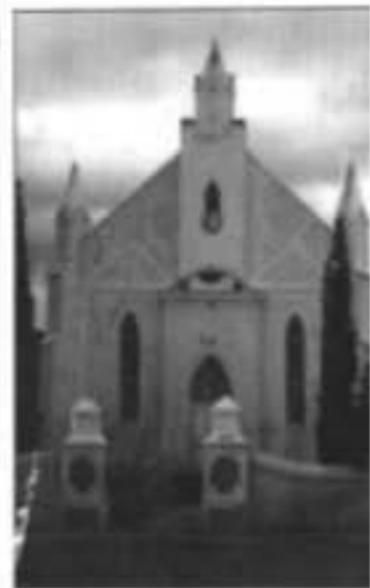


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Election tests SA's will to change

By PAUL GRAHAM

WITH only weeks to go before South Africa's first non-racial election – the scale and importance of which we have never before experienced – the transitional vehicle we have cobbled together is starting to show signs of a major speed wobble.

The negotiated structural frameworks of the Transitional Executive Council (TEC), the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Independent Media Commission (IMC) were designed at a time when negotiators thought their task would be over in 1993. They would have had a few months to gather their energies before opening up their engines again and driving the last few kilometres with the needle in the red.

To continue the metaphor, even this might have been acceptable had the road ahead been smooth. What is required now is a turbo-charged tank capable of cornering the bends like a well-known brand of German car.

The fact is, we are not going to have a perfect election. It is going to test the mettle of all those committed to change and democracy. This includes not only parties, officials and organised civil society but also voters.

We should not try to pretend that everything is normal and that this election is, as a member of the IEC put it, happening in a democratic



ELECTION DRAMA: Actors bring voter education to a Cape Town community during the problem-wracked run-up to the April election.

ERIC MILLER

'Truth sets a nation free'

If there is to be real healing in South Africa, we have to know the truth about the past. This is the thinking behind a new programme aimed at creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. RONEL SCHEFFER spoke to Alex Boraine.

THERE is a sense of unreality and unfinished business as South Africa prepares for democratic elections. To many the "official" transition from apartheid to democracy seems to have been too slick for what preceded it. The election will no doubt provide a climax of some sort, but will we ever

experience the catharsis usually associated with new beginnings?

The temptation to evade the difficulties of dealing with the injustices of the past will be great for a government of national unity faced with pressing needs on almost every front, as well as the challenge of day to day governance. But such avoidance will come at a considerable price, says Idasa executive director Alex Boraine.

He urges civil society to pressurise the new government to come up with a policy on past injustice. If South Africans ignore the past, he warns, it will come back to haunt them, as is happening in some neighbouring countries where the truth was sacrificed in reconciliation attempts that were misguided.

Finding help in confusing times

Manpower Commission's efforts to develop a policy for unemployment, they begin to see that things are happening that will impact at the local grassroots level."

White people, on the other hand, need information on how the April election will differ from previous

exclusive elections.

"A group of white women from the Durbanville farming area requested a workshop," Erasmus explains. "These women were concerned about their farm workers and wanted to know what they could do to help them participate in the elections. It is important for people who have voted previously to realise that with this election there will be no voters' roll and no need to register.

"The major difference, of course, is that this election will be five times bigger than any election this country has ever seen. People also need to understand the difference between the government of national unity and the Westminster system that was previously used."

Because Idasa is seen as a non-partisan organisation, its workshops are attractive to diverse groups. Participants have ranged from directors and company managers to teachers, hospital staff and labourers.

Among the most challenging demands Idasa has faced is a call from the Worcester Town Council, acting in consultation with bodies such as the South African National Civics Organisation, for workshops targeted at the entire town - which has a population of 30 000.

Erasmus says simply: "Our major role is to affirm people and help them in confusing times."

Voter educators are finding they have to be quick on their feet, Idasa trainer Charles Erasmus told SHIREEN BADAT. What do you say when someone asks whether the ballot box is safe from the tokoloshe, for instance?

that groups from different communities experience.

"People from disadvantaged communities expect very concrete and physical things from the elections. They expect to get houses, electricity and water, and very few talk about democracy and representation. It is the task of the workshop to sober people up and point out that the elections cannot bring about those things.

"It is important to get people to realise that the election is not an event but part of a process. One of the ways of doing this is to talk about the release of Mandela in 1990, when people had similar high expectations. After a year or two their expectations became more realistic.

"However, it is also important that people realise that change is not only in the hands of politicians. When people hear about the establishment of the National Housing Commission, which has strategised to provide 300 000 homes a year, and the National

'The fact is, we are not going to have a perfect election. It is going to test the mettle of all those committed to change and democracy. This includes not only parties, officials and organised civil society but also voters'

and the control of weapons is only now being addressed, and clearly many people are going to resist handing in weapons that were issued to them.

• The administrative arrangements for ensuring that voting stations conduct their business fairly and efficiently are still to be concluded. The IEC has an immense organi-

sational task merely to put its own core staff to work. Thousands of voting officials and monitors still have to be found and trained.

• The present trickle of complaints by parties against one another is likely to swell into a flood, and the mechanisms for dealing with these proactively through party liaison committees and remedially through the adjudication structures are still in embryonic form.

• The Electoral Act, supposedly the guide to the procedures and planning of the IEC, is still the subject of negotiation by parties. This adds to the uncertainty of planners, monitors, observers and voter educators.

It is, therefore, essential that ordinary citizens take seriously their own responsibility to guard the election and to make sure it works as well as possible. We cannot afford a failed election.

Paul Graham is national programme director for Idasa.

THE secrecy of the vote is one of the subjects raised often in voter education workshops run by Idasa's Western Cape office - sometimes in unexpected forms. "Will the *tokoloshe* know who you are voting for?" was one of the questions asked recently.

Intimidation, often in subtle forms, is another recurring theme. Residents of Crossroads and Nyanga East, for instance, have complained that a local *sangoma* told them who to vote for, and are convinced that it is impossible for their votes to remain secret from a person with magical powers.

"Voter educators have had to handle these kinds of problems very sensitively," Erasmus says. "They have had to learn to listen to all these problems and then refute them in the most sensitive manner possible."

One of the ways the issue of secrecy is addressed, for example, is to take workshop participants through a process of simulated voting, where all mark ballot papers and place them in a ballot box. At the end of the session one of the ballot papers is removed and participants are asked to guess who placed it there. In this way people experience concretely that votes can be secret.

Another surprise occurred in a workshop for nursing staff from a Cape Town hospital, who had heard a rumour that the Aids virus could be transmitted through the invisible ink that will be used to mark the hands of those who have cast their votes.

"Fortunately the Idasa staff member running the workshop had done post-graduate work on Aids," Erasmus comments.

He adds that it has been interesting to note the different expectations and problems

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country in the manner of a run-of-the-mill modern election. It is understandable that there is a conspiracy of optimism, but now is the time to challenge South Africans to stand up for what they have been struggling.

In order to develop more realistic hopes, we need to put on the table some of the things that remain unresolved.

• The security arrangements for protecting voters and canvassers remain ambiguous. The relationship between the National Peacekeeping Force, the SA Defence Force, the SA Police and the various structures to develop legitimacy and community trust are unclear. There are still significant parts of the country where there is ongoing violence or where violence can break out.

• The demobilisation of armed formations