

An even chance for future

The foundations laid for democracy in 1990 may still be unsteady, but the progress made since February 2 provides grounds for hope.

BARRY STREEK reports.

THERE can be no question that movement towards democracy and a culture of freedom in South Africa, both in theory and in practice, progressed this year.

But if the foundations for a democratic system of government were being laid, especially in the period after February 2, they were severely rocked by the horrific violence in various parts of the country, in which some 2 500 people have died – at an estimated cost of R3 billion in the first six months of the year.

Claims were made about the role of hit squads, vigilantes, warlords, third forces, the militant youth, the police and the army. Some of those claims were wild and unfounded, but many of them had elements of truth in them, particularly as far as those who suffered were concerned.

Violent clashes also took place between supporters of various political groups, including the ANC, PAC, Azapo and Inkatha.

On the far right, extremists did their level best to stir things up and often resorted to violence, as various trials and incidents have demonstrated. Most disturbing were unprovoked attacks by right-wing terrorists on innocent bystanders, purely because they were black.

The fundamental point is that there are still far too many people and groups in South Africa who will resort to the gun, the bomb, the knife, the panga or the stone to express their political grievances or try to capture political ground, for anyone to have reasonable confidence about the future of real democracy here.

Despite public statements by the leaderships of different political groupings and desperate pleas in the predominantly black press, the spirit or atmosphere of tolerance, an essential

lence and intolerance that has been displayed.

If at the end of 1989 – particularly after the September 6 elections when the Democratic Party was villified for being “soft” on security as well as the ANC, and the National Party saw fit to publish an advertisement featuring a photograph of a DP leader with the SA Communist Party’s Joe Slovo to win white votes – anyone had suggested that South Africa at the end of 1990 would be where it is, most people would have regarded that person as soft in the head.

But the fact is that for the first time since 1950, when the Communist Party of South

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Early encounters between the NP and ANC leadership roots problems.

Africa was outlawed, there are no banned political movements. The number of officially “listed” communists, who could not be quoted in their own country, has dropped dramatically. Political leaders have been released from jail and have returned from exile, a process which is continuing.

The government has called this “normalis-

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MORE

Time to scrap local



"The ANC is not against the protection of cultural and language rights in a new South Africa," he added.

As the ANC's Raymond Suttner told a group of Cape Town businessmen in November, there is also consensus about the need for economic growth and the need to tackle poverty and remove inequality.

No-one should be over-optimistic over the degree of consensus that has been reached on these issues, and considerable differences about how to deal with them remain. However, if one thinks of the suffering, conflict, death, destruction and waste during 42 years of National Party rule, it can only be encouraging that South Africans have finally discovered that they are not so far apart and that a system of government which has legitimacy among all is the only way forward.

There are indeed grounds for hope for a democratic future. But much more has to occur before that hope can be translated into reality, and two issues could be decisive.

The first is the role of the security forces in the process of change. Can they be transformed into legitimate instruments for the maintenance of law and order? Or will the majority of South Africans still regard them as instruments of control for the white minority?

SOME elements in the security establishment are complaining that the police are becoming "too neutral". There may well be movement in that direction but far more has to be done because neither the police nor the army are perceived by many South Africans, probably the majority, as being neutral.

Secondly, it is high time that political movements accepted responsibility for the actions of their members and supporters. If democracy is to take root, there has to be discipline.

This is, of course, much easier said than done, but the need for discipline is essential. Although it is freely acknowledged that supporters of different groups were involved in the violence this year, not one of those groups has disciplined - publicly, at least - people who have resorted to the thoroughly anti-democratic instruments of violence.

It may be necessary for the political groups to adopt a joint code of political behaviour so

THE crisis in black local government is reaching such proportions that it can in actual fact derail the whole negotiation process unless something is done.

While the two main actors in the negotiation process, the ANC and the government, have to a large extent found one another - due largely to the special chemistry between Mandela and De Klerk - the same is just not happening at grassroots, township level.

While the government at national level has gone out of its way to engage "non-system" legitimate black leaders such as Nelson Mandela, it is doing the exact opposite at township level by insisting that township residents work with and through the totally rejected and illegitimate town council system.

So, while the demand that the government negotiate with legitimate and truly representative leadership has been met at national level, the demand has not been met at black local government level.

Until the government meets this demand, the nationwide campaign and mass mobilisation against black councils will continue. It will result in continuous violent confrontations and polarisation between the grassroots masses on the one hand, and on the other hand, the black government structures and the South African Police who are used both to protect these government structures (which is understandable) and to keep them in place, in spite of community rejection (which is not understandable).

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