

# A rethink on 'city politics'

By Max Mamase

Some years ago, civic organisations in Port Elizabeth's black townships put forward the demand for "One City, One Municipality". Since then we have witnessed — in one of the most turbulent periods of our country's history — resistance to the government's system of separate local authorities for each racial group.

Idasa's conference, entitled "One City, One Municipality — A Critical Appraisal", reopened the debate in Port Elizabeth on 14 July. It was time to make an assessment of an idea which had, in some ways, gone full circle around the country and come back to Port Elizabeth five years later. From the stormy years of opposition to black local authorities in 1984/5, when many in the Eastern Cape ceased to function under popular pressure, to the rent boycotts in Transvaal and the recent "single tax-base" argument of the Soweto People's Delegation; from the campaign around "grey areas" in Hillbrow to the emergence of a broad "Open City" campaign against the Group Areas Act in Cape Town; from the attempts of Pietermaritzburg 2000 to plan for the future, to the building and then crushing of alternative local forms of representation in townships under the State of Emergency. The issue of "city politics" has been placed firmly on the agenda. While even the Port Elizabeth City Council acknowledges the inefficiency of having five separate local authorities for one area, how do we move beyond this situation?

Kehla Shubane, of the Wits Centre for Policy Studies, opened the debate by placing it firmly in context. He outlined how the present multi-racial local government system works, and how it affects our lives. His research indicates that the townships "export" labour to white cities — "the net effect of this system is that white towns receive a subsidy in the form of labour and buying power of township folks". The consequence of such policies, he argued, are boycotts, strikes and other forms of popular struggle around issues such as rent, transport, electricity and health services. The duplication and inefficiency of service provision, and the vast bureaucracies required to maintain such a system, make the present local government structures extremely costly to the economy.

Ivan Krige, Port Elizabeth city councillor, responded to Shubane's paper by stressing that the "bedeviling" factor is the "obdurate refusal of the government to recognise... that its concept of 'group' development is flawed". They are, he claimed, involved in a "hunt for ways to preserve group areas without the Group Areas Act. They clearly would like to preserve racism by another name". Krige felt that it would be "fantastic" if Port Elizabeth could lead the way in applying "one management to one city". It was important to "demand immediate recognition of the fact that we all want representation on one local authority which is not racially based".

Jan van Gend, Democratic Party MP for Groote Schuur, then gave a succinct analysis of the government's Free Settlement Areas Act, explaining how they "compound rather than alleviate the problems inherent in multi-racial local government". The intention of such



Panelists... Mr Rory Riordan, director of the Human Rights Trust, Mr Max Mamase, co-director of Idasa in Eastern Cape, and Mr Ivan Krige. Right: Mr Jan van Gend.

measures, on the government's part, was to put "a finger in the dyke", to strengthen rather than weaken residential segregation. He raised the interesting debate about whether the legislation could be used by those opposed to group areas to have entire areas declared free settlement areas.

After a panel discussion, followed by a buffet lunch, two more challenging papers were delivered. Mark Swilling, of Planact in Johannesburg, looked at the implications of building non-racial local government. He stressed the importance of building truly democratic local government in preparation for the future, and took a hard look at some of the practical problems which will have to be confronted in a "reconstruction" phase. In terms of immediate strategies for "contesting the future of the cities", he outlined four possibilities: local level negotiations between township leaders and white establishment interests; labour-capital strategies where shop-steward councils bargain with chambers of commerce and industry over township development; "Open City" campaigns, as in Cape Town against the Group Areas Act; and campaigns for "one city" or a "single city". The latter is seen as significant, in taking the issue of residential segregation further: to the need for a single tax-base for the city, and the demand for political representation at local level to be non-racial.

Jeremiah Sulelo, giving a township perspective on non-racialism and democracy, explained to an entranced audience just how the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation had built up its own structures of street and area committees. Pebco, he claimed, envisaged this as a truly democratic, grassroots-controlled system; it would be wise to extend this system to all areas on a non-racial basis, to ensure a future system of local government which represents everybody's interests.



After further questions from the floor, the conference was wrapped up by a suggestion that Idasa assist with research into the possibilities of a "single city" of Port Elizabeth.

As Sulelo put it: "To alleviate the fears of many white people, who believe in what they term 'domination' by blacks, the national democratic struggle believes that non-racialism is very different from multi-racialism. South Africa has been 'multi-racial' from the day Van Riebeeck landed here. Non-racialism has nothing to do with group interests; the protection of the interests of white people or black people, or the so-called coloured people. Anybody who has been elected by the people to be present in a council will not be there in the interests of black people or white people, but in the interests of everybody in South Africa. To apply the principle of non-racialism, blacks would be prepared to elect even P W Botha, if he was prepared to represent the interests of everybody in South Africa."

□ Max Mamase is Co-director of Idasa in the Eastern Cape.