

Zulus' date with destiny

Carla Powell on a friendless people who this week could decide the future of South Africa

On Friday a fateful election takes place in South Africa. Strictly speaking, it is only a local election in Natal. But it could well decide the future of the entire country — in particular whether South Africa becomes a one-party state run by the African National Congress.

The ANC is gradually taking over all power. Only two forces hold out against it — Cape Province, where the Nationalists are in a majority, and KwaZulu-Natal, where Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha party is still dominant.

The government is pouring troops and armed police into Natal to create a pre-election atmosphere of tension. Of the 9m Zulus, the ANC attracts most of the detribalised people of the cities, who have gradually lost their identity and pride. But up to 6m Zulus in the villages still look to Buthelezi for national leadership, and if they stay loyal to him on Friday, the ANC's road to a one-party state will remain blocked.

An ANC dictatorship would mean the final collapse of the rand, a currency already on the danger list, and the end of outside investment in South African mining and industry.

So who are these Zulus? Why are they so important to South Africa's survival?

Although the largest single grouping in South Africa, the Zulus' political allegiance is divided. The ambition of most of them to have a wide degree of autonomy for their historic kingdom of Zululand in Natal is being thwarted by the centralising ANC. Their most vigorous leader, Buthelezi, who is the minister for home affairs, is increasingly treated as at best a semi-detached member of the ANC-dominated Pretoria government.

He has also been badly treated by the world. He stood out against demands for sanctions on South Africa; he understood that those who would suffer most would be the country's black people. But instead of earning gratitude and plaudits, he has mostly been cold-shouldered by the international community. Under the pressure of political correctness, many have found it more convenient to buy the ANC view of the Zulus as troublemakers.

Luckily, not everyone makes that facile judgment. Among the most notable exceptions is the remarkable John Aspinall. "Aspers" is passionate in his admiration for the Zulus and they in return regard him as a "white Zulu".

I went on a recent expedition with Aspers into the bush of Natal's Mfolozi game park. While one purpose was to indulge a passion for wild animals, it was a chance also to follow Zulu history to its source and to witness an *imbizo*: a Zulu gathering with singing, dancing and speeches, attended by Buthelezi.

With us was Ian Player, philosopher, historian, former chief game conservator of Zululand and saviour of the white rhinoceros. Not only is he an unrivalled expert on the animals and birds of southern Africa, he is also an expert on Zulu history.

Under his guidance and enthused by his recall of Zulu legend, we walked Mfolozi in the footsteps of King Shaka, who in the short space of 12 years welded the clans of Zululand into a formidable nation. Although Mfolozi is now empty of people you can still see the traces of Shaka's military campaigns of well over a century ago, in burnt homesteads and smashed grinding stones.

That military tradition reached its high point when, in 1879, 25,000 Zulu warriors under the leadership of Mnyamana Buthelezi swept over the Nqutu hills, then trotted over the plain, armed only with sticks, spears and shields, to Isandhlwana, where the best of Britain's African army were drawn up.

Within a few hours, the Zulus had overwhelmed the camp, wiped out 812 British soldiers and brought lasting fame to themselves.

Although subsequently defeated and split up into innumerable small kingdoms by Garnet Wolseley, the Zulus' moment of triumph remains undimmed and indestructible.

All the sadder, therefore, that fortune has subsequently deserted them. They seem to bear remarkably little grudge against history, or the British for that. Indeed it was indicative of the Zulus' ability to forgive and forget to hear Buthelezi, himself a direct descendant of the Zulu general at Isandhlwana who bore the full force of British fire power, feteing and praising Aspinall, who is as British as they come: "Our brother John Aspinall ... has become one with all of us and with the Zulu nation."

Some of Aspers's ambitions for the Zulus have in past years been known to make white South African administrators blanch. Yet thank goodness someone has preserved some passion and loyalty for these remarkable but friendless people. They deserve much more, both from the world and from South Africa itself.