# The Boundaries of Afrikaner Self-Determination

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## Introduction

South Africa has long been a veritable laboratory for those interested in the study of boundaries: ethnic homelands, destroyed by tribal wars and European invasion then reinvented by apartheid, were recently dismantled under the new government of national unity; relatively autonomous provinces that numbered four between 1910 and 1994 were largely disempowered under apartheid but recently multiplied to nine and were re-empowered; apartheid cities created through boundaries that segregated races are now being rearranged to provide for integration.

Potentially disrupting or at least affecting all these South African experiments with boundaries has been the quest for an Afrikaner homeland. On 26 May, 1994, in accordance with section 184A of the Interim Constitution the Volkstaat Council, a body of twenty persons, was established to seek out the boundaries of an autonomous region for the Afrikaners.[1] In May 1995, the Volkstaat Council released its report.[2] The proposal, if accepted in its entirety, would establish an ethnic homeland, affect the boundaries of all nine provinces, and lead to civic councils for Afrikaners at the municipal scale.

While many non-territorial solutions to ethnic conflict are possible ranging from affirmative action to complete assimilation (or technically even genocide),[3] the Volkstaat Council was specifically tasked with finding a territorial solution. This might have included one or some mix of fifteen different kinds of possible arrangements[4]:

1.  partition (Cyprus)

2.  ethnic federalism (Ethiopia)

3.  functional federalism (United States)

4.  municipal autonomy (Hamburg)

5.  municipal independence (San Marino)

6.  regional autonomy (Faeroe Islands, Denmark)

7.  administrative devolution (Scotland in the United Kingdom)

8.  consociation (Switzerland)

9.  mixed autonomous arrangements (Spain)

10. special protection (biosphere reserves of the Kuna, Panama)

11. communalism (millet system in the Ottoman Empire)

12. drawing electoral boundaries according to ethnicity (apartheid South Africa)

13. market-based boundaries (voluntary segregation in cities)

14. regional boundaries that mitigate ethnic tensions along state boundaries (EU)

15. confederation or commonwealth status (Federated States of Micronesia)

The Volkstaat Council is suggesting a mixed territorial solution that involves a federated Volkstaat that also has ties to some autonomous regions and local councils (communalism). The Volkstaat Council first seeks a territory with its own system of justice, citizenship, schools, taxation, police, and laws including the power to conclude treaties with other states.

In this regard, a similar model might be the German Lander which have wide-ranging powers and can be independently involved in trade negotiations and certain kinds of treaties. Secondly, for areas in which the Afrikaner has no clear majority, some autonomous arrangements are proposed. In sum, the Volkstaat is proposed as an ethnic state with an international identity yet a constituent part of South Africa and some Afrikaners not falling within those boundaries could be part of certain autonomous areas.

### The Boundaries of the Volkstaat

The Volkstaat spatial design centres around Pretoria to include nearly two million people of which the Afrikaners are now a 60% majority. It comprises an area of some 38,000 km² (3.2% of South Africa) split into Eastern and Western halves (Figure 1). The western sector of 23,000 km² includes some 460,000 Afrikaners and offers a majority of 58%. The eastern half of 15,000 km² includes some 715,000 Afrikaners or 61% of the local population. This initial Volkstaat would affect the boundaries of Gauteng, the North West, and the Eastern Transvaal Provinces.

The additional autonomous areas number five but involve eight fragmented sets of boundaries. These areas would not be a formal part of the Volkstaat but would include 'civic councils' and might be

future areas of incorporation. The autonomous areas taken together with the Volkstaat suggest a dispersed and fragmented political geography similar to the former Bophuthatswana (Figure 2) except larger in area. This amounts to a total of 11.5% of South Africa (8.35% for the autonomous areas and 3.2% Volkstaat) or 134,000 km² (about the size of Greece).

The boundaries of the Volkstaat and autonomous areas are perceived in the report as both culturally hard and economically soft. As cultural boundaries, they are perceived as open to the influx of Afrikaners but relatively closed to others who do not meet certain cultural criteria. An exception is made for pre-existing non-Afrikaner residents who may become immediate citizens of the Volkstaat and those who immigrate thereafter and reside in the territory continuously for ten years. In

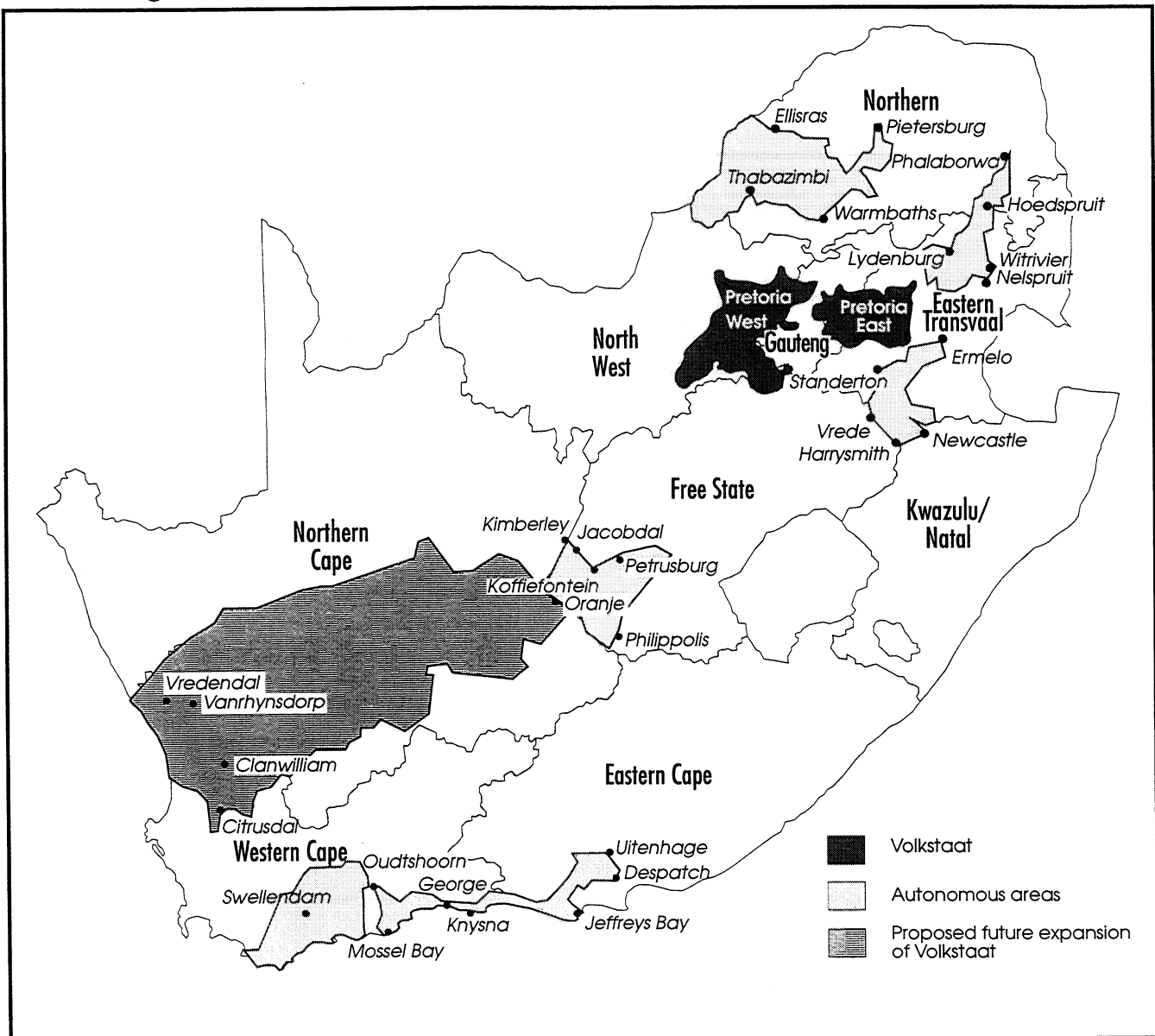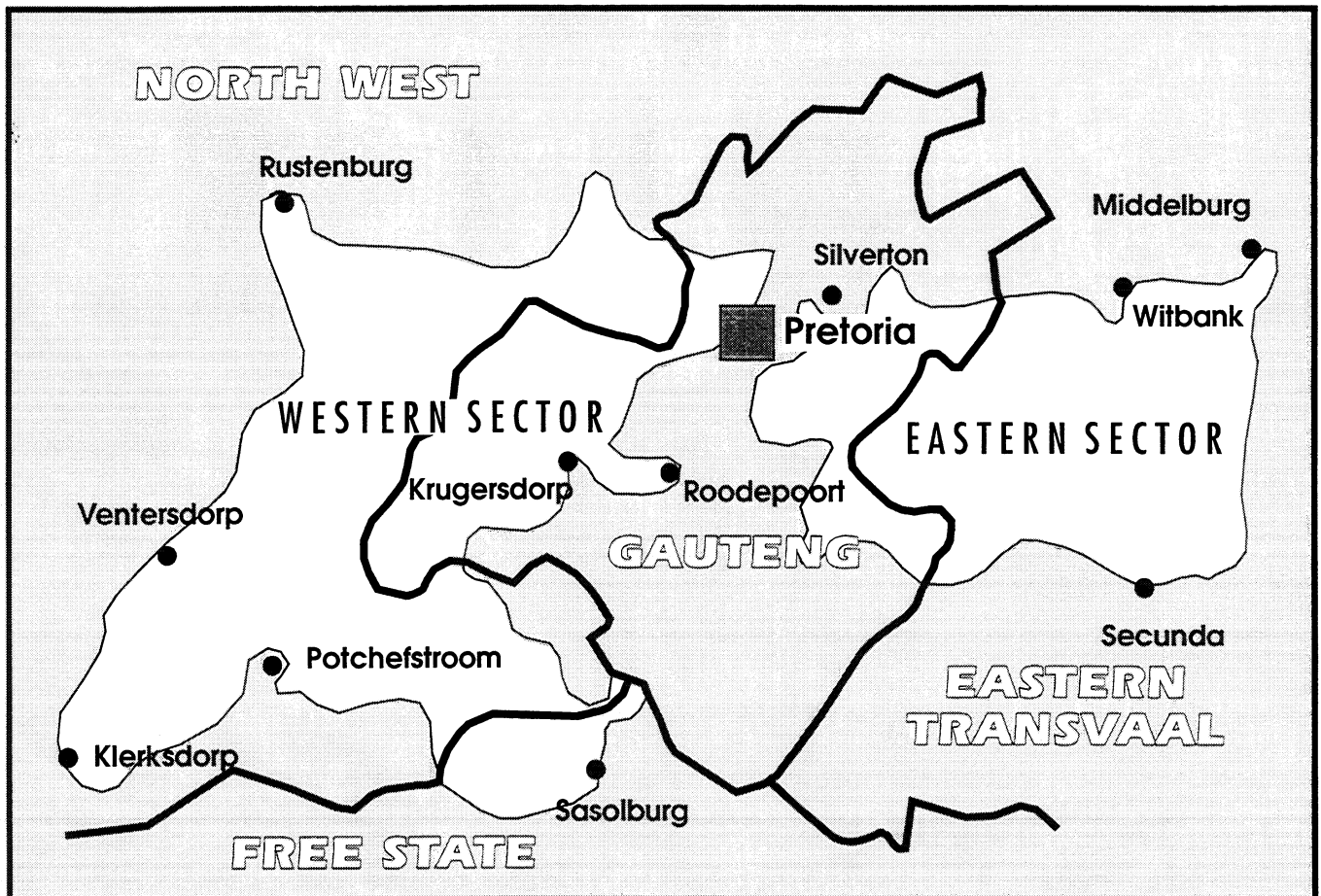## Figure 1: The Volkstaat, six autonomous areas and possible zone of expansion

**Figure 2: The west and east sectors of the Volkstaat centred on Greater Pretoria**



economic terms, the boundaries are perceived as soft and open to full participation in the South African economy.

**Significance**

This report and reaction to it are of significance to understanding the role of boundaries in conflict resolution. Some social scientists have identified state-building by nation-destroying as a principal source of ethnic violence rather than nationalism per se.[5]  If a territorial resolution to Afrikaner nationalism can be found within a state that has an open and established programme of 'nation-building,' it has practical and theoretical ramifications for some 160 multinational states.[6] This case may not be typical, however, and this is also important to note with regard to any comparisons that may be made.

From an international perspective, the proposed Volkstaat differs in at least three ways: (1) an ethnic group that previously dominated the state through the radical partition of the black population

into semi-independent 'homelands' (Figure 3) is constitutionally required to propose a homeland for itself; (2) the Afrikaner population is dispersed and lacks any easily recognisable majority in any one place; and (3) the boundaries of the proposed Volkstaat are not fixed but mobile: the Council perceives that Afrikaner majorities may develop in certain areas and become an eventual part of the Volkstaat.

The first point is rich with irony and establishes the unique character of the South African situation. While many (most?) Twentieth Century states engaged in assimilationist policies that backfired as oppressed minorities revolted, South Africa engaged in segregationist policies that also backfired but as the majority revolted. Rather than partitioning off the blacks from a white-dominated South Africa, Afrikaners are now attempting to excise a white state from a black-dominated South Africa.

Regarding the second point the lack of any existing demarcated area on the map complicates the Afrikaner basis for territorial claims: a right to self-

## Figure 3: Former Homelands
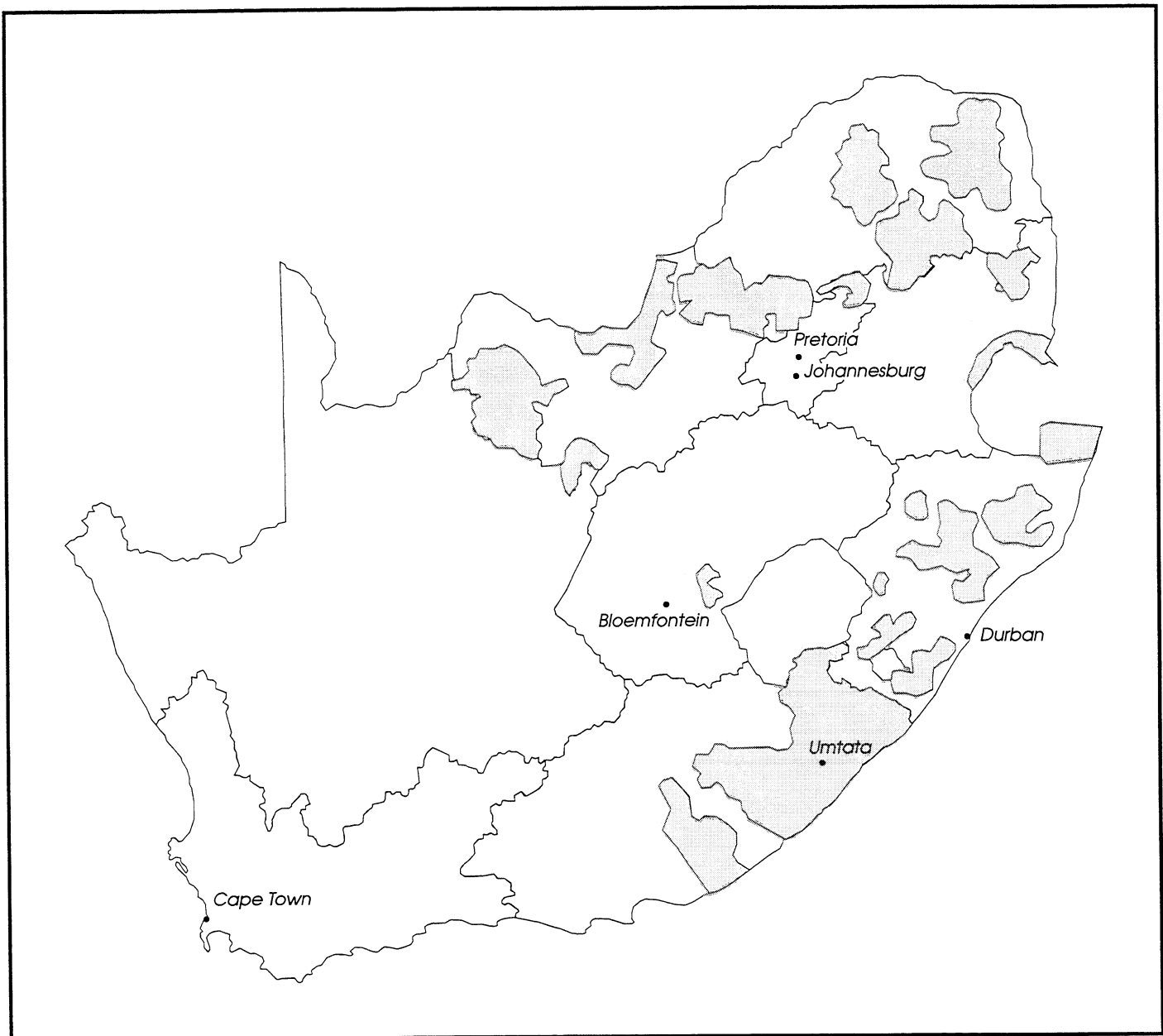


determination based upon a culture derived within certain territories. The Transvaal, which was once the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and the Orange Free State both have black majorities making such claims difficult and dubious.

Finally, an expectation of population movement is implied in the Volkstaat proposal although *"at the time of the creation of the Volkstaat, Afrikaners must constitute a majority of the population".[7]* This does not amount to forced relocation as in the former homelands but the Council provides for the possibility that the self-determination drive of Afrikaner people may see the enlargement of their territorial base through migration to these areas (a new trek?).

**Prognosis**

The spatial outcome of political processes is not scientifically predictable but taking into account the discourse of various political parties, the present political climate of reconciliation, and the political power structure set against the actors that shape it, the probability of a powerful Volkstaat is low and the probability of some concession is high.

The obstacles to achieving such a highly independent Volkstaat include a wide variety of

legal, political, social, and geographic problems. Chief among these are constitutional conflicts. The first chapter and first principle of the interim constitution plainly states that *"the Republic of South Africa shall be one sovereign state."*[8] A Volkstaat as a political achievement also seems remote considering that a two-thirds majority of both the state parliament and the parliaments of affected provinces are required to make such drastic boundary changes.[9]

Socially, the idea of a Volkstaat is widely perceived in class terms: setting up areas of white privilege in a country that requires teamwork to rebuild. In effect, the Afrikaners would be excusing themselves from a problem they created. Other social factors relate to popular discourse: the concept of 'non-racialism' and the common South

African conflation of culture with race (a legacy of Apartheid) has created a majoritarian populist discourse in which ethnicity is regarded as a false consciousness created by either class struggle or ambitious politicians.[10] This discourse has also been coloured by fears of Zulu secessionism and there is widespread fear that to relent to Afrikaner self-determination may mean the beginning of state breakdown and civil war.

Geographically, the staged design of a Volkstaat requires initial alterations to at least three provinces and may eventually affect all nine provincial boundaries - a debate the new government is loathe to re-open given the division and conflict that accompanied the working out of the present boundaries. Furthermore high hopes are unlikely to form the basis for boundary demarcations or

## Figure 4: Orania
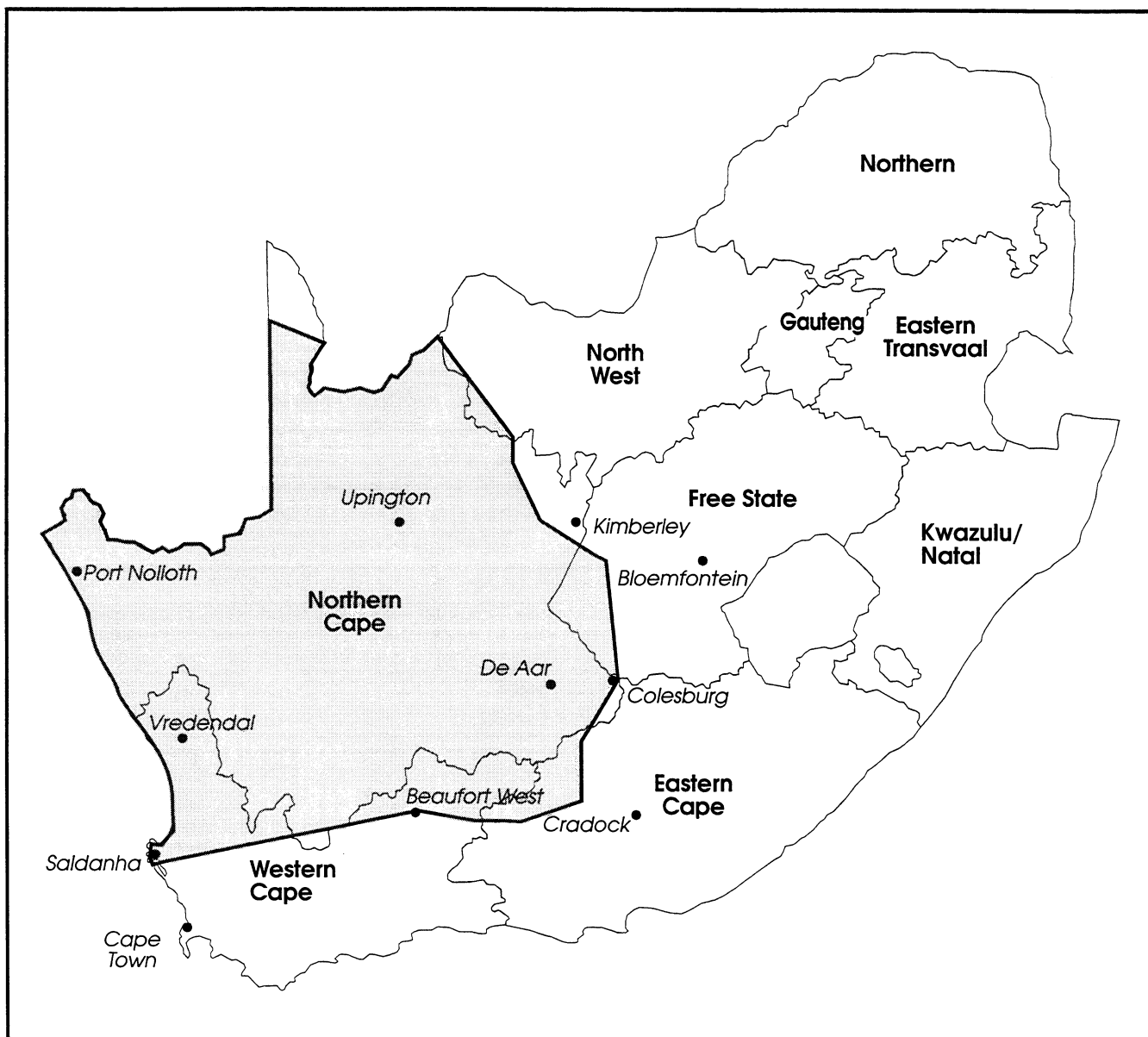
constitutional policy. The report's visionary nature even foresees that the Northern Cape, now comprising 17% Afrikaners (if the coloured population is excluded) could become a future point of migration and for this purpose suggests a constitutional 'Declaration of Intent' to claim this area.

Despite these complexities, there are reasons that some concessions will be made to the Volkstaat Council. The ANC and Nelson Mandela, in particular, are anxious to illustrate that compromise and negotiation are more effective tools of change than violence. The Volkstaat report was very warmly received by President Mandela who announced before television cameras and news reporters his intent to show that compromise works. The report, coming amid calls of secret secessionist plans by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and a recent IFP walkout on constitutional debates may be well-timed.

It seems that some Pretoria-based concession, perhaps less than what the Volkstaat Council submitted, is likely. The government is in some ways obligated to reward the Freedom Front for constructive participation in government. The package of constitutional amendments supporting the Volkstaat Council were the result of peace negotiations that brought the Freedom Front into the April 1994 elections. The government is also anxious to illustrate to violent right-wing factions and the IFP that a peaceful and structured approach to ethnic aspirations can work. Stability is recognised by all major political parties as the cornerstone of economic growth, social development, and democratic nation-building.

Given that the dominant party, the ANC, is clearly opposed to ethnic divisions of the country, it is likely to suggest some designated areas for *cultural self-determination* and *economic development* by citizen councils. The region around Pretoria as identified by the Volkstaat Council, but subject to some modifications is a likely candidate. The area of Orania along the Northern Cape/Southern Free State border is also a possible candidate as a second autonomous area (popular will and an Afrikaner majority). The latter formed part of another proposal to include large portions of the Northern and Western Cape where the Afrikaans language is dominant but not necessarily by racial categories (see Figure 4). By including Orania, a greater mix of political aspirations and proposals would be appeased.

[1]  Relevant acts of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 200)* include Chapter 11A and schedule four, constitutional principle no. 34; see also Act no. 30 (Volkstaat Council Act) of the Parliament of South Africa, 23 November 1994.

[2]  Volkstaat Council, 'Broadening Democracy for Stability,' *First Interim Report*, Pretoria, May 1995.

[3]  Coakley, J. (1994) 'Approaches to the Resolution of Ethnic Conflict: The Strategy of Non-territorial Autonomy,' *International Political Science Review*, 15, 3: 297-314.

[4]  The list is my own version but the ideas are not original. See also Coakley, J. (1993) *The Territorial Management of Ethnic Conflict*, London: Frank Cass; Safran, W. (1994) 'International Political Science Review', 15, 1: 61-80.

[5]  See Connor, W. (1972) 'Nation-building or Nation-destroying?', *World Politics*, 24; Simpson, M. (1994) 'The Experience of Nation-Building: Some Lessons for South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 3: 463-474, September; Safran, W. (1994) 'Non-separatist Policies Regarding Ethnic Minorities: Positive Approaches and Ambiguous Consequences,' *International Political Science Review*, 15, 1: 61-80.

[6]  Griggs, R. A. (1993) 'The Role of Fourth World Nations and Synchronous Geopolitical Factors in the Breakdown of States', dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

[7]  Volkstaat Council, (1995) 'Broadening Democracy for Stability,' *First Interim Report*, pp. 30-31. Pretoria, May.

[8]  *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, (1993) Chapter 1, Act 200.

[9]  *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, (1993) Schedule 4 (Constitutional Principles), Principle 18.

[10]  O'Malley, K. (1994) 'A Neglected Dimension of Nation-Building in South Africa: The Ethnic Factor,' pp. 77-88 in *Democratic Nation-Building in South Africa* (Nic Rhoodie and Ian Liebenberg, eds), (Chapter 8), Pretoria: HSRC Publishers.

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