

# One nation, many problems!

## Who's stumbling on the road to a common nationhood?

By HERMANN GILIOME

Because the project of building a common nation in South Africa has only just started there is a strong tendency among democrats to downplay or ignore the fact that we have a competition between nationalisms in South Africa. It is almost as if they say: "Let's first get the vote for all and only then worry about instilling a sufficiently developed sense of common nationhood."

I assume it is for this reason that some people have been upset by the view I expressed at several Idasa conferences, starting with the historic one in Dakar, that the best way to build a democracy in South Africa is not to deny or reject the fact that we have at this stage two nations in South Africa — a predominantly white and a predominantly black one — but to accept it and to explore ways of facilitating a reconciliation process between these two nations. At a recent conference in Johannesburg Dr Alex Boraine also opposed this view because it, in his words, "institutionalised the idea of two nations". He added that this was "exactly what Idasa wants to get away from". (*Democracy in Action*, May 1989).

In view of the great need for debate on nation-building and democracy in our country I am grateful for the opportunity *Democracy in Action* has given me to restate my position.

To start at the beginning: everyone would surely agree that to address, and resolve, any conflict one must understand its root cause. This is also true of the South African conflict.

Scholars hold essentially two views of the historic causes of the South African conflict. To simplify greatly one view argues that there has been conflict in our country over a long period because of **conflicting ideas and values**. In this perspective blacks and whites believe that they belong to different races, communities and nations. They make their sense of nationhood the basis of their political identity and they tend to ascribe certain superior qualities to that nation.

The other view holds that conflict is decisively shaped by the fact that whites and blacks belong to different classes which have **conflicting interests**. According to this perspective there is conflict in South Africa because the dominant class refuses to part with their exclusive control over land and industrial capital and their apartheid-based privileges.

My study of South African history and politics has convinced me that there are elements of both in our conflict, but that when it comes to the crunch people in South Africa (or, for that matter, in other ethnically-divided societies) are moved more by the emotional power of nationalism rather than by materialist considerations (jobs, rewards or privileges).

If this is indeed so we must look at ways to resolve the South African conflict from the

Democrats tend to downplay or ignore the competition between nationalisms in South Africa, according to Prof Hermann Giliomee (right). In this article he explains his own position on nation-building — and takes Dr Alex Boraine to task for wanting to get away from the idea of two nations.

latter perspective. In other words, we must explore how an Afrikaner/white nation and African/black nation can co-exist peacefully in South Africa. My suggestion would be for the people(s) of South Africa to become engaged in a process of nation-building in which we try to construct a transcendent South African nation with its own distinctive set of symbols and values. This means reducing both Afrikaner and African nationalism to second-level or sub-national loyalties. I believe we can do this because (a) neither Afrikaner nor African nationalism can prevail over the other over the short to medium term and (b) the existence of a considerable middle ground in South Africa comprised of people who don't necessarily identify with the one nationalism or the other.

This brings me to Dr Boraine's words that my view "institutionalises" the idea of two nations, something which Idasa "wants to get away from". I suspect that behind this line of thinking lies an anticipation together with certain political and academic qualms. The anticipation is that Afrikaner or a broader white nationalism will disintegrate over the short to medium term because of pressure from within and without, and the greater attractiveness of the ideology of non-racialism. This is a fallacious assumption. There is nothing that suggests a break-down of Afrikaner, or broader white coherence.

The qualms are twofold, political and academic. The political qualms can be disaggregated. There is on the one hand people who believe that nationalism is by its nature exclusive, setting up a disastrous either you/or I dichotomy as far as control over the state and territory is concerned. This is not correct.

Nationalist demands can range from exclusive control (as in South Africa under Verwoerd) through co-equality (as in Canada, where French-Canadians have rejected a separate independence and have settled for a system which grants them a special status in Quebec and specific provisions for the French language) to the recognition of minority rights.

On the other hand there are those who have problems with nationalism because they believe that this will foreclose the search for democracy in South Africa. After all, democracy usually requires a common sense of nationhood. For those who are concerned about this I refer to **South Africa's Options**, by Van Zyl Slabbert and David Welsh, which states that the following countries are democratic despite the existence of strong feeling of nationalism or communalism among one or more of the population groups: Belgium, Canada, India, Jamaica, Mauritius, Senegal, Singapore and Switzerland.

Then there is the academic qualm about nationalism and idealist interpretations. Scholars in general much prefer interpretations



Die Suid-Afrikaan

which stress class of socio-economic differentiation. Until the mid-1970s they tended to consider warnings not to underestimate the emotional strength of nationalism as outdated or embarrassing. Outdated it certainly is not; in fact the class interpretation is on the defensive. As for embarrassment — we simply will have to get over it. Trying to sweep the ethnic divisions in one society under the carpet is in fact counter-productive. It is exactly those societies which tried to downplay or denigrate the ethnic factor (for instance India) that ran into the severest problems, while those who tried to take proper account of it enjoyed great stability (Malaysia).

In recent times the single most important conclusion scholars in the field of conflict mediation have reached is that the force of ethnonationalism has been greatly underestimated. Nathan Glazer writes: "We became more aware of ethnic strains and potential conflicts. Ethnicity began to appear as a universal force with a power to move people that was putting class in the shade." Walker Connor writes: "It risks triteness to note that during the past two decades ethnonationalism has been an extremely consequential force throughout the first, second and third worlds . . . Few indeed are the scholars who can claim either to have anticipated this global upsurge in ethnonationalism or have recognised its early manifestations."

Dr Boraine is cited in *Democracy in Action* as saying that we should rather devote attention to debate about a post-apartheid South Africa. That debate is an important one, but it has in some quarters assumed unreal and escapist features — almost like a debtor who does not try to resolve his financial difficulties but rather day dreams of his debt being written off or the bank being nationalised.

Idasa has played a valuable role in stimulating the debate about alternatives in South Africa. It is well placed to organise a conference on the most formidable of all issues — the national question. In the meantime I would like to suggest that Dr Boraine and I debate this in your columns.

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