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A 'Terrible Beauty' In South Africa

In Parliament, whites speak Zulu, a general salutes the ANC, and a praise-singer bares his chest

By John Battersby

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SOUTH AFRICA'S Parliament building, permeated with the echoes of apartheid, reverberated last week with the sounds of a society redefining itself.

Frene Ginwala, the new speaker of Parliament - imposing in her fine silk saris - lost no time in reshaping what constitutes "the dignity" of Parliament. "We want to ... make it more accessible to the people of South Africa," she told the Monitor.

The first tradition to go was the daily Christian prayer, which was replaced with a minute of silence and meditation. Next was the strict adherence to suits, ties, and jackets for male legislators, who are now allowed to dress in colorful Afro-style shirts, caftans, and Nigerian-style shirt-and-trouser suits. Members now merely refer to one another in a respectful manner rather than in the rigid formality of "honorable member."

The first week of the new democratic Parliament saw an impressive display of unity and goodwill among South Africa's culturally, religiously, and ethnically diverse legislators.

A white Afrikaner, representing the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party, made his speech in impeccable Zulu; a former member of the African National Congress military wing opened her speech in Xhosa; Gen. Constand Viljoen of the right-wing Freedom Front paid tribute to the ANC; a former ANC detainee and hunger-striker replied to General Viljoen in Afrikaans. President Nelson Mandela delivered a paragraph of his opening speech in Afrikaans, and Viljoen commended him on the gesture.

Several legislators who spoke were former prisoners, guerrillas, exiles, and torture victims. Some speeches stressed the need to forgive but never to forget. Others called for a truth commission to identify and record the crimes of those seeking amnesty.

The general mood in the colorful chamber was as upbeat as the array of fashions and challenged the Parliament's Calvinist tradition. A bare-chested Xhosa praise-singer shattered Parliament's austere opening procession as he hailed President Mandela in his tribal Xhosa tongue.

Most legislators praised the explosion of cultural diversity as a symbol of the new rainbow nation. "A terrible beauty has been born," proclaimed Prof. Kader Asmal in his maiden speech as an ANC legislator, quoting W. B. Yeats. Martha Olckers, education and training minister in the Western Cape provincial legislature, held a different view: She found the praise-singer "a terrible culture shock."

Yet, on the Parliament floor, there was not a trace of bitterness about the past: "The last four days have perhaps been the most exciting, the most unforgettable in our political life because, for the first time, we have now put the past behind us," said Mandela at the end of a four-day debate on his "state of the nation" speech, which stressed reconciliation and nation-building.

Mandela spoke in the red-upholstered Senate - the scene in 1955 of a cynical maneuver by the National Party government to strip "colored" (mixed-race) voters of the franchise. His opening speech on May 24 was a model of statesmanship, confirming his commitment to build a new country from the ruins of apartheid while reassuring

whites that this would be done without drastic intervention, which could harm the economy. The normally controversial ``no confidence debate" gave way to an amicable discussion on the president's ``state of the nation" address.

But for some, the new Parliament's camaraderie contained a warning. ``Politicians on almost every side ... seemed intent on stressing that the most important thing is not to rock the good ship National Unity," and a burden would rest on the smaller parties to keep opposition alive in a system where traditional adversaries were now bound together in a government of national unity, noted a Weekend Star of Johannesburg editorial. ``Barely three weeks into the new South Africa, I am nostalgic for those bad old days," conceded black newspaper columnist Jon Qwelane, adding that he, too, may be suffering from culture shock.



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