

DEMOCRACY

Vol 6 No 3
15 June 1992

Journal of the Institute for a
Democratic Alternative for South Africa

in ACTION

The people need to KNOW

Idasa book takes Rapport prize

A BOOK published by Idasa last year, which breaks new ground in South African history, has been awarded the 1992 Rapport prize for non-fiction in Afrikaans.



Die Derde Oorlog teen Mapoch by journalist Hans Pienaar traces the origins of the uprising in KwaNdebele in the mid-1980s back to two (well covered up) wars between the Boer and Ndebele people in the last century.

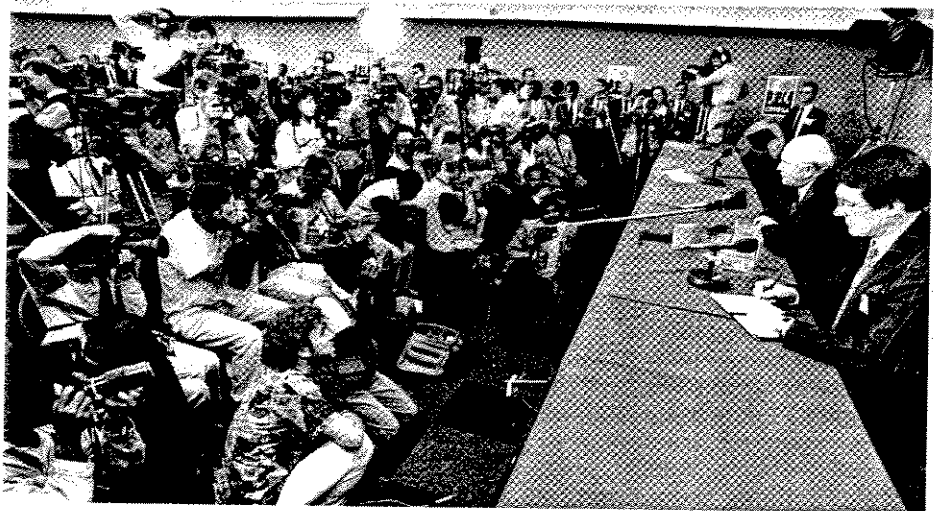
One of the judges, Dr Johan van Wyk of the University of Durban-Westville, says the book makes a significant contribution to the general historical record in South Africa, containing new information and analysis not reflected in some major English-language histories.

● See report on Page 5

Starved of information about our future....

South Africa's constitutional future is being formulated virtually behind closed doors by an unelected leadership at the meetings of Codesa. Most South Africans have little knowledge, let alone critical understanding, of the whole process of constitutional negotiations which is taking place at the aptly chosen World Trade Centre.

By HUGH CORDER



A battery of media...but most of South Africa remains ignorant of the negotiation process.

Ken Oosterbroek, The Star

Some South Africans probably don't care, but the majority would like to be given some information on who is deciding their future, how they are operating, what they are discussing, etc. Given the ostensible and sometimes vocal and real commitment of most of the participating parties to democracy and the goal of the entire enterprise - a democratic SA - the fact that even the literate and interested public is starved of information is nothing short of scandalous.

How has the situation come about? I would suggest that there are two main groups of culprits, each of which is unconcerned about this matter for a range of diverse reasons.

The first group consists of the media - both written and spoken. One of the founding pillars of democracy is the accountability of the governors to their subjects. Between popular elections, the chief means through which accountability is sought is through the public's

right to know what kind of people are in government, what powers they exercise, what policies they pursue and so on.

Crucial to the right to know is an openness of approach by the powerful and the duty of the media is to inform the public. In a country in which roughly half the adult population cannot read or write and the electronic

media are funded by the public, a special responsibility rests on the SABC's television and radio services. The SABC's performance has been poor. Apart from full coverage of the two plenary sessions, reporting of Codesa has been sporadic, uneven, boring and unsophisticated. It appears that many of those involved with the news

To Page 6

INSIDE

Quest worth pursuing

- PAGE 7 -

When people, not power, count?

- PAGE 9 -

Co-operation in southern Africa

- PAGE 21 -

Mislukking - en mislik - in Malawi

Deur HENNING MYBURG

Erens uit my kinderjare is daar herinneringe van President Hastings Banda van Malawi wat met groot trompetgeskalk in Suid-Afrika aankom op amptelike besoek om die goeie verhoudinge tussen die twee lande te bevestig.

Dit was met hierdie gedagtes in my agterkop dat ek geesdriftig die grenspos tussen Zambië en Malawi bestorm het om my kort besoek aan die land te begin. Dit sou interessant wees om iets te sien van die land wat in 1991 'n ekonomiese groei koers van 10 persent kon handhaaf.

By die grenspos is daar die gewone toegangsdokumentasie wat voltooi moet word. Ek vul in: kom vanaf Suid-Afrika, werk vir Idasa, is 'n politieke fasiliteerder van beroep.

Skielik is daar beroering. Ek moet herhaaldelik verduidelik presies wat ek in Malawi wil doen, naamlik voorbereidings tref vir 'n politieke studietoer deur 'n groep Vrystaters.

Uiteindelik begin hulle 'n vorm invul getiteld "Arrest on entry". Drie ure na my aankoms by die grenspos word ek Malawi binnegelaat onder 'n "Provisional Restriction Order" met streng opdrag om reguit Lilongwe toe te ry.

by 'n spesifieke hotel in te boek en die volgende oggend by die doeane-kantore aan te meld.

Ek doen so en rapporteer om 08h00 die volgende oggend by die aangewese kantoor. Weer dieselfde storie: verduideliking en uiteindelik aan die Kommissaris van Polisie! Om 17h00 is almal ten einde laaste oortuig van die onskuld en goeie bedoelings van my sending en word ek toegelaat om weer te vertrek Zambië toe. (Die tyd begroot vir Malawi was om).

Op pad terug na die grenspos maal die woorde van 'n kelner in die hotel die vorige aand deur my kop: "Ons is ontevrede en opstandig omdat ons niks mag sê nie, ons het geen geld nie, die regering het al die geld, die moeilikheid gaan oor demokrasie."

Henning Myburg is streekdirekteur van Idasa in die Vrystaat.



Henning Myburg... "arrest on entry"

The people need to know

From Page 1

gathering and presentation (particularly on television) are having difficulty adjusting to a different political game.

The print media (with singular exceptions) are marginally better, but most reporting is tucked away on the inside pages and analytical pieces are seldom encountered: hardly a fulfilment of our newspapers' much-vaunted independence and public service function. The media are not fulfilling their function in this regard.

The second group which must carry the blame for the lamentable lack of information comprises all the parties at Codesa.

One appreciates that government in this country has long been characterised by paranoid "official secrecy" and an imperious style. One readily acknowledges, too, that political compromise and negotiation can often be achieved more effectively and expeditiously behind closed doors. But it is equally true that outrageous statements, stupidity and stonewalling are unlikely to be indulged in when the full glare of publicity or at least the possibility of disclosure, is brought to bear.

'It is not good enough that some clever public relations agency be called in once the talking is over'

Few, if any, of the delegations have been prepared to divulge their policy on a number of crucial constitutional issues and the names and backgrounds of their delegates and advisers. It does not help to reply: "Oh, but these are only discussions about transitional arrangements," for the shape of those plans will have a considerable influence on the final constitutional form. In addition, Codesa is apparently drawing up a list of constitutional principles which will form the building blocks of the future constitution and bill of rights.

It is not good enough that some clever public relations agency be called in, once the talking is over, to sell the final product to the people before an election for a constituent assembly. The future electorate has a right to know what is going on, and to be kept

informed by intelligent and critical public commentary. If this does not occur, the finished product will have little chance of legitimacy.

'An uninformed society cannot be democratic; an ignorant electorate cannot be effective'

Here are some practical steps which will go some way to rectifying this sad state of affairs:

- A state-funded information campaign, using commentators acknowledged to be non-partisan and critical, and a Codesa equivalent of Hansard in printed form.
- Greater allocation of time and resources by the SABC and the press to achieve a continuing and analytical treatment of the negotiation process (eg regular radio slots - we no longer have "Parliamentary Report" - but we still have several stock exchange reports!).
- Accessible presentations of this information. The media could employ journalistic devices like weekly Codesa supplements, profiles of the leading public actors, a Codesa barometer, fact files and joke columns.
- Information campaigns (adverts, newsletters, meetings) by the political parties to inform and consult with their constituencies. They have a duty to inform and educate their constituents.
- A massive public education campaign about democratic government, its demands, benefits, structures and procedures, to establish a democratic culture in a country which knows only authoritarian violence as a means of political expression.

There are many more mechanisms which could be imaginatively explored. The first steps need to be taken urgently to inform the public. An uninformed society cannot be democratic; an ignorant electorate cannot be effective.

Prof Corder is a member of the Civil Rights League and a lecturer in the Department of Public Law at the University of Cape Town.