

Democracy - the dream and reality

By Sue Valentine

Throughout the world in the 1990s, South Africa notwithstanding, everyone claims to support democracy. The inhabitants of the global village are all democrats – or so they would say.

Yet if one thing was clear at the Idasa conference, "Democracy: A Vision for the Future", in Johannesburg from November 21 to 23, it was the need for clarity as to just what democracy means and what we mean by democracy.



Claude Ake

Speaker after eminent speaker, including ANC president Nelson Mandela who opened the conference, stressed the complexity – and uncertainty – of the process of building a democratic society. They warned that democracy offered no quick-fix solution to a nation's ills. Although so many appeared to speak the language of democracy, the exact concepts, commitments and values implied by the term remained unclear.

The scene was set by the other opening night speaker, Dr Claude Ake, an internationally renowned political scientist and head of the Nigeria-based Centre for Advanced Social Sciences in Africa, who cautioned that the apparent worldwide triumph of democracy was due partly to the fact that it had been "trivialised" to the point that it no longer threatened power elites.

"It would appear that form has replaced content and



Nelson Mandela with Nthato Motlana, ANC trustee.

now democrats," he said.

Of the so-called "democratic revolution" taking place in Africa, Ake was cautious, emphasising the need to examine the many different threads running through the movement.

"There is a deceptive simplicity about it...It has many faces, speaks with many voices, embodies different value commitments, it expresses different interests. It illustrates the classic saying that what you see depends not so much on what you are looking at, as from where you looking."

In his address, Mandela called for healing and reconciliation, and the creation of a society in which South Africa's variety of colours, creeds, cultures and genders was cause for cele-

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