

No easy walk

Election tests SA's will to change

By PAUL GRAHAM

WITH only weeks to go before South Africa's first non-racial election – the scale and importance of which we have never before experienced – the transitional vehicle we have cobbled together is starting to show signs of a major speed wobble.

The negotiated structural frameworks of the Transitional Executive Council (TEC), the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Independent Media Commission (IMC) were designed at a time when negotiators thought their task would be over in 1993. They would have had a few months to gather their energies before opening up their engines again and driving the last few kilometres with the needle in the red.

To continue the metaphor, even this might have been acceptable had the road ahead been smooth. What is required now is a turbo-charged tank capable of cornering the bends like a well-known brand of German car.

The fact is, we are not going to have a perfect election. It is going to test the mettle of all those committed to change and democracy. This includes not only parties, officials and organised civil society but also voters.

We should not try to pretend that everything is normal and that this election is, as a member of the IEC put it, happening in a democratic



ELECTION DRAMA: Actors bring voter education to a Cape Town community during the problem-wracked run-up to the April election.

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If there is to be real healing in South Africa, we have to know the truth about the past. This is the thinking behind a new programme aimed at creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. RONEL SCHEFFER spoke to Alex Boraine.

THERE is a sense of unreality and unfinished business as South Africa prepares for democratic elections. To many the "official" transition from apartheid to democracy seems to have been too slick for what preceded it. The election will no doubt provide a climax of some sort, but will we ever

experience the catharsis usually associated with new beginnings?

The temptation to evade the difficulties of dealing with the injustices of the past will be great for a government of national unity faced with pressing needs on almost every front, as well as the challenge of day to day governance. But such avoidance will come at a considerable price, says Idasa executive director Alex Boraine.

He urges civil society to pressurise the new government to come up with a policy on past injustice. If South Africans ignore the past, he warns, it will come back to haunt them, as is happening in some neighbouring countries where the truth was sacrificed in reconciliation attempts that were misguided.

Stuck in the middle

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Hartman, who sometimes seems to be the only sober person in the settlement, is alcoholism. This is aggravated enormously by the *dop* system whereby farm labourers receive part of their wages in the form of a daily ration of alcohol. Many of the people are so dependent on this "ration" that they worry more about losing their alcohol supply than about the possibility of losing their houses.

People in Amalienstein – all of whom are coloured – worry about being "stuck in the middle". "The white government looked after the white people," they say. "Won't a black government do just the same for blacks?"

'Most people don't know that voters need an ID book or a voter's certificate, and many don't possess such documents'

Another difficulty is the behaviour of one of the white farmers in the Ladismith district. He employs about 500 of the Amalienstein community as labourers and is notorious, even among other white farmers, for ill-treatment of his workers.

Now, according to community reports, he is threatening to refuse to give workers the day off on election day unless they vote for his party.

But people in Amalienstein hasten to add that not all employers in the district behave in this way. The farmer in question is disapproved of and other farmers have promised to transport their workers – and other workers – to the polling booth on election day.

Noteworthy along the road linking Amalienstein, Droevlei and Zoar are a series of "death bells" which are tolled vigorously when someone in the settlement dies. It is a haunting sound and one the people fear may sound for their whole community.

They fear loss; they hope for an easier future. They value their independence and for this reason want to know more about regional government. They plead for voter education – not party propaganda, not empty promises, "just some straightforward facts".

Anya Gerryts is an artist.

Albert van Jaarsveld is studying architecture at the University of Cape Town.

'Truth sets a nation free'

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"If we want real healing to take place in this nation, we have to know the truth," says Boraine. "It is the truth that sets a nation free – it doesn't bind it."

It is understandable, he says, that many people are desperate to move forward and avoid dwelling on the past, but this may work against the achievement of reconciliation. Even if there has been a change of heart among some of those responsible for the wrongs of the past, this is not enough. Those wrongs remain an issue that needs to be dealt with in a formal process.

Such a process should involve, at the least, establishing and acknowledging the truth.

"Those who say we shouldn't rake up the past should tell that to the victims of apartheid. We have to listen to those who suffered," he observes.

In order to understand why there is so much anger and bitterness in the black community – and to enable those who have suffered to regain a sense of dignity – South Africans need to hear the truth about what took place in the country over the past four decades.

For the victims, in particular, there is a vital difference between amnesty and amnesia, between knowledge and acknowledgement, says Boraine.

He emphasises that revenge is not the objective of calls for a process of addressing the injustices of the past, and challenges anyone who doubts this to talk to the victims of apartheid. "You'll hear it is not revenge they want, but the truth."

He believes that acknowledging the truth is the first step in a process of healing. Seeking justice and effecting restitution would have to follow.

Boraine has recently embarked on a programme aimed at influencing national policy on justice and reconciliation, and will devote himself to it full-time on his retirement from Idasa. Long experience in both the political and theological spheres – he served as a minister for many years, becoming president of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa – gives him a unique set of skills for the task.

Boraine hopes to see the appointment of a



VICTIM: Albie Sachs of the ANC, injured by a car bomb in Maputo.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which he believes should be independent, impartial and judicial. While the ANC is on record as supporting such a body, the preference of the governing National Party still seems to be for drawing a veil over the past.

The programme, which is designed as a participative process, began publicly with a conference in Somerset West at the end of February. Entitled "Justice in Transition: Dealing with the Past", the conference enabled a wide range of South Africans – human rights activists, legal academics, representatives from non-governmental organisations and members of the Cabinet – to hear first-hand from people like Albie Sachs and Nyami Goniwe about the suffering inflicted by the apartheid order.

Delegates listened to prominent figures from Eastern Europe and South America who spoke on how the issues of truth and reconciliation, amnesty, prosecution and restitution were dealt with when new democratic governments were put in place in their countries. Also present were representatives from Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia.

One of the major aims of the conference – which will be reported in more detail in the

Wanted: Election observers

Idasa invites all interested readers to help with the elections. If you wish to volunteer as a non-partisan and independent observer, send Idasa your name, address and telephone number before the end of March. As an observer you will be allowed into voting stations, and will be needed only on the voting days unless you are able to watch the count as well.

Idasa regional offices will provide training closer to voting day. We will ensure that you get drawn into an observer team either under the banner of Idasa or under the emerging National Election Observer Network (Neon) if you are able to sign the observer code of conduct.

'Together we will help to make sure that South Africa will be able to elect a government which can take us on the next mile to democracy'

Whether you volunteer as an observer or not, please let us know if you see anything at the voting stations or anywhere else which strikes you as irregular.

If you have access to a fax machine, send us your written report stating your name and contact number, giving details of the incident and when and where it happened. Otherwise, telephone an Idasa office with the details and our staff will take up the issue with the Independent Electoral Commission.

There is nothing to stop any person from going straight to the IEC Monitoring Directorate at (011) 397-5000, but we intend to help by making sure that all over the country there are people watching the elections to see that they are free and fair.

Contact any office of Idasa if you want to offer your help, and together we will help to make sure that, despite the problems, South Africa will be able to elect a government which can take us on the next mile to democracy.

Ciudadanos chilenos mencionados en las listas de los 119 (22 y 24 de julio de 1975), detenidos desaparecidos al igual que cientos de compatriotas.

¡¡justicia!!

AGRUPACION DE FAMILIARES DE DETENIDOS-DESAPARECIDOS. CHILE 1988

INJUSTICE!: A Chilean poster published by the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared. A Truth Commission has been held in Chile to bring out in the open the gross human rights transgressions that occurred under General Augusto Pinochet's military regime.

next issue of *Democracy in Action* - was to begin to clarify policy options and priorities in the South African situation. What will follow is a second, more ambitious conference that may take the form of a series of public hearings, where the victims of apartheid, South African specialists and the

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general public will engage further around these issues.

Another part of the programme, which will also cover the human rights abuses of the opponents of apartheid, will be an extensive documentation exercise, capturing the experiences of those who suffered under apartheid in a range of ways. Such a public record should add an essential human

dimension to the process of formulating policy recommendations.

The fact that scores of people have been granted amnesty, and that there is a commitment to further amnesty, inevitably has certain implications for future policy. But Boraine hopes the new government will appoint a Truth and Reconciliation Commission before further amnesty is granted.

One of the tough decisions a new government will face is what to do if individuals with records of human rights abuse are elected to public office. Another involves the complex issue of prosecution - who gets prosecuted and how are sentences determined?

"Many will say they only did their duty but the fact is that they went well beyond the call of duty," Boraine says. "Tough laws were in place, but it didn't stop the hit squads, death squads and dirty tricks."

The hope is that a Truth and Justice Commission, painful and costly though its establishment may be, will serve to ensure that "hit squads, death squads, dirty tricks" do not happen again.