

# A quest worth pursuing

South Africa is not on the point of collapse or disintegration; nor is she on the point of imminent breakthrough to a trouble-free democracy, says Idasa director DR VAN ZYL SLABBERT in a new book. Here are some of his conclusions.

**"S**outh Africa is the largest graveyard of political predictions in the world. She has been condemned, cursed and dismissed more often than understood. The complexity of her problems has undermined the confidence of many competent analysts. Very few, if any, would have predicted that she could now be busy with negotiating away domination and seeking to put democracy in its place.

"The dynamics of this transition have unleashed a flood of creative energy in all areas of societal life. Most key actors on national, regional and local levels display a willingness to engage rather than confront, to create rather than destroy. South Africa is not on the point of collapse or disintegration; nor is she on the point of imminent breakthrough to a trouble-free democracy.

"One of the hopeful signs is a growing awareness of the gravity of the problems that have to be solved. In short, South Africa's quest for democracy is not as easy as some pretend, nor as futile as others predict. As long as the impact of the past on the present is not ignored when the future is negotiated, it is a quest worth pursuing with as much vigour as the extraordinary people of South Africa can muster."

With these words, Van Zyl Slabbert closes his latest book, *The Quest for Democracy: South Africa in Transition*. It's an upbeat conclusion to a sobering analysis of the way forward.

Ending apartheid is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the establishment of a true democracy. The current negotiation process could end in a number of possible undemocratic transitional scenarios; for the next few years South Africa could hover between a fresh clampdown and a government of transitional unity (GOTU) – an unelected multi-party arrangement. The virtual collapse of negotiations at Codesa II raises a fresh series of imponderables about South Africa's future, and makes this sobering assessment all the more relevant.

In the final chapter the most important



Key actors: most display willingness to create rather than destroy.

Rodger Bosch, Southlight

conclusions of the book are outlined:

- South Africa has embarked on its quest at a time when two clearly discernible trends are influencing international relations: the trend towards good governance and a commitment to a democratic system of government as well as the trend towards sound management of market-driven economies. There is a growing convergence on criteria that countries use in judging each other's responses to these trends.

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- The quest for democracy is motivated also by the need to get rid of domination. In South Africa this took the form of colonialism, ie white minority domination. However, South Africa cannot solve this problem through conventional colonial transition, ie white withdrawal or an externally imposed formula for transition implemented and monitored by some external international agent.

- Other failed attempts at transition away from domination have left legacies which affect the current negotiations; partition, technocratic reform and attempts at revolutionary transition.

- There are powerful external and internal forces, planned and unplanned, which have

combined to make negotiation a compelling option to deal with the transition away from domination to democracy. There is no need to seek extraordinary explanations or fall back onto simplistic psychological causes.

- The difficulty of identifying key players in the negotiation process arises from the dynamics of the process itself and the problems that have to be dealt with at different stages of transition. Realignment, new parties and

alliances, as well as shifting patterns of leadership, tactics and strategies, have to be taken into account.

- Clusters of problems can be distinguished analytically in different phases of the negotiation process, though they are entangled in reality. Normalisation, democratisation and consolidation overlap and interact, adding to the complexity of the process and the uncertainty of the outcome.

- An identifiable sequence of phases of negotiation does not guarantee a trouble-free unfolding of the process. South Africa may be similar to other countries undergoing transition, but there are important imponderables which can have a significant impact on the outcome of the process: for example, an unresolved security situation; transitional legitimacy; ideological intensity; economic performance; and youth.

- The prospects of South Africa becoming a democracy are daunting and challenging, but not out of the question. They depend on the critical role of key political actors; the strategic choices they make concerning the different problems during the different phases of transition; how they react towards one another; the obstacles and opportunities that have to be overcome and exploited. It is the interaction between such strategic choices and basic structural conditions inside South Africa that hold the key to South Africa becoming a democracy.

*("The Quest for Democracy: South Africa in Transition" is published by Penguin Books.)*