the one hand, substantially increase his military commitment in Rhodesia to meet the threat of an unrestricted sanctuary for the guerrillas. This would mean a vast increase in the amount of military assistance to Ian Smith, both in money and in men and arms.

Such a policy of confrontation would logically embrace the possibility of pressing ahead with South Africa's nuclear weapons capability as the *ultima ratio* of a confrontational policy. The risks involved in a Vietnam-style military involvement were not lost on Vorster. He could expect no assistance or support from anywhere but Rhodesia itself and would court the opprobrium of virtually every world power, including France, his principal supplier of military weapons. Such a policy, however, would be a logical extension of his support of the Smith regime. To withdraw entirely and leave the Rhodesians to fight it out alone would be inconsistent and might even be seen as a betrayal of the renegade regime in Salisbury.

On the other hand, Vorster could reinforce his policy of détente with black Africa by soliciting the good offices of black leaders who were either dependent on him or at least communicative. This would allow him to cut his losses in Rhodesia, detach himself from a weak and illegitimate ally, and advance himself as a reasonable and responsible statesman. This course of action might well redound to South Africa's long-term interest. It also entailed certain perils. Even if he could secure a negotiated settlement in Rhodesia and it was greeted with approval by influential black heads of state, there could be no assurance that Smith would comply. Having defied Great Britain, the United Nations, and virtually every nation in the world, it would not be entirely out of keeping with his past record for Smith to try to go it alone. The other imponderable for Vorster was whether the Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) nationalist groups that had now achieved the military initiative would be willing to sit down and negotiate with Smith. The minimal conditions from the nationalists' point of view would involve the eventual establishment of

majority rule in Rhodesia.

There were internal complications for Vorster as well. The diehard *verkrampte* nationalists who had hived off from the Nationalist Party over the very issue of dialogue with the black states would now have more than a vague set of suspicions to level against Vorster. He could be accused of selling out a beleaguered sister state, and that would have both strategic and ideological repercussions. For one of the two self-consciously white supremacist states of the world to abandon the other might set off tremors within Vorster's Afrikaner constituency.

Vorster, however, was no newcomer to Afrikaner politics. He possessed all the credentials of Afrikaner legitimacy. An alumnus of the Ossewa Branwag (Ox-Cart Sentinels), a militant and xenophobic patriotic society founded prior to World War II, which ultimately challenged the Nationalist Party for leadership of the Afrikaner community, Vorster had been interned between 1942 and 1944 for pro-Nazi sympathies. He was simultaneously a member of the Broederbond, a secret society formed for the purpose of maintaining Afrikaner hegemony in South Africa. Coming from the narrow sectarian confines of Stellenbosch University, Vorster recanted his youthful flirtation with Ossewa Brandwag to become Verwoerd's minister of justice in 1961. Although he had repudiated the antiparliamentary and antidemocratic notions of the Ossewa Brandwag, he pursued his tasks as minister of justice with ruthless efficiency. He sanctioned, indeed encouraged, police repression of dissenters, and was Verwoerd's floor manager for the Sabotage Act of 1962, which was designed to incapacitate political opposition.

Vorster was the father of the "90-Day Clause," which conferred almost limitless power of arrest on the police, and he invented the practice of "banning" dissidents. As prime minister he presided over the enactment of the Population Registration Act, which has the objective of classifying population by race and has resulted in members of the same family being categorized in different racial groups. The Act has raised the recessive gene to the status of a leading social indicator.

Vorster's credentials, then, as an orthodox Nationalist and a white supremacist were beyond dispute. Yet he is more than just a wool-hatted "dorpie." He scaled the heights of Afrikanerdom and played the game of apartheid with skill and conviction. In 1968 he pulled the rug out from under Dr. Albert Herzog, the doyen of the *verkrampies*, with the simple but plausible assertion that the Republic was a part of Africa and not an outpost of seventeenth-century Holland. He contended that some measure of contact between South Africa and black Africa was not merely an idle foreign relations ploy, but, in the final analysis, the only way to insure white dominance for the indefinite future. Rarely has the linkage between foreign and domestic policy been so clearly and forcibly stated.

So long as the relationship between South Africa and the rest of Africa was preeminently military and confrontational, the nature of the internal organization of South African society would always be at the forefront. The international scrutiny of the Republic would be merciless and critical in the extreme. So long as a purely adversary relationship existed with the black states, South Africa could expect no quarter. The very intransigence and inflexibility of the Republic on the race question was brought into clearer focus by its defiant attitude in foreign policy. Vorster and his foreign minister, Hilgard Muller, initiated a plan to make the Republic's foreign policy the handmaiden of domestic policy in what can only be called a textbook example of statecraft.

The earliest and most general change in South Africa's foreign policy assumptions was, of course, the policy of dialogue—an expansion of the Verwoerd notion of an opening to the north. The dialogue policy took shape with the assumption that the medium of communication with South Africa's most abiding adversaries would be its most vulnerable neighbors. To counter the suspicion that Pretoria was simply using its weak neighbors as Trojan horses to penetrate and di-



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vide the OAU, the influential leader of Zambia; Kenneth Kaunda, was also tentatively approached beginning in 1968.

One might have expected Kaunda to shrink from dialogue with South Africa. Kaunda is in many ways the very model of the generation of African nationalists who struggled for independence. He is as fierce in his devotion to African independence as is Vorster in his belief in the white role in Africa. But Kaunda's incandescent nationalism is tempered by a strain of pacifism that has come, in recent years, to eclipse his militancy on the question of racial oppression. This element in the complex character of Kaunda came to the fore in 1969 with the promulgation of the Lusaka Manifesto, which called for a negotiated settlement of the outstanding racial issues in Southern Africa. The Manifesto called on nationalist groups to ponder the possibility of peaceful resolution of their grievances, even if the pace of progress toward racial

equality were slowed or the ultimate realization of it were deferred.

"We would," Kaunda stated, "prefer to talk rather than kill." Thus Kaunda entered into an exchange of letters with Vorster. Vorster stepped up the pace of both covert and open communication with other black states. Into the circle of dialogue were brought the Ivory Coast's Felix Houphouët-Boigny, Ghana's Dr. Kofi Busia, President Bongo of Gabon, and President Tsirinana of the Malagasy Republic. Trade contacts in early 1969 began to broaden between the Republic and Kenya, Uganda, and Zaire, and some measure of commercial relations were even reported between South Africa and Tanzania.

The motives for détente with South Africa varied between the several African leaders. Some, like Kaunda, saw the prospect of a holocaust in Southern Africa if the white regimes had their backs to the wall—a holocaust that would likely consume millions of Africans as well as thousands of whites. Others simply saw the poor and underdeveloped states of black Africa being no match for the military power of South Africa. The Republic had nuclear weapons technology in its grasp, in addition to an overwhelming advantage in conventional power. The sheer logistics of fielding a multinational African army against the white regimes was daunting. Such a suggestion had been made from time to time during the 1960's, but even if widespread armed violence inside the white redoubt were to occur, it was deemed doubtful that the black states would have either the resources or the inclination to intervene. Most typically, however, the readiness to accept dialogue on the part of the black leaders was based on the simple realization that the Republic is the continent's foremost industrial power. Material benefits accruing from amicable relations with Pretoria would far outweigh the spiritual satisfactions of uncompromising enmity.

Some suggest that the black leaders' receptivity to dialogue represented a fundamental compromise with the principles of continental liberation. But this criticism ignores the elemental fact that there was little they could do either as individuals or collectively to challenge South Africa's regional hegemony or internal policies. If America, the nation that chronically invoked morality as the wellspring of its foreign policy, was relinquishing any hope of changing South Africa's internal policies through confrontation, what conceivable impact could be made by the challenge of a score of poor and uncertain African states?

Looking to Washington, the African leaders saw little to encourage them in a policy of militancy. The newly elected Nixon Administration had commissioned a National Security Study Memorandum to suggest the outlines of a future policy toward South Africa. Discarding the "extreme" options posed in the document (known as NSSM-39)—suggestions such as interven-

tion on behalf of a beleaguered white regime or a naval boycott to bring it down—the new Administration chose a typically intermediate course aimed at influencing positive developments through communication and dialogue. When Nixon campaign strategists addressed the question of Southern Africa, they were not interested in a policy designed to win domestic black support, but rather one which would be attractive to potential Wallace voters. Given the high level of affection for the white supremacist governments within the 1968 Nixon campaign, it is not surprising that the new Administration drew back from even the moderate rhetorical support for African liberation that had marked previous Democratic administrations.

With no prospect of leadership from Washington, with the French selling arms to South Africa, with Great Britain fulminating impotently against Rhodesia, what was to be gained by Gabon or even Zambia in throwing down the gauntlet to the white regimes? Even if a coalition of African states had resolved to present the world with a *fait accompli* by marching on Pretoria, the probability of material support from the Western democracies was near zero. Bowing to the inevitable, the dialogue was joined by the Africans.

The mixed motives of the African heads of state in entering the dialogue are quite apparent. For Kaunda, who had been compelled to trade with South Africa and enter into a series of clandestine relationships, the lure of the South African economy was less a dazzling prospect than a grim reality. From Kaunda's point of view, the transcendent problem was the likelihood of bitter regional strife centered on Rhodesia. If the South Africans had advanced to the point of stiffening the cadres of the Rhodesian army with units of the South African police, it would not seem unreasonable for Portugal to intervene as well. Such an eventuality would turn Zambia into a battleground as the white-ruled states pursued guerrillas into their sanctuaries. It was precisely this fear that prompted Kaunda in 1968 to initiate contact with Vorster in the hope of heading off what Kaunda felt was an imminent invasion of his territory by the Rhodesians and Portuguese. Vorster dismissed these apprehensions as groundless, but the event did permit him to establish direct contact with his most abiding adversary.

This contact allowed Vorster to deal with a specific area of dispute beyond the borders of South Africa and set the ground rules for a dialogue focused not on apartheid or some more generalized issue of race, but on foreign policy. By using Rhodesia rather than the domestic institutions of South Africa as the talking point, Vorster could have dialogue on his own terms. But Vorster could not be entirely unresponsive to African sensitivities about apartheid. There had to be some *quid pro quo*, even if only in a cosmetic sense, to reassure the black leaders. The manifestations of apartheid were so visible and galling to the black Africans that Vorster found some

domestic modifications necessary.

Apartheid, it should be remembered, is not a single system but a dual one—greater and lesser apartheid. The latter, known as “petty apartheid,” was the humiliating Jim Crow system replete with park benches marked *blankes* and *nie blankes*, the oppressive labor system, the “locations,” the Pass system, and the entire panoply of social degradation and disenfranchisement for black Africans in the Republic. The larger vision of apartheid, for which “petty apartheid” was thought necessary, is “separate development.” This posited the notion that the citizenship rights of Africans resided not in the Republic but in a chain of tribal enclaves known as homelands or “Bantustans.” Since civil and political rights for Africans were derivative from their “homeland” citizenship, the Republic was under no compulsion to grant them equivalent rights.

As a paradigm this seemed logical, but in reality the homelands were more a vision in the mind of Vorster than an operating system. Even the most sanguine expectations about the homelands saw them as little more than reservations whose people would be fed into white-owned industries surrounding the homelands. Since the territories set aside as homelands were invariably the least fertile areas of the region, agricultural or pastoral self-sufficiency was precluded. If the program actually matured, it would eventuate in a system whereby contract laborers would leave their homelands for periods ranging from a day to several months to work in the border industries or in the mines. But they could own no property, cast no votes, nor possess any of the privileges and immunities of South African citizenship during their sojourn.

The logical extension of the homeland program, however, would embrace duties on the part of the South African government—duties accorded to any alien. If the program of separate development was to be more than the sheerest fraud the world would perceive merely as a device to divest Africans of all rights, the homelands had to have genuine autonomy. They would also have to receive substantial contributions from Pretoria to offset their underdevelopment. Most important, the “citizens” of the homelands would have to be accorded the normal courtesies and protections extended to any visitor. The South Africans, however, wanted *both* grand apartheid as embodied in the Bantustans *and* the old *baaskaap* privileges of the Jim Crow system. To make any dialogue plausible and acceptable petty apartheid had to be modified at least to the point where, if independent African states sent emissaries to South Africa, they should not be subject to the routine humiliations visited upon local Africans.

This imperative, coupled with the canny manipulation of Vorster by tribal leaders such as Chief Gatsha Buthelezi of the projected Kwazulu homeland, suggested to the South African government that petty

apartheid had to be bent in favor of grand apartheid. Buthelezi demanded a *quid pro quo* for his endorsement of the program of separate development. He insisted on authentic autonomy, substantial development assistance, and the right to bypass Pretoria in securing foreign aid directly from overseas sources.

Vorster found himself trapped in a serious contradiction. If he followed the dictates of Buthelezi and accorded both autonomy and aid, the Bantustans could serve as a base for agitation against his regime. If he instituted the homelands as mere tribal reservations while simultaneously denying Africans from those territories the rights of ordinary aliens, separate development would be revealed as a cheap subterfuge, and dialogue would be a dead letter. Either course involved risks, and the ultimate issue is still in doubt.

Vorster did move to spruce up petty apartheid to the extent of desegregating sports, integrating diplomatic fraternization, deemphasizing the old Nationalist racial stridency, and allowing some measure of dissent by African organizations. The simple economic reality of a shortage of skilled white labor has led to a modification of the job reservation laws. These changes now allow “coloureds”—people of mixed racial background—to work on projects previously reserved to whites. How far Vorster can or will go in modifying, if not sacrificing, petty apartheid to the interests of dialogue, separate development, and economic realities is still unclear. The changes that have occurred are not meaningless, nor without future significance.

Since the Portuguese coup of 1974 it is clearer that South Africa is willing to sacrifice white supremacy in Rhodesia for the sake of separate development in South Africa. Buttressed by Mozambique, Rhodesia was an asset; it is now a clear liability. Vorster's inclination to sacrifice it, however, derives from the modest success of his plan of dialogue. By entering into a joint venture with Kaunda in forcing Ian Smith to accelerate the pace of political equality, Vorster is gaining leverage he would not have had if his support for Smith had been without reservation. By acting as a midwife of compromise, South Africa is contributing to the development of what may be another black state with which it can talk.

Smith is only too well aware of the possible consequences of these talks. Feeling betrayed by Vorster, he has tried to scuttle the talks in a variety of ways alternately aimed at repressing or discrediting the Zimbabwe nationalists. Smith may be able to defy his opponents in Rhodesia, but Vorster is not likely to let Smith lay waste to a settlement that is clearly in South Africa's interest.

Vorster's *realpolitik*, however, goes well beyond forcing a recalcitrant Ian Smith to sit down with the African opposition. For years South Africa has suffered almost universal condemnation for her annexation of Southwest Africa (Namibia).

Vorster may well have discovered that Namibia too is expendable in the interests of dialogue and separate development. Vorster's motives in putting a homeland for the Ovambos of Namibia on the drawing board may be similar to the "bargaining counter" mentality so dominant in American SALT negotiation tactics. By appearing to extend the homeland policy to this disputed area, Vorster may be enhancing the trade-off value of Namibia. Thus, when he actually divests himself of Namibia, it will appear to be a major concession. Cutting loose Namibia would remove another important point of contention between South Africa and the black states. Such an autonomous Namibia would, naturally, be "associated" in some manner with South Africa. It is difficult to see how dialogue could proceed if South Africa were to absorb Namibia and set up Bantustans in the bargain. Vorster must be well aware of his country's ability to control events in adjacent territories, and there is no reason to assume that an autonomous Namibia on the model of Lesotho or Swaziland would be intolerable to Pretoria.

If Vorster is able or willing to engineer these changes—force a settlement on Ian Smith, set up an autonomous Namibia as an associated state, chip away at petty apartheid, and proceed with the development of the homelands by massive infusions of development funds and a reasonable grant of internal autonomy—what are the prospects that dialogue will proceed with the black states and buy for South Africa the surcease from external criticism it so dearly wants?

The answer to that complex question must be hedged with a good many qualifiers, but on the whole the prospects of success must be judged fairly good. The reasons for this assessment stem less from the profundity or sincerity of South Africa's actions than from the ability of her challengers to persist in holding South Africa's feet to the fire. One very general observation is in order: The unassailability of the Third World has been badly tarnished. Ten years ago the essential moral rightness of the positions of the developing societies of Africa was largely unquestioned. However, the political aberrations of the new states, the tendency of some Third World leaders to prefer posturing to performance, and the disposition of those governments to be every bit as high-handed and dictatorial as any mature regime have seriously damaged Third World credibility. These failings are now regarded less as a legacy of colonialism than as the responsibility of Third World leaders and governments themselves. For the aspiring states of the Third World the bloom is off the rose. The failure to attain development goals has given rise to frustration and a desperate casting about for excuses and scapegoats. It is not merely the bizarre antics of Uganda's Idi Amin, the atavistic quest for "authenticity" of Tombalbaye or Mobutu, or the genocide in Burundi, but rather a recognition on the part of Africans themselves that virtue is not a necessary concomitant of underdevelopment or previous condition of dependency.

To replace the manipulative and self-serving hegemony of the Western powers in the United Nations with an insular and bombastic Third World chauvinism is not a change for the better. If it were only the question of ganging up on Israel in the General Assembly or UNESCO, in the hope of gaining some unspecified benefits from wealth-encrusted sheikhdoms, it could be condoned as a desperate groping for resources to underwrite development. What is really happening goes beyond that doubtful strategy, however. Platitudes are invoked to obscure national shortcomings; the present generation of African leaders feather their own nests at the expense of the peasantry; corruption far exceeds what could be excused by the claims of primordial ties; and authoritarianism is used to compensate for deficiencies in authority.

In short, the developing states have let slip from their grasp the very qualities that made their claim morally superior to that of the South Africans. It is not true that the changes in South Africa have been sincere or substantial. On the contrary, they have been opportunistic and shallow; but they have been immeasurably burnished by the backsliding of the black states. If all liberation from apartheid can mean for South African blacks is leadership by the likes of Sekou Toure, they will have been fleeced. It is only in the present setting that the insubstantial and contrived reforms of the Vorster regime can receive the token approbation they have gained. It is not true that the Sharpeville massacre is effectively excused by, for example, the depredations of the Ethiopian military junta, but such events substantially debase the claim that any black government is superior *a fortiori* to any white one. The hallowed axiom that black men are entitled to all rights enjoyed by white men, including the right to oppressors of their own color, must be subjected to closer scrutiny.

To be sure, the plight of black and colored South Africans is not relieved by comparison with the plight of other Africans. But as a very practical matter the cutting edge of the world's moral indignation is being blunted. The accusers of South Africa must now answer for their own imperfections, and this, necessarily, impairs the legitimacy of their struggle against South Africa. If South Africa defers the showdown, as I believe it will, it will be less because of its own putative reforms or help in resolving the Rhodesian question than because the forces arrayed against the Republic can no longer apply moral sanctions with the consistency and force they had before.

No African leader perceives the discrepancy between profession and performance so acutely as does Kenneth Kaunda. Perhaps this is why he has concluded that trafficking with a well-established evil is preferable to invoking a cataclysm that could result in evils beyond imagining.