

'Most complex' change in the world

The transition to democracy in South Africa is "easily the most complex transition in the world", according to American political scientist Larry Diamond, who addressed a recent seminar in Cape Town.

By SUE VALENTINE

THE mood among local academics, journalists and organisational representatives was bleak after a day of discussion on "The Role of Civil Society in an Emerging Democracy" - a seminar co-hosted by Idasa and the United States Information Service.

This had to do with the enormity of the problems facing South Africa in its transition to democracy, although these were tactfully described as "challenges" by Larry Diamond, a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution in California.

Diamond proclaimed himself "less pessimistic" than some of the South African discussants who spoke at the seminar. However, he was not offering any short cuts or quick fixes for the local transition process, which he characterised as far more complex than those within the former Soviet Union and East European bloc.

Diamond listed several factors that, unless dealt with meaningfully, would threaten and possibly destroy the chances of a successful transition to democracy in South Africa. These included:

- the maldistribution of socio-economic wealth;
- racism within the white bureaucracy and the South African Defence Force;
- ethnic tensions and conflicts;
- the need for structural economic change in order to become more competitive and to attract foreign capital;

Democratic Revolution

Introducing "The Democratic Revolution", edited by Larry Diamond, in Cape Town: Alex Boraine with Diamond and former Cape Times editor Tony Heard, who contributed to the book. The USIS has donated 500 copies to Idasa to distribute among key players countrywide.



DIAMOND: Key to building democracy is incrementalism.

- control of the military - according to Diamond, "even the current regime does not have control of the military".

He noted that South Africa "has every single kind of challenge when other countries in transition have only one or two". On the hopeful side, however, South Africa had certain factors in its favour.

"There is a real capitalist, private productive base which does not have to be constructed from scratch. This structural core of the economy is an important factor and should not be diminished."

While Diamond cautioned that he was not suggesting there were billions of dollars waiting to flow into the country, he said that over time the prospects for developing the capacity to attract foreign aid and goodwill were better than many people imagined.

Ultimately, all the factors converged into different mixtures of "possibile-ism". The critically decisive factor was the human factor - the political will of the people and the political leadership.

Were the situation in South Africa to worsen any further, one would be looking at another disaster area, Diamond said. "If you want to see worse, go to Liberia, Somalia, southern Sudan, Zaire and, potentially, Nigeria." However, there would not necessarily be any further deterioration, and it was likely that "people's stake in a positive outcome will assert itself".

He emphasised that the negative factors he had outlined should be seen as *challenges*, not as elements dooming the transition.

As soon as a legitimate government came to power in South Africa, some redistribution should begin. "There is more realism out there than is sometimes allowed for," he said. "The average disenfranchised South African does not expect a miracle, but a shared sense of sacrifice."

He said a measure of socio-economic redistribution would buy

some time and space to build a culture of political tolerance. Critical to this would be the role of political elites - especially during the election campaign.

"There is no short cut to political tolerance. The work of civil society groups will help a great deal, but in the final analysis it is a matter of people's experience. The key to building democracy is incrementalism. Democracy comes in parts. No country gets it all and no country has it all."

He noted that South Africa

