



# Sun has not set on NGO task yet

**O**NE of the first questions people tend to ask me when learning of my new job is what there is left for Idasa to do in the light of South Africa's recent political transition. The question is naive, certainly, for the moment of transition is the first critical step in a much longer road of democracy building. It is also uninformed, for Idasa under the able leadership of Alex Boraine has repositioned itself from working for a democratic alternative to consolidating the new democratic order.

This shift in perspective and activity is reflected in Idasa's change of name, from the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa to the Institute for Democracy in South Africa. Not many people have noticed the disappearance of *Alternative* from the name, but what was alternative a few years ago is now, of course, mainstream. Perhaps the retention of the acronym Idasa (rather than Idsa, as it technically ought to be) contributes to the confusion.

Still, after all is said and done, it remains important to ask what precisely the role and function of Idasa and similar non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is in the new South Africa.

A point to remember is that a democratic transition is not a one-off matter concluded with an election, but a series of longer-term processes having good moments at times and bad moments at other times. Neither is it a linear or necessarily progressive movement. Back-sliding, regression and non-democratic reversals are always possibilities.

Democracy building, Idasa's mission, is therefore an effort that must work with a longer time horizon than many people tend to imagine. More importantly, it is something that requires constant analysis, monitoring and surveillance, to ensure that the momentous progress that has been made thus far is sustained and improved on.

Some aspects of the transition must perforce work within a specific time-frame and with a point of conclusion in sight, such as the finalisation of the Constitution and preparations for possible interim provincial elections and the national elections scheduled for 1999. It is increasingly appreciated that the 21 or so months left for the

Constitutional Assembly to develop a final constitution are probably too limited.

Relations between local, provincial and national government need sorting out, particularly after the 1995 local government elections and, further down the road, after some practical testing in the field and possible legislative amendments. Then there is the question of preparing for the 1999 elections, which would be better off, in my view, reverting to a constituency or ward system. The decade of the 1990s has a busy constitutional and electoral calendar in which NGOs like Idasa are, willy-nilly, inserted.

I could go on to talk about democratic processes with brief horizons (hopefully, for example, community policing will come into effect sooner rather than later) or those of 10- to 12-year duration, such as the proper and effective overhaul of our education system (a standard per year?), to reinforce the point that the consolidation of democracy has various aspects, levels and time-frames, which will take us well into the 21st century.

Then there are less time-bound activities, such as the analysis and monitoring of the proper functioning of the democratic state on the basis of principles that the new government and elected officials have embraced – openness, transparency and accountability to the public – and the monitoring of the strength of non-democratic behaviour and counter-democratic forces in society.

Independent NGOs can and should play a critical role in monitoring the state, providing the public with information about elected officials, and diminishing the power of non-democratic and counter-democratic behaviours in our society. The scale of these agendas – and there are others, too – will keep Idasa in business for a very long time to come.

**Wilmot James**  
**Executive Director**



## Idasa's goals are:

- ▶ To promote the development of a democratic culture in South Africa
- ▶ To address fear, prejudice, anger and other obstacles in the transition to a non-racial democracy in South Africa
- ▶ To engage influential groups and individuals who may be outsiders to the transition process
- ▶ To provide, wherever possible, information on critical issues and to explore ways of addressing these
- ▶ To facilitate discussion of constitutional and developmental issues relevant to southern Africa
- ▶ To assist and encourage others to contribute to the attainment of these goals