## Ordinary people walk

Should mass action be reviewed as the legitimate protest of democratic civil society or the provocative methods of reckless leaders? RUSSELL ALLY brings some hindsight to bear on this question.

RING up the question of mass action and you are bound to get an impassioned response. This is only to be expected. In a concentrated form, the mass action campaign of the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance expresses the tensions of a country in political transition from racist authoritarianism to some form of democracy.

At the end of the day, however, the principle of mass action is bigger and more important than the arguments of either the present promoters of the mass action campaign or its detractors. Mass action quintessentially is about the ability of people to demonstrate freely and openly, and to express their dissatisfaction with those who are in power.

Because the ANC-SACP-Cosatu alliance is at the head of the mass action campaign, this fundamental principle is often overlooked. But mass action is not the preserve of certain political organisations, nor does it only involve large-scale mobilisation for the socalled big political issues.

Mass action is also about groups of residents getting together to protest against the lack of facilities in their communities. It is about homosexuals demonstrating against discrimination and sexual harassment. It is about marches to protest against the abuse and exploitation of the environment. Indeed, in many ways it is possible to judge just how democratic a society is by the extent to which the people of that society are free to protest, which includes the right to challenge those in power.

For die-hard, racist conservatives, however, mass action confirms all their worst fears and prejudices about black majority rule. Hordes of unruly, violent blacks on the march can only signify one thing: the country is on the precipice of anarchy. And there can only be one solution to this awesome spectre of black defiance: bring out the army, declare a state of emergency. In sum, enforce law and order. This response is predictable and not all that interesting.

'Mass action is about the ability of people to demonstrate freely and openly'

Much more interesting is the response of De Klerk and his National Party. Having ostensibly embraced democracy, the Nationalists have, of course, to pay lip service to the right of protest. But what they find totally baffling is why this right needs to be exercised. After all, has the NP not indicated its willingness to negotiate a new democratic constitution for the country? Has the NP not abolished apartheid and committed itself to a new non-racial South Africa? Why then the need for mass action? The dismay of the Nationalists at this display of ingratitude on the part of the alliance would

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## Snail's pace but the process is progressing

From Page 23

all parties, including government, to its decisions represented "interim government by stealth". It is true that the forums do represent interim authorities of sorts. I believe that in this they can be very constructive instruments for managing transition.

## Depoliticising Development

The politicisation of the development process has been a major obstacle to effective development delivery. In the run-up to South Africa's first democratic national elections, the question of who takes the credit for development or who is able to direct development resources so as to build a support

base is of critical importance. Is it the provincial administration which is giving the money? Is it the civic association that has arranged the protest and participated in the local negotiation? What about the minor parties who do not have the political clout of the major roleplayers?

By making development decisions on the basis on a multiparty consensus, the opportunities for any single party to claim the credit for devel nities to build their own organisation through reporting back and engaging their constituency in the process.

It has also become clear, however, that processes can be very destructive and undermining if they are not carefully thought through and sensitively planned and implemented. Community organisations have pointed out that negotiations often involve community leaders in an endless series of meetings which they have difficulty in understanding because of their technical nature and which deliver very little.

Ultimately, they argue, the community

leadership ends up with limited time to engage their constituency on the issues which in turn leads to a decline in the level of community organisation.

The participation of women and youth in most local development and democracy processes has been limited. A particular challenge of the moment is to develop mechanisms for redressing this situation.

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