

An obsession with tolerance?



Democracy conference: C

Grassroot

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An Idasa conference on the theme of "Democracy" held late last year drew a critical reaction from the editor of the journal of the Institute for Contextual Theology, Albert Nolan. Writing in the ICT's journal, *Challenge*, he compared the Idasa event to a recent conference hosted by the ICT on the same theme and criticised the emphasis on tolerance which emerged from the discussions as an issue with which whites seemed pre-occupied. He argued that when talking about democracy among black South Africans the emphasis was on addressing the structural inequalities in society. Below are some of the central aspects of Albert Nolan's article, along with three responses by Idasa's Western Cape staff.

ALBERT NOLAN

"For me the star of the Idasa conference was a Nigerian, Prof Claude Ake. He opened the proceedings by declaring that the word 'democracy' had been trivialised. Everyone claimed to be supporting democracy, no matter what their values, interests or ideologies might be. Democracy was no longer a threat to the power elites in the world because it could be made to mean whatever anyone wanted it to mean.

"The conference succeeded in exposing various myths about democracy, nation-building, civil society, ethnicity and about what we might expect from a democratic society. There was a measure of disagreement about these and other issues, but the overall assumption seemed to be that the greatest obstacle to democracy in South Africa today is tolerance.

"Speaker after speaker referred to the perceived high levels of intolerance in South Africa and to the urgent need to educate peo-

ple in the virtues of tolerance...

"Much was also made of the need for a 'culture of democracy', but I soon came to realise that what most speakers and participants really meant was a 'culture of tolerance'.

"I have no argument with the general importance of tolerance in human relations, but the question in my mind throughout the Idasa conference was: why does everyone keep coming back to this problem of intolerance? There must be a reason for it. My question was no doubt influenced by the fact that during four days of intense discussion on democracy at the ICT conference the week before, nobody had made any reference to the issue of tolerance! At this earlier conference the principal obstacles to a democratic future for South Africa were thought to be the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few, the control of the media by monopolies and the role of the security forces...The only conclusion I could draw was that the two different perceptions of what constituted an obstacle to democracy were based upon two different kinds of fear and mistrust.

"...The Idasa conference spoke about democratic freedom as tolerance, the ICT spoke about it as an end to oppression by other forces and powers..."

Call for tolerance essential

VINCENT WILLIAMS
Regional Co-ordinator

To imply, however, that tolerance necessarily means ignoring the fundamental legacies of apartheid (economic inequality, media monopolies, the role of the security forces etc.) is to conflate the democratic process with democracy as an end result.

What we are engaged in at the moment (Codesa, the National Peace Accord and so on) is the infantile stages of the democratic process. The purpose of the democratic process is essentially to create the necessary

In considering the place of tolerance in the political debate, it is "democratic tolerance" that is the critical concept.

"Democratic tolerance" involves an acceptance that the legal democratic process is the mechanism whereby disputes and conflict in society get resolved.

It does not imply that economic inequality, an unaccountable security apparatus or media monopolies are to be tolerated. It does imply that they should be opposed in a legal, peaceful manner.

It seems to me that all the major political actors have accepted, at least in theory, the centrality of this democratic tolerance. It is this acceptance that drives Codesa with its consensual paradigm and that underpins the National Peace Accord.

It seems clear at the same time that the absence of democratic tolerance at grass roots level poses the most severe threat to our transition. The gap between the national processes and what is happening on the ground is epic. The slaughter continues.

There is a Hasidic parable that captures our great political challenge:

"Imagine a rare bird at the top of a tree. To reach it, people form a human ladder, thus allowing one of them to climb to the very top. But those at the bottom cannot see the bird and therefore lose patience and go home. The ladder falls apart, and up there the rare bird has flown away."

If the fruits of democracy are not manifest in the lives of people on the ground at the very least in the form of an end to the violence, the rare bird of democracy will have passed us by.

Democratic tolerance is about a change of attitudes for it has never been a dominant

Albert Nolan's suggestion that the call for political tolerance, so strongly emphasised at the Idasa "Democracy" conference, could be viewed as a tactic of the ruling (or potential) elite to maintain the status quo, is a valid one indeed. Tolerance does imply a certain degree of acceptance, and there are undoubtedly those elements who use it in exactly this way.

Empowerment buzz

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comes from advertising. If we did not have adverts we would have to rely on subsidies...there is a link between commercial independence and editorial independence.

"You cannot produce a newspaper on an editorial idea alone," he said.

Thami Ntenti from the ANC's Department of Information and Publicity, queried the fairness of commercial dictates. Those who have something to say but lack the resources to say it should still have the right to publish, he said, even if they cannot survive in the marketplace.

There were calls to dismantle the huge media monopolies that own almost all the country's newspapers, but Wilson cautioned that some of the newspapers would not survive without the backing of the mother companies.



Marion Sparg: more crusading journalism



Gavin Stewart, of Rhodes University Journalism Department, in the chair during the opening session of the conference

The editor of *South*, Guy Berger, added that the alternative press made use of the printing and distribution resources of the monopolies.

Across the spectrum, from the ANC to the National Party, speakers echoed the need to redistribute ownership and control of the SABC, partly by introducing an independent broadcasting authority.

Leslie Xinwa of Radio Transkei said there would still be a need for a state broadcaster in the future, but it would have to be fundamentally restructured.

And speakers, Gabriel Ugoiti of Bush Radio and Libby Lloyd of *Speak* magazine, said the time had come to open the airwaves to community radio, which was the voice of ordinary South Africans speaking for themselves.

Marion Sparg of the ANC appealed to the media "for a more crusading, investigating, exposing ethic of journalism. This has been lost in this country. It is the kind of ethic we had in the past, and we need it today.

"Lifting restrictions and telling the press it is free does not mean there is press freedom and media democracy. The media has to start reflecting the reality on the ground," she said.

The idea is not to establish an ANC press, but a free press that reflects the majority of the people, she said.

The message the 170 delegates departed with was that freedom of the press and media democracy would be meaningless if it was not reflected at all levels of society.

Moira Levy is media facilitator with Idasa.

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structures and mechanisms by which the legacies of apartheid can be addressed, and it must recognise the fact that we are a multi-cultural society and that divergent views abound.

It is futile to expect that economic justice, control over the security forces and the elimination of media monopolies can be achieved when the structures of our society are geared towards exactly the opposite.

What comes to mind is the two-stage theory which was the subject of heated debate in the mid-1980s. "First we take power and then we create an egalitarian society."

Yes, democracy must address the legacies of apartheid, but unless we can achieve consensus as to how this is going to be done (the purpose of the democratic process), the call for political tolerance (preparedness to engage constructively with those holding opposing views) remains essential.

Confusion of means

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to speak more concretely: of dominant structures, the distribution of power and access to resources. It is suggested that these two "languages" reflect two different realms of apartheid experience, each extending its own words to express its fear and mistrust.

In one sense this may well be so: it cannot be denied that apartheid successfully blinded the powerful to the most tangible everyday manifestations of racism – and that the disenfranchised must feel patronised by the implication that "tolerance" is all we need in order to live happily ever after. Used in this way, the great call for tolerance indeed becomes an iniquitous power tactic.

However, there is a difference between, on the one hand, taking seriously the intolerance which apartheid has bred and, on the other, proposing that it is tolerance that will lead us to a democratic order. To equate these two is to assume that the only road leading away from intolerance is one of tol-

erance. This may not necessarily be accurate.

Intolerance is an active word: it is provocative. There is aggression in the way it excludes and disregards. Many of the obstacles to democracy discussed at the ITC conference – economic, injustice, media monopolies, the role of the security forces – seem to express such intolerance: of poverty and deprivation, of hearing another voice, of fear and brutalisation. It is intolerance that trivialises oppression and keeps the structures of exclusion in place. Tolerance, on the other hand, implies passivity and acceptance. It calls for patience with the status quo, with one another as we are – it pushes change to the back burner. It does nothing to counter and redress the spoils of intolerance.

It seems clear that there is indeed an urgent need to address the intolerance of apartheid. Yet it does not follow that the only alternative is to cultivate tolerance of the present order. Moving away from intolerance can lead us in many directions, including actively bringing an end to oppression in its multiple forms.