

# Seizing the moment

**L**OCAL political scientist Andre du Toit told the seminar that it was important that the process of transition in South Africa be seen in context, and as a process of action and reaction – rather than in terms of a simplistic set of positive or negative factors.

Du Toit, who teaches political science at the University of Cape Town, said that historical and political change took place in a more complex manner than simply as the result of a number of negative or positive elements.

While agreeing that grim social and economic realities could not be wished away, he said that they could also not be dealt with by identifying a longer list of positive factors at play in society. Instead, Du Toit suggested that two pointers be considered when viewing the process of transition in society: the historical context and a dialectical perspective.

For instance, very negative factors could contribute to positive interventions and developments, and vice versa. Very serious political conflict could have the effect of galvanising people into doing something to address it. Similarly, if people believed that all was going well and disengaged from involvement in monitoring or pressuring for change, a situation that looked promising could deteriorate rapidly.

As to historical context, it was important to remember that real changes had occurred since February 1990. "We must take seriously the fact that there has been a change away from the polarised 'total onslaught' politics of the 1980s, towards negotiation. There has also been substantial liberation in the society, allowing political groups to operate freely,"

already had some of the essential elements of civil society – trade unions, voluntary organisations and certain judicial traditions.

Socio-economic redistribution was also essential to help address the issue of political violence. Youth development programmes which would help absorb and reabsorb the "lost generation" would serve to give youth a sense of hope.

Priorities would need to be set and certain trade-offs might be unavoidable. For example, the rural areas might have to suffer from less attention because the townships were boiling.

Diamond said that any further delay in the process of transition would be "very, very

Du Toit said.

"We are living in an historical moment. Even bearing in mind the long list of negative factors, there is a window of opportunity which could be utilised if the necessary political will is there."

He said South Africans could not sit back and rely on positive factors to pull the country through the transition. "Most crucial is the need for political will and leadership. However, this is not apparent, especially regarding the violence – politicians are conniving with it and using it to suit political agendas."

Du Toit said that if people woke up to understand the full reality of the "ghastly things" happening in the country, and if they knew that things could get worse if nothing was done, then there was still the chance of turning the situation around.

"There is a fine balance between self-fulfilling prophecies based on the bleak scenarios that can be identified and described around us, and the possibility that, if we spell out the realities of the situation in all their grimness, and if there is real political leadership, then we can still do something about it."

Another participant in the seminar, Stellenbosch philosopher Johan Degenaar, said it was important to distinguish between pessimism, optimism and hope.

He said that where people took seriously what was happening and felt pessimistic, it was likely that they would feel themselves to be victims of the situation and powerless.

Equally worrying were the dangers of false optimism – when people did not take the harsh realities of the situation seriously enough and hoped for utopia.

The alternative, said Degenaar, was an understanding of hope as "creative expectation". In this context, people knew and understood the realities of the situation, but continued to do something to influence the process.

dangerous", adding that "until there is a true transitional government, you will not be able to get a grip on the problems". High priorities should be the reorganisation of the security forces and a crack-down, using the full force of the law, on criminal behaviour.

It might now be a truism that each grouping within South Africa needed a sense of having a stake in the system, but there would be "deep trouble" in the country if it looked as if one group would take all.

Diamond said South Africa had already travelled an enormous way down the road towards democracy, and foreigners visiting the country were struck by the "tremendous" human resources of this society.

## Fear and loathing

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for so long Crossroads had been controlled by conservative elements. Crossroads is a minefield: one has to be careful when dealing with it, especially when the witdoek vigilante war is still vivid in most people's minds.

After all, we didn't think Nongwe would go to such extremes. We were in the same ANC branch and we thought his witdoek attitude would gradually be discarded as he encountered democratic practice within the organisation.

We soon discovered that he was using the very same structure to perpetuate the headman system. Another thing we noticed was that when he assumed power, Nongwe never lifted the banishment of youth and women's organisations. In actual fact he refused to allow them to be launched in this area.

So we from the Bantubakhe/Unathi area decided to launch our own branch, and together with other comrades we started organising people. Many people fled from Nongwe and came to join us. The people started questioning Nongwe's activities. For instance, they questioned his removal of people from Section One and Two to Lower Crossroads, for the purpose of upgrading the areas, without consultation.

Nongwe also interfered with the affairs of the local Mandela High School, challenging the decision to name a Crossroads school after Nelson Mandela. He wanted the school to be named after him, as he was the recognised leader of Crossroads.

A South African Communist Party branch was launched in Crossroads. Many people joined as it was vocal in criticising the squatter leader's autocratic rule. The houses of all SACP members in Crossroads were burned, and Nongwe continued with his campaign of forced removals.

***Why does Nongwe keep on mentioning you as the source of all the problems at Crossroads?***

It's because I'm one of the people who organised resistance against him. Moreover I never swallowed his rubbish that he has repented. After killing and displacing so many families, surely he cannot expect us to embrace him?

***Many people would disagree with you, given that presently the country is in a healing process of reconciliation. Do you still think your decision to keep Nongwe at arm's length was correct?***

Yes, we were absolutely correct. You can see for yourself what Nongwe turned out to be – a tyrant.