

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE INSTITUTE FOR A DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE FOR SOUTH AFRICA

SEPTEMBER 1989

Peace prospects: SA in better shape than N Ireland, Israel

The lessons of conflict



Countrymen . . . Sammy Smooha (left) and Meron Benvenisti from Israel.



South Africans . . . André du Toit and Khehla Shubane.

Photographs by JAN GAGIANO

What can be learnt about the prospects for ending apartheid and achieving a political settlement of our increasingly polarised and violent conflicts by comparing South Africa with such other deeply divided societies as Israel and Northern Ireland? Are we locked into essentially the same patterns of communal conflict and cycles of political violence which produced the disasters of Lebanon, or can comparative studies point the way to alternative and more viable strategies of nation-building in the quest for peace?

These were the questions which brought together an international group of academics with specialist knowledge and intimate experience of South Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland in Bad Godesberg, West Germany, for four days of intensive discussions early in September. From the outset it was clear that the "Ending Apartheid" conference, jointly hosted by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Idasa, would at least be one conference on South Africa without any parochial concerns. It was also clear that it would be a somewhat different kind of enterprise to the ongoing series of international conference involving South African and ANC-delegations. After the drama of Dakar and the exotic setting of Victoria Falls the sedate surroundings of suburban Bonn

A group of international academics with an intimate knowledge of South Africa, Northern Ireland and Israel gathered at Bad Godesberg in West Germany in September to discuss the inevitable conflict in divided societies. PROF ANDRÉ DU TOIT, one of the delegates to the conference jointly hosted by Idasa and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, reports.

provided an appropriate context for a more reflective meeting of minds seeking a wider comparative understanding of these three societies, so diverse in their similarities.

But if the discussions, quite understandably, had an academic bent, this was also an academic conference with a difference. The conference organiser, Hermann Giliomee, of the political studies department at the University of Cape Town, had succeeded in bringing together a truly international group of scholars, a good mix of area specialists together with some outstanding generalists. From Israel there were the historians Moshe Ma'oz and Motti Tamarin as well as the social scientist Sammy Smooha; from Northern Ireland there was a

strong contingent including Pdraig O'Malley, Paul Arthur, Norman Gibson, John Brewer, Kevin Boyle and John Whyte, as well as Michael MacDonald, author of "The Children of Wrath"; and established writers on South Africa such as Lawrence Schlemmer, Heribert Adam and W R Johnson were joined by younger scholars such as Wilmot James, Jan Gagiano and Annette Seegers. More general perspectives were contributed by comparative analysts of nationalism Walker Connor and Benjamin Neuburger as well as the Soviet Africanist Apollon Davidson by the doyen of development studies David Apter from Yale, and by some of the leading practitioners of conflict resolution methodologies such as the social psychologist Herbert Kelman from Harvard and James Laue.

However this wealth of academic expertise was also complemented and challenged by participants who could draw on experience and understanding of a different kind, equally relevant to these three deeply troubled societies. When some academics wanted to speculate about abstract theoretical models, there was Idasa's Fana Zungu, fresh from the scene of the ongoing political killings around Pietermaritzburg, to remind them that there are people actually dying out there even as they

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Lessons of conflict

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talked. Of the South African participants three, in the persons of Fikile Bam, Neville Alexander and Khehla Shubane, could speak from personal experience as political prisoners on Robben Island. (Not surprisingly it was Alexander who contested what he saw as the gradualist and reformist assumptions underlying the conference agenda, and who insisted on the need for radical social transformation). Breyten Breytenbach, too, was on hand to give witness to his unique vision as activist, prisoner, exile and poet. And the most striking contribution to the Israeli debates was made by Meron Benvenisti, former mayor of Jerusalem and more than ready to challenge the consensus otherwise prevailing among Israeli scholars on the basis of his grassroots understanding of the consequences of 20 years of occupation of the West Bank. Even if the conference did not include any actual representatives of the IRA, PLO or ANC — which no doubt would have made it into a different sort of meeting altogether — there was thus little chance for the academics to retreat for long into their ivory towers of dispassionate analysis and abstract theorising.

For those in search of readymade "solutions" the comparative discussions of these three intractable conflicts brought little comfort. Before the start of the conference Otto Graf Lambsdorf, leader and senior statesman of the German Free Democratic Party, made an important statement setting out the aims and constraints of the international commitment to help end apartheid and achieve a peaceful resolution of the South African conflict. And in the opening session Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, respected former editor of *Die Zeit*, floated the idea of calling on President Bush to get incoming president F W de Klerk and Mr Nelson Mandela together to start the process of "talks about talks" needed to create the conditions for serious political negotiation involving both the National Party and ANC leaderships. In the discussions that followed, however, it was again

and again stressed that South Africa was nowhere near meeting the conditions needed for successful negotiations, and that increased international intervention could well increase the problems. Neville Alexander argued, that while we should always be prepared to explore what may be gained by talking to all parties, it is dangerous to spread a popular illusion that a negotiated settlement is around the corner; rather, it should be accepted that the ending of apartheid and the transformation of South African society will and can only be a long term historical process. Meanwhile, so Van Zyl Slabbert anticipated, if the objective conditions for negotiations were still lacking, this did not prevent an emergent consensus around the idea of "negotiations". Indeed, this was already creating its own momentum even in the short term, drawing various parties into a complex process of position-bargaining in which the name of the game was to make your opponent look unreasonable and so take the blame for the unresolved conflict. The consequences would be new realignments in both white as well as extra-parliamentary politics and also an increasing salience to the issue of controlling the spread of political violence.

Here comparisons with Israel and Northern Ireland proved illuminating. Apart from the more obvious similarities between the various inter-communal conflicts, there were also substantial differences with significant implications for the prospects of a peaceful settlement in each case. As analysed by W R Johnson, Northern Ireland was still largely in a colonial relation to Britain as the metropolitan power, which was once again directly holding the ring, and had successfully prevented the problem from becoming internationalised. By comparison Israel was an intermediate case with much greater involvement of other international forces and the United States in the position of a quasi-metropole, while the South African case had developed furthest from its colonial origins: there no longer was any single metropolitan power and the conflict had become completely internationalised. This meant that in the cases of Israel and Northern Ireland, but not in South Africa, there were metropolitan powers in a position to intervene and change the situation, thus ostensibly providing more leverage for a possible settlement. In effect, though, this also served to make the

Irish problem most intractable: as various analysts of Northern Ireland observed, the fact that internal forces did not themselves bear the final political responsibility simply fuelled polarisation and further encouraged the extremist use of political violence. The paradox, commented respected British political commentator Simon Jenkins, was that British rule in Northern Ireland, on the face of it as good an example of purely disinterested intervention as one might hope to find, had in fact become an intractable part of the problem itself.

On closer analysis there also appeared to be further subtle but significant differences to the patterns of violent communal conflict between the South African and the other two cases. Alarming as the proliferation of political violence in South Africa undoubtedly was, the kind of disciplined violence against representatives of communal enemies, so crucial to Northern Ireland, was (as yet) quite rare. With the possible exception of the continuing communal violence in the Natal Midlands, South Africa did not yet know the self-sustaining cycles of communal violence so deeply entrenched in Northern Ireland. Even in the Natal case, W R Johnson pointed out, the violence was not just political but had evident social roots: in conditions of rapid urbanisation and social differentiation gangs tended to become the key social units while there were considerable opportunities which violence entrepreneurs such as warlords and shacklords could exploit. Khehla Shubane countered that the killings around Maritzburg were not just senseless and random violence, but had definite political motives and dimensions with both Inkatha and the state deeply implicated. Still, one outcome of the discussion appeared to be that while the problem in South Africa was largely one of **uncontrolled** communal violence, it was the disciplined and politically entrenched violence in Northern Ireland which posed the more intractable problems.

Compared to Israel, again, the discussions repeatedly brought out the profound consequences of the basic fact that, unlike blacks in South Africa, Palestinians on the West Bank (and even Israeli Arabs) were not irrevocably incorporated into a common economy and a shared territory. This means that in the Israeli case partition remains available as an option.

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CLYSON

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read in the last 12 months for example came from an article by Joyce Harris in the March issue of the official Black Sash newsletter. In the article on the "soft option" she suggests a strategy whereby all the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forces in opposition to apartheid would co-operate to oust the present government. She suggests that everybody should work together until this broad front achieves their goal of forcing the government to negotiate about the handing over of power to ALL the people. After this every organisation should then again be free to bring their own set of principles to the negotiating table.

Since I am only a very recent subscriber to

your newsletter I am not sure of the space you've allocated to such discussion in the past. But surely the subject has not been shelved or solved? It should be debated in *Democracy in Action* or any other open platform accessible to all in the country.

I also fully agree with the letter of Joan van Staden (*DIA* July 1989). Why not invite those other, but still largely "unknown", organisations to offer their views on the "soft option". Or invite people like Denis Beckett of *Frontline* magazine to talk about his clearly defined ideas on how to achieve democracy. After all the aim is surely to make people think, not to present clear-cut solutions.

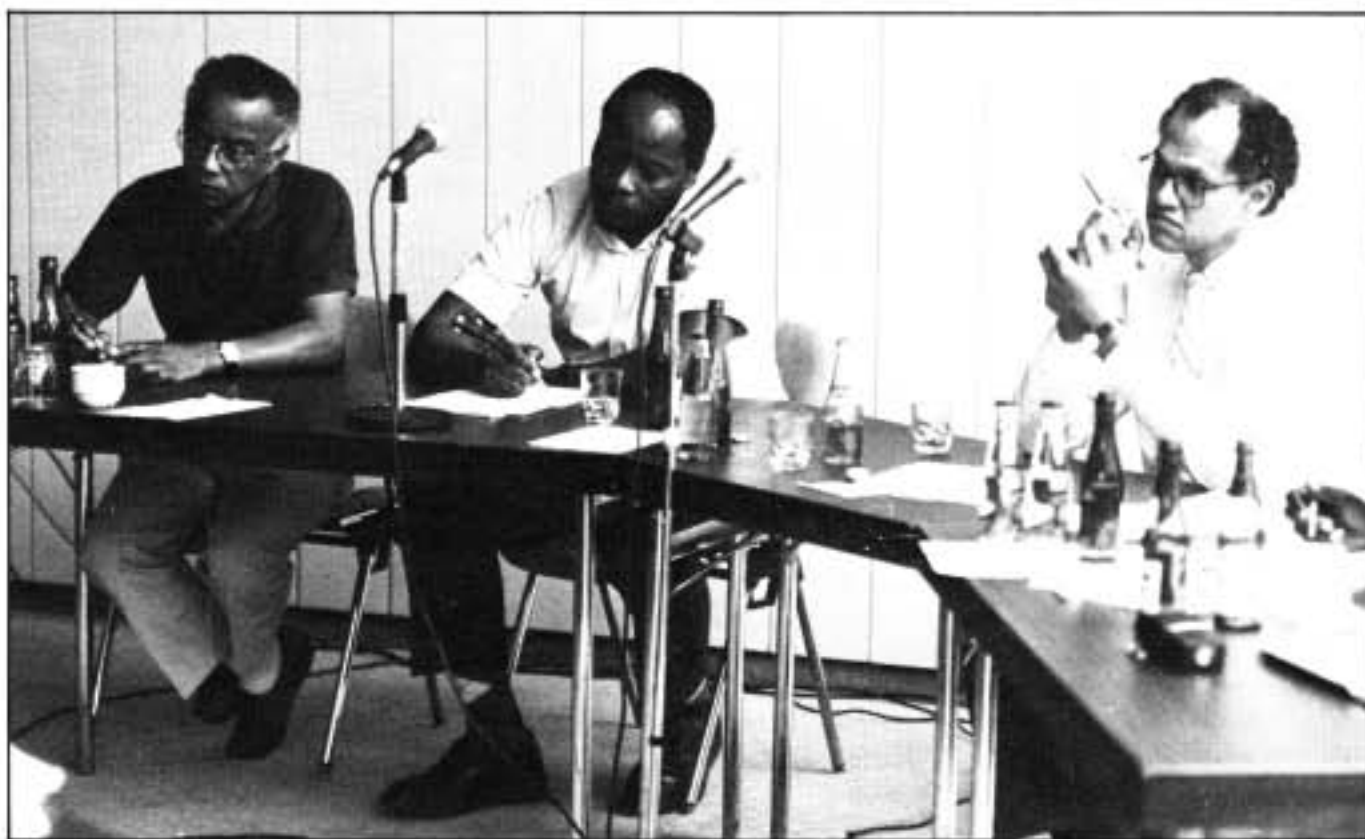
**Ignas Heitkönig
Louis Trichardt**

CONFLICT CONFERENCE

It also means, as Heribert Adam put it, that there are not the same intrinsic limits to the ruthlessness possible to government repression. This was not due to more humane norms but simply a function of the fact that the Israeli economy does not depend on Palestinians in the way that the South African economy depends on black labour and skills. In a sense, commented Motti Tamarkin, South African society has in effect long been an integrated society, and the struggle now essentially concerns the **terms** of incorporation. While in the South African case the problem of nation-building had thus become central to the political agenda, with different conceptions of the nation-to-be vying for hegemony, in Israel political debate remains premised on the assumption that territorial separation of one sort or another can and will provide a way out.

It was just this virtual consensus on the nature of the Israeli problem which Meron Benvenisti set out to challenge with his unsettling arguments that, after more than 20 years, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank had, to all intents and purposes, become an irreversible political reality. For what that claim implies is that Israel no longer was the Jewish nation-state (albeit with a small Arab minority) which it had been prior to the 1967 war. Benvenisti contended that the occupation of the West Bank was an effective act of colonisation which had turned Israel into a divided society. It followed that the Intifada is not an externally generated conflict that could be settled by negotiated partition; rather, it should be recognised for what it is, an incipient civil war. On this view, then, Israelis who still clung to the convenient fiction that, unlike South Africa, their own conflict could readily be resolved by partition had things just the wrong way round. Indeed, their refusal to admit the **de facto** reality of their divided society in effect contributed to the dangers of the "South Africanisation" of the Israeli conflict.

But how should the South African conflict itself be best understood, and what was its historical logic? At the outset of the conference this issue was debated in terms of the contrast between "bicomunalist" and "common society" approaches to South African history and politics. Building on the controversial position he has developed in a number of important recent publications, Hermann



A South African panel . . . Neville Alexander, Fikile Bam and Wilmot James.

Giliomee argued that the essence of our history is to be found in communal conflict over less easily negotiable concerns with national identity, political sovereignty and status rather than any class struggles about material interests, privileges or exploitation which can be negotiated much more readily. Ultimately this amounts to a conflict between two nationalisms, though of different kinds: an Afrikaner ethno-nationalism represented by the National Party (with its white and black allies), and a much more inclusive African territorial nationalism led by the ANC (with its allies). As against this, Heribert Adam rejected any notion of the "equal justice" of both causes (suggested by the philosopher Bernard Crick). Instead he posed the ideal of a "patriotism" that would accept the political implications of an effective common economy and an emergent sharing of cultural norms and social values within the same state. But this debate was not really taken up in the ensuing sessions. In any case Giliomee also stressed that a political settlement must involve a total break with apartheid and could only be based on freedom of association, not race-classification, while in the long run nation-building must transcend the bicomunal accommodations proposed for the interim transitional phase. In effect this suggested substantial

common ground with the positions of others using quite different terminology, eg Neville Alexander's advocacy of the need for a flowering of civil society as a strategy of the long march towards social transformation. (Only in the concluding session did Breyten Breytenbach take up the cudgels against "bicomunalism" in the context of a purported letter about the conference to a member of the ANC. Giliomee strongly objected to what he called the unwarranted "demonising" of his pluralistic analysis, but also indicated that he himself was "finished" with advancing bicomunalism if it continued to be understood as suggesting a stark white-black conflict.) Rather than engaging in polemical debates about "bicomunalism" or any other theoretical model, discussions thus tended to pursue a range of crucial questions in the varied contexts of the three different cases, using the relevant similarities to bring out the particular historically rooted complexities of each in turn.

In the end, wisely suggested David Apter, we may make most progress when we abandon the quest for "solutions" and learn to ask the right questions. Instead of pitting materialist against idealist explanations we should rather ask **when** are (non-negotiable) principles converted into (negotiable) interests, and when does the converse happen? And what is the role of political violence itself in these processes: violence could force ruptures creating new situations with different discourses and assumptions of legitimacy, but violence may also generate self-sustaining cycles of entrenched conflict. It may even be necessary to return to the original question underlying modernisation theory itself: whether, and how, democracy was "universalisable" beyond those societies where it had first been established. And that, most certainly, was an appropriate question for a conference sponsored by Idasa. For after four days of intense and exhausting discussions the conference somehow managed to strengthen the feeling that, of the three, the South African case was the one where the stakes were highest, but also offered the bravest hopes in that democracy and nation-building actually were on the political agenda.

□ Prof Du Toit lectures in the Department of Political Studies at UCT.



At the conference . . . FDP leader Otto Graf Lambsdorf (centre), Gräfin Lambsdorf (centre) and an FDP official with Idasa directors Alex Boraine and Van Zyl Slabbert, and Hermann Giliomee.