

# Count-down to negotiation?

Not while most still believe outright victory is possible

**Expectations abound about a negotiated settlement in South Africa. But what really are the prospects for negotiation? And how long will we wait for the process to start? Idasa recently hosted a seminar on the subject in Durban where the present positions of the major parties to any future negotiation were examined. PAUL GRAHAM reports.**



Mr Van Staden and Prof Frost take questions on the negotiating positions of the PAC and others.

Negotiations in South Africa would only start when all parties realise that the cost of their present strategies are higher than the benefits. Prof Mervyn Frost told delegates at a one-day Idasa seminar in Durban. The seminar on "Prospects for a negotiated settlement in South Africa" was held at the end of August.

Prof Frost, who heads the department of political studies at the University of Natal in Durban, warned that it would be wrong to use a "warfare analogy to explain negotiations within South Africa". Summing up at the end of the conference Prof Frost suggested that piecemeal negotiations would be possible long before the classic stalemate position of warring parties was reached.

Earlier, Mr Steven Friedman of the South African Institute of Race Relations made the same point when he described the options open to the extra-parliamentary opposition and drew some parallels with the earlier bargaining strategies of the trade union movement.

He said there was potential for extra-parliamentary groups to encourage the government to remain open to attempts at negotiations over local issues. Friedman mentioned the negotiations with Escom in Soweto as a good example and said that these local negotiations added to a climate for national negotiations.

He described constitutional negotiations not as an alternative to exercising political power but a consequence of the exercise of political power. "However, I believe that the balance of power between the parties is still too unequal for a negotiated settlement," he said.

The seminar was opened by Prof Leon Gordenker, visiting professor at Rhodes University and an international relations expert. He painted a picture of a systematic and organised web of concern regarding South Africa and speculated about the help that could be expected from this international network "reaching from heights of power to grassroots".

"The support would come in possible services of encouragement and motivation, technical assistance and keeping the flow of information open. There would also be the possibility of transitional services as existed in Namibia presently."

The international community could also offer long term support through loans, international health and welfare networks and experience, and diplomatic relations.

The seminar was structured to provide an analysis of the present positions of the major parties to any future negotiation. Major presentations were made on the positions of the

ANC and the government by observers close to these two parties.

Dr Fanie Cloete, former director of constitutional planning in the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning, explained the government's refusal to negotiate with people "who are not committed to peaceful methods to achieve a transformation of South African society."

He explained the way in which this precondition was the subject of debate itself, with interpretations varying from a commitment to peace through to a renunciation of violence. His paper spelled out the government perceptions of the extra-parliamentary opposition and their wish for "proof of the UDF's commitment in theory and practice to traditional democratic values and procedures before they can be persuaded about the peaceful motives of the organisation".

**The government wants proof of the UDF's commitment to traditional democratic values before they can be persuaded about its peaceful motives.**



Dr Cloete... tactical manoeuvring has started.

"Negotiations do not only take place live across a table," Cloete said. "Verbal skirmishes, the use of intermediaries, leakages to the press and coercive tactics are all instruments used to communicate or enhance bargaining power. Seen in this way we are contending now with tactical manoeuvring in preparation for the formal phase of negotiations."

However the most important pre-condition remains "mutual and unambiguous commitments on all sides to democratic change."

Describing the ANC position, University of Natal researcher Sbu Ndebele reminded the audience that the ANC had been founded on a commitment to talk. As early as 1962 at the Lobatsi summit a position on negotiations was prepared and this position has been regularly refined until the present position was accepted

recently by the Organisation for African Unity in Harare.

"The ANC wants a constituent assembly. The movement wants people to choose democratically their leaders. All parties must be given enough opportunity to expound their positions," he said.

He referred to the armed struggle as a strategy and not a principle quoting the ANC leadership as saying: "The need for us to take up arms will never transform us into prisoners of the ideal of violence, slaves to the goddess of war".

He quoted the State President, Mr F W de Klerk, who said that "it is proper to draw a distinction between intensive dialogue, consultation and real negotiation. In the final analysis negotiations means that those who try to reach agreement must have the authority to enter into agreement". Mr Ndebele continued: "Here at least is something we agree on."

A final paper by Gary van Staden of the South African Institute for International Affairs dealt with the present positions on negotiations of other parties in South Africa. These included both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary groups to the left and right of the political spectrum. Amongst these he gave attention to the PAC, to Inkatha and to the far-right groups including the AWB.

Summing up his survey he said: "Most of the parties still believe that outright victory is possible in the conflict and that there is consequently no need to negotiate." In addition, "too many substantive bargaining issues have been set as preconditions by the various parties and organisations involved and this will only serve to delay the process".

With the seminar taking place shortly before the tri-cameral elections, it was Steven Friedman who summed up the feeling of speakers and participants when he concluded his paper. "At the end of the day power realities will determine how things work out. I believe that we are entering a potentially exciting but a potentially dangerous period in our political history, one which could be decisive. Within this period the extent to which people are able to form an informed and realistic view of what negotiation can and cannot deliver and can disseminate, this may play a small but important role in deciding whether the climate for negotiations is created."

□ Paul Graham is the Regional Director of Idasa in Natal.