

Taking up the challenge of transition

THE changing political face of South Africa and Idasa's role in the process of transition came under close scrutiny during a two-and-a-half day staff workshop held at Gordon's Bay in mid-June.

Directors and co-ordinators from all six regions and the head office met to assess political developments in the country and the goals and challenges facing the organisation in the 1990s.

Essential reading for all delegates was *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule; tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies* by Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C Schmitter.

Idasa trustee and UCT political studies professor André du Toit, reminded Idasa that all too often people assumed falsely that South Africa was an exception to other scenarios.

Research on the process of transition from authoritarianism to political democracy showed a movement through phases from liberalisation to democratisation. However, Du Toit warned that history was not necessarily on the side of democracy and that this process was not inevitable.

Evidence from other societies which had gone through the transition process showed that the "two stage theory" - in which it was believed that society could first be liberalised and democratised and only then introduced to socialism - did not work. On the contrary, if the process of liberalisation and democratisation proceeded to the end of the transition phase together, the tendency was for a freezing over of social relations which made it more difficult to proceed with radical social change.

Contextualising this information, a researcher at the Wits Centre for Policy, Mark Swilling, said there had been a fundamental shift in the way opposition groups in South Africa viewed the government. He said the United Democratic Front now accepted that the regime was prepared to move towards a political democracy.



Outgoing chairperson Dr Beyers Naudé, Ian Liebenberg and Marion Shaer at the Idasa workshop in June.

However, the opposition was divided into two: those who believed the conditions put forward and were prepared to abide by the rules of the game, and those who believed the regime was weakening and therefore opposition groups should hold out for higher stakes.

He said there was also a realisation by the National Party that without the opposition (the ANC) they were finished.

The making of pacts between the rulers and the opposition characterised the available options in the situation. A pact defining the rules of the game and the beginning of an agreement could be forged (the Groote Schuur minute possible fell into this category); or a cartel could be formed when "softliners" and the opposition both agreed to co-operate in the management of the transition.

He said the only way a society could move beyond political democracy to social democracy, welfare democracy or socialism, was if the mobilisation of civil society continued.

The pattern in other societies thus far has been one in which mobilisation declined the closer a settlement became. The reasons for this included exhaustion, disillusionment with idealism, a depletion of resources and

not to concentrate its energies only on the white community.

The next day, delegates launched into the last eight-hour stretch of the workshop. All eyes were focused on Idasa - its internal workings, its strengths and weaknesses, the "threats" it encountered and the opportunities that existed.

In considering the role of the institute a broad working document emerged from the small group and general discussions. In terms of this Idasa would see itself as:

- * Promoting progressive and democratic ideals and practices.

- * Addressing the fears, prejudice and anger in South African society that are obstacles to the transition to a non-racial, democracy.

- * Strengthening "pacting" between the major actors in South Africa.

- * Providing information to all groups on all levels - in particular locally - on critical issues confronting South Africa and exploring ways of addressing these.

- * Facilitating discussion of constitutional and developmental issues around a post-apartheid South Africa

All of these issues and more will be deliberated at Idasa's planning conference scheduled for August.

THE Soweto civic leader Dr Ntatho Motlana, was elected chairperson of Idasa's board of trustees at a meeting of the board during Idasa's recent staff workshop. UCT political studies lecturer Professor André du Toit, was elected vice-chairperson.

Outgoing chairperson was Dr Beyers Naude, who has served in the position since 1986.

In his address to Idasa staff, Dr Naudé said the challenge for the Institute was how to bring a fearful white community to a new understanding and to work with

New boss on board

those on the left who, while not opposed to negotiations, were deeply suspicious of the National Party.

Dr Naudé said the major discussions and debates in South Africa could not take place purely in parliament, they would have to happen in local communities all over the country.

One aspect of Idasa's work that



Dr Motlana

should be reconsidered was the understanding between itself and black organisations, especially the Mass Democratic Movement. Dr Naude said a shift was taking place within communities.

"People will come to whichever organisation will meet their needs.

"People's needs will bring them to that person, that

group, that organisation."

Dr Motlana said he deeply admired the work of Idasa, but while he approved of its efforts to allay white fears about a non-racial democracy, it needed to broaden its work to allay black fears and promote democratic ideals in the black community.

"People are not born democrats. I think they are born damn selfish! We need to learn that it is better to share and work together."

There was a particular need to broaden democratic practice and understanding among the black youth.