

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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

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EDITORIAL

A new vision from Dakar

A FEW weeks ago, Van Zyl Slabbert, Breyten Breytenbach and I visited Dakar in Senegal for four days. This was not our first visit. In 1987 we had brought a large group of mainly white Afrikaners to meet with key members of the national executive of the African National Congress.

As the Air Afrique plane landed once again at Dakar airport, the memories came crowding back. It was a very tense journey then. We had wondered what sort of reception we would receive, how the members of the ANC and their white counterparts would react to each other. Would the meeting explode after a few hours and end in disaster? Certainly there was a wariness and even an unease to begin with. There was suspicion, the discussion was tentative. But after a while the exchanges became far more honest, focusing on the whole question of violence, a future economy for a new South Africa, human rights and protection of individual rights in a new constitution.

It might well be argued that Idasa was conceived in South Africa but was in a very real sense born in Dakar, Senegal.

So much had happened in South Africa since the 1987 visit, and now we were back in Dakar which had given us the opportunity to facilitate a meeting which, in many ways, was the beginning of the shift towards negotiation politics.

We were the guests of the Department of Foreign Affairs and throughout our brief stay were treated with great courtesy, generosity and warmth. The visit with President Abdou Diouf stands out. It was a meeting which lasted one and a half hours and we talked first of the event which he had helped to make possible in 1987. We outlined the developments which had taken place in Idasa. We spent time in giving our understanding of what had and was taking place in South Africa. He was deeply interested, asked many questions and was as interested in the role played by Mr De Klerk as he was in the role being played by Mr Mandela.

When we told him that we had come to explore the possibility of setting up a new Institute for Democracy in Africa he was immediately interested and pledged his total support.

After that meeting the way was cleared for us to meet cabinet ministers, lawyers, politicians and academics. With each group we met, we told them of our hopes for an institute which could be based in Senegal, but would serve the whole of Africa. We stressed time and time again that for an institute such as we envisaged to be successful, it had to be totally independent of the government of Senegal, of political parties and would have to enjoy wide support – not only from the Senegalese but from all the people of Africa.

We explained that the institute would have a small and lean professional staff, that

it would have to have an infrastructure which would enable it to host workshops, conferences and seminars focusing on the meaning of democracy, not only in constitutional terms but as it affected every area of life. We described the possibility of distinguished visiting professors spending time at the institute, of people coming from many parts of Africa and even beyond, that those who came would not only be academics but also professionals, bureaucrats, politicians, young and old. We even dared to mention that we had hopes that the Institute for Democracy in Africa could play a small part in breaking down the wall which separated South Africa from the rest of Africa to the mutual advantage of both.

But why Senegal? Firstly because Senegal in its recent history has demonstrated a commitment to a form of democracy in strong contrast to most other parts of Africa. Secondly our own experience in 1987 gave us the idea that Senegal may well be the ideal place for such an institute. Thirdly and perhaps more importantly, just off the mainland of Dakar lies the island of Goreé.

IN 1987 we visited the slave house on Goreé Island where approximately 40 million victims were held before being carried away from their homeland during the 11th to the 19th centuries. Six million died from hardships and cruel treatment.

What better place to found an Institute for Democracy which would emphasise the unique worth of the individual and the absolute importance of fundamental human rights.

We will continue to explore the possibilities of founding such an institute. Already President Diouf and Madame Mitterand of France have agreed to serve as patrons and we will be inviting other leading figures to do the same. We will also have to set up a board of approximately 30 to 36 trustees and as we discuss this project with people who could serve usefully on such a board, it will become clear as to whether or not such an institute is both desirable and possible. Should we make good progress, we will then have to consider the basic infrastructure, financial support and appointment of staff.

During November, several of us have been invited to attend a conference on democracy which is to be held in Dakar and delegates will be coming from many parts of Africa. This will give us a further opportunity to test out the idea.

History will determine whether or not the meeting in Dakar in 1987 had any influence whatsoever in the new dispensation in South Africa today. Only time will tell as to whether or not it will be possible also to begin an Institute for Democracy in Africa.

– Alex Boraine
Executive Director