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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BOPHUTHATSWANA:
A Black State Or State of Mind?

c/o Professor F. de Villiers
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Mmabatho, Bophuthatswana
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

Bophuthatswana is a unique place in southern Africa. It is considered by South Africa to be an independent black state, but it consists of seven completely separate pieces of land. It has accepted independence but it lies entirely within South Africa's borders. It has a bill of rights which South Africa does not, and has declared apartheid and discrimination on the basis of race, creed or color illegal. However, it is making conscious efforts to have the cultural make-up of the country be mostly blacks of Tswana descent.

Bophuthatswana is the result of South Africa's attempts to create a "constellation of states" by returning the different black ethnic groups to the areas where they originated. (In crude terms, "send 'em back where they came from.") In this case the Tswana people were moved to an area of South Africa very close to Botswana, and told that their old home was now their new home.

If it's any indication of how successful or intelligently the demographic lines of the past few decades have been drawn, the majority of Tswana—the largest ethnic group of Botswana

—live in Bophuthatswana and S. Africa. Over sixty percent of Bophuthatswana's citizens still live and work in South Africa, mostly in townships outside of Pretoria.

Looking at the dispersal of the Tswana; in Botswana which was the largest traditionally Tswana region, there are the fewest number of people. The next largest area, Bophuthatswana, has the next largest number of people. Then, near Pretoria, in mostly impoverished "township" communities are the vast majority of Tswana people.

So, we are presented with a landlocked "country" broken into numerous unconnected pieces. The majority of the "country's" citizens live and work "abroad" in the neighboring countries. This new "nation" has a legislated societal order completely antithetical to the considerably more powerful country that surrounds it.

With no formal borders between South Africa and Bophuthatswana, the responsibility for behaving according to the laws of the land is certainly placed upon the individual. A white South African told this correspondent, "it's really quite ridiculous. You can drive two hours out of Johannesburg

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and see blacks and whites walking hand in hand, legally. Then you drive back home and they're throwing people out of their homes because they're (nonwhites) living in a white area."

What results from all of this is less an intangible "independent black state," than a very tangible—and to some people, a quite appealing— independent state of mind.

Just travelling from Johannesburg to Mmabatho, the new capital of Bophuthatswana being built from scratch in the bush, the difference in atmosphere can be felt. Ms. Carmen Nathan, a renowned South African legal expert, author, and professor of law at the new University of Bophuthatswana said, "I can feel the difference when I come back (to Mmabatho), and I like it. It's hard to describe but it is as if a burden has been lifted."

She was referring to the most obvious difference between South Africa and Bophuthatswana, which is the absence of apartheid in the latter. However, it is not just the departure of the legal apparatus for racial discrimination that has created a more positive social atmosphere here. It is, rather, the visible existence of a predominantly black, multiracial leadership.

Bophuthatswana has a black president, his Excellency Kgosi Lucas M. Mangope, and an almost entirely black parliament. On the other hand, the chief justice of the supreme court, the Honourable Chief Justice V.G. Hiemstra is white. So are many of the professors at the fledgling but fast growing University of Bophuthatswana.

Most of the government and civil service jobs are now held by blacks. The local shops and businesses that were owned by whites still are owned by

them for the most part.

The small Bophuthatswana Defense Force is entirely black but is being trained by white South Africans. The police force is a mixture of both black and white, although the largest percentage of police patrolling the streets are black.

Even though the economic hierarchy of this area has not changed drastically, in the shops and at public events a distinct and sizable black middle class can be seen.

What all of this points to is an environment that defies simple or all-encompassing definitions. Probably the most startling examples of this are the resettlement camps in Bophuthatswana. They are the result of thousands of people having been uprooted from their homes in South Africa and sent to new communities inside the new "nation's" boundaries. The concept is frightening, but in at least one, with the incongruous name of Tse Tse, the responses of some of those questioned were surprising.

In particular, a seventeen year old Tswana girl named Rebecca said that although leaving the place she had grown up in was hard at first, even with the new difficulties of Tse Tse life was much better than back in the Republic. The schooling was much better than what she had received in South Africa, and she hoped to attend the University of Bophuthatswana the following year. She was emphatic when she said that there was no apartheid here. "When you go to the stores in Mafikeng there is no door for white people and door for black people. Everybody goes in the same door."

She mentioned that the police were strict but fair, and there were no "tsotsi" or hoodlums at all. But perhaps

most significantly, she felt it was the proximity of the Bophuthatswana Army barracks that kept the criminals away.

The Bophuthatswana Army is not used for police functions. Being only a few years old it is barely functional as a military force, and its tactical strength is so low, the South African Border Police still do a large percentage of Bophuthatswana's border patrol work. Yet, it is perceived of as a black army, and therefore naturally protective of black people. Unlike the blacks in the South African Defense Force, who are mostly recruited from and used in South West Africa/Namibia—and who stick out as obvious foreigners when used for guard duty in Johannesburg—the black soldiers here are from here.

Does all of this suggest an elaborate scheme of facades? Bophuthatswana is an "independent" nation that geographically makes a mockery of the word. It has black leaders with political power but still very little economic control over the destiny of the country. And its extremely small army is almost entirely dependent upon the one country it would most likely oppose for ideological reasons.

The only thing for certain is there are quite a few people curious enough about just what Bophuthatswana is to want to come and see it for themselves. There is a housing crunch at the moment as large numbers of people arrive from all over southern Africa, England, the United States, and many European countries. Largely these are professionals and technicians who have come to work on the huge construction projects, health, and education programs. Very few, however, were induced to come by offers of large paychecks. Being paid in South African Rand, even those here

simply for monetary gain—along with those here for personal reasons—have had to absorb an over thirty percent decrease in the value of their money in the last year alone.

At this point it is hard to say if Bophuthatswana is just an expensive and wasteful attempt by South Africa to permanently disfranchise the Tswana people. It might be a unique and unexpectedly successful social testing ground for apartheid South Africa's transition to full integration and effective black leadership.

Sincerely,



Kendal B. Price

Received in Hanover 6/1/82