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Down-sizing and right-sizing: An analysis of the demobilisation process in the South African National Defence Force

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Abstract

Using in-depth interviews with key informants, participant observation, an analysis of documentary and archival sources, and a survey of a national sample of 395 former APLA and MK soldiers, this study analyses the process of demobilisation in South Africa between 1994 and 2004. The key questions are: why and how was the demobilisation process conducted and what were its consequences? Demobilisation is a shorthand term for the multi-staged process of converting a soldier to a civilian. This encompasses the release of soldiers from a statutory force or guerrilla group and their reintegration into civilian society. Reintegration is defined as "the process of facilitating the ex-soldiers' transition to civilian life" (Clark, 1995: 50). In South Africa, demobilisation was envisaged as the last phase in the process of forming the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The *Interim Constitution* (Act No. 200 of 1993) made provision for three phases in the formation of the SANDF. First was the integration of various armed forces. This was followed by a process of consolidation, which included the completion of bridging training by former members of the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) and uMKhonto we Sizwe (MK). The final phase was the reduction of the size of the integrated SANDF, known as rationalisation. However, the concept held the same meaning as demobilisation.

The thesis of this study is that the reduction of the size of the SANDF (known as rationalisation) was necessary for two reasons. First was the perceived and real improvement in the national and regional security environment. Second was the perceived economic and development impact of the reduction of defence expenditure. These were informed by the broadened concept of security, which was popularised by non-governmental organisations such as the Military Research Group. However, while rationalisation was postponed and anticipated as the final phase in the process of forming the SANDF, the presence of military "misfits" among former APLA and MK soldiers (the aged, the sick and those who lacked the necessary educational qualifications) led to the introduction of a process of excluding these categories from the process of integration. The process became known as demobilisation and was introduced without adequate planning. It differed from the anticipated rationalisation process which was meant to apply to all members of the integrated SANDF.

Various factors pointed to the lack of adequate planning. First, demobilisation was introduced before the finalisation of the relevant legislation, and consequently the process was halted in 1995. Second, the demobilisation of former APLA and MK soldiers was not accompanied by effective reintegration programmes. The reintegration programme that was assembled consisted of a once-off demobilisation gratuity, a voluntary two-week counselling programme and an option to join the Service Corps for an eighteen-month vocational training programme. Third, while the Service Corps was part of the reintegration programme, it was not operational when demobilisation began. When it became operational, it was ineffective as an institution to provide for the re-skilling of demobilised former APLA and MK soldiers.

The lack of adequate planning for the demobilisation and reintegration of former APLA and MK soldiers has hindered their full social and economic reintegration into civilian society. Following an analysis of the socio-economic needs of a national sample of 395 former APLA and MK soldiers, it is argued that they have not achieved economic reintegration in the sense of achieving a productive livelihood. Furthermore, it is argued that while respondents have achieved social reintegration some of them continue to see themselves as a distinct group different from other members of the society. Thus, demobilised soldiers may threaten the consolidation of democracy in South Africa and destabilise the region. The proliferation of light weapons throughout the region following the end of armed conflict and the lack of effective disarmament in South Africa increases the potential not only for violent crime but also for serious political and social disruptions.

KEY WORDS: APLA, demilitarisation, demobilisation, integration, MK, rationalisation, reintegration, SANDF.
