

The rocky road to democracy

While most people in South Africa – including the government and its main opponents – claim to believe in democracy, we seldom analyse the stumbling blocks on the road to building a truly democratic future.

THE focus of a recent Idasa conference in Port Elizabeth was not on the method of reaching democracy – the subject of so much current discussion around negotiations, preconditions and creating climates – but on the obstacles which both the government and its opposition place in the way of reaching this goal.

A top line-up of speakers provided a highly stimulating evening to the more than 80 participants from all walks of life.

Tiaan van der Merwe, chairman of the Democratic Party, kicked off by giving a succinct overview of the obstacles placed by the government in the way of democracy. While much of what he presented was commonly known, it was important to re-

state the obvious facts to which people have become anaesthetised through many years of abnormality: that all citizens do not have the vote, and that the government does not seem any nearer to accepting the principal of universal, non-racial franchise; that apartheid has created a heritage of fear, suspicion and social segregation to the extent that it takes an abnormal effort for an ordinary white person to relate normally to a black person. How can a democracy function until it has overcome this legacy?

Andrew Boraine of Planact then gave an enlightening paper on the obstacles placed by the Mass Democratic Movement in the way of building democracy. Speaking from an MDM perspective, he highlighted the need for a self-critical approach to politics. In a situation of extraordinary repression, he warned of over-centralisation in organisations, of unmandated leadership, of "hero-worship" of leaders and the unacceptability of criticising leaders, especially those in exile; of the need for unity leading sometimes to a stifling of debate; and of the lack of resources and skills – especially those needed by the masses, such as literacy, to enable them to play a full role in the democratic process.

Sefako Nyaka, a journalist from the *Sunday Star*, spoke on how access – or more pertinently, non-access – to information restricts a

society's ability to become democratic; where certain sections of the population are presented with one set of facts (which are more often than not distorted by editorial opinion), while another section of the population is fed a different interpretation, it is extremely difficult for individuals to make informed choices about their society. The role of the press, he stressed, is to make adequate information available to the public so that they can make their own, informed decisions. However, in a situation where the media is biased in favour of certain values, organisations or racial groups, it may be necessary to have "alternative" papers which provide news which is, admittedly, biased towards the "other side".

Professor André du Toit, of the University of Cape Town, then gave what was felt by all to be the most challenging address of the evening. Focussing on the topic, "Positive Indicators Towards Democracy", he drew on the experience of certain Latin American and Southern European countries. Using diagrams, he illustrated how in these countries a number of similarities characterised the process of change from authoritarian regimes to democratic governments.

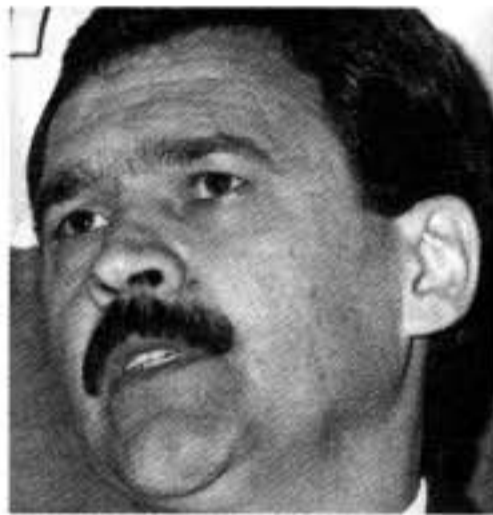
Usually, those in power were divided between the "hard-liners" and the "soft-liners"; the soft-liners initiated a process of liberalisation – allowing more open political opposition. This in turn led to the "resurrection of civil society", when the majority of the population became actively involved in working for change, through a range of institutions – civic organisations, the church, education bodies, etc.

The moment of popular upsurge which led on from this was a crucial point, at which three basic options existed: the "hard-liners" take the society back to authoritarianism, perhaps through a coup; there is a revolution (which is unlikely to result in a democracy) or there is a negotiated solution which begins with the formation of "pacts" by different sides in the conflict. In this situation, the government may have to democratise more than it had planned.

After tea, the delegates convened for a panel-discussion, and a lively debate ensued. Some questions focused on the role of the press, but most were directed towards Du Toit, trying to assess the relevance of his model to what is happening in South Africa. The outcome? That we are probably at that crucial stage in our country's history when we could, if we play our cards correctly and use opportunities wisely, be on the road to a democratic state.



André du Toit



Tiaan van der Merwe

RESPONSIBLE DEMOCRACY

A Conference on Ethics and
Accountability in Public Life

Hosted by Idasa

JANUARY 18 - 20: CAPE TOWN

Robert Leslie Building,

Middle Campus, University of Cape Town

For attendance:

Contact Christine Maritz at
021-6140511 (Fax 021-615329)

or write to her at

Private Bag X08, Clareinch, 7740.

Limited seating available.

Book early to avoid disappointment.

Conference fee R60.

TOP SPEAKERS AND PANELISTS

Shirley Williams, Richard Neustadt,
Murphy Morobe, Zwelakhe Sisulu,
Paul Davis, John Dugard, Trevor Manuel,
Stephen Mulholland, Phillip van Niekerk,
Glen Moss, Ken Owen and many others.

FOCUS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

Building a culture of democratic accountability is an urgent need in contemporary South Africa, both at the level of national politics and in the diverse fields of business, labour, the professions and the press.

At this conference leading figures will diagnose the critical problems of democratic accountability in their respective fields and attempt to find constructive ways of building a culture of democratic accountability together.