

ARTICLE FOR SUNDAY TIMES

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Perhaps it is best to begin by saying what IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa) is not. It is not a political party, organization or movement. It has no intention of competing with any such whose goal is to mobilize for support, protest or opposition. This will, and rightly so, be done by such organizations or parties which exist already or new ones that are bound to be formed. Although IDASA is in fundamental disagreement with government policy and in many cases wishes to assist in bringing about the exact opposite of what government intends, its function is not to confront the government, either at the top or lower levels of administration.

IDASA is committed to a non-racial democracy for South Africa.

By non-racialism it does not deny the existence of races or ethnic groups in South Africa, but believes that they should not be used in any formal constitutional or legal sense to determine the nature of the individual's political, social or economic participation. Therefore IDASA does not agree with, or support, any form of "contrived multi-racialism" where individuals are accommodated in constitutional or other state structures specifically because they are intended to represent a legally defined racial group. Similarly the concept of Democracy that IDASA supports is one where the structure and composition of government is determined by the non-racial participation of the adult individual in the political process. Political decisions and leadership must in the final analysis be accountable to people who, on the basis of free association, elect representatives to govern on their behalf. Therefore, IDASA does not agree with or support any form of "compulsory group-based democracy" or a "broadening of democracy" which tries to one-sidedly structure the individuals political participation by defining him or her into a pre-determined racial group. This is the kind of democratic alternative which IDASA wishes to promote. How ?

Because the main thrust of IDASA is educative it is an institute rather than a political party or organization. Obviously its terms of reference fall within the political context, but not in the narrow organizational sense. IDASA wishes to focus attention, discussion, energy and debate on what it means to become a non-racial democracy in South Africa. Is it possible and how does it come about? What does a non-racial democracy mean for health, law, education, land use, local government, housing, conservation, religion and yes, central government for South Africa? Is it possible to generate an idea of a post-Apartheid non-racial democratic South Africa that is so compelling that most South Africans would rather work to bring it about than fight against or cling to the present one? This is the challenge which IDASA hopes to meet. The way in which it wishes to do so is on four different levels of activity :-

(a) Region/Local Based Activity The intention is to open up regional offices as and when the need from the communities become apparent and funds become available. There are many organizations in a local area working for an alternative democratic South Africa in various spheres of activity who may not be aware of, or in touch with each other.

Similarly there are many individuals with special talents and resources who would like to become involved in working for a non-racial democracy, but literally do not know how to "plug in" or become useful. At the local level IDASA would wish to provide a forum where such resources and organizations, whether from the townships or from "white suburbs" can pool their talents and co-ordinate their activities. A local community may be experiencing a crisis in health, employment, housing, transport or a breakdown in local government. Rather than "wait for something to happen" from central government, IDASA would like to assist people to explore what they themselves can and are prepared to do.

It is particularly on the local level that white and black South Africans must explore concrete projects in which they can convince each other that life beyond Apartheid is not only possible, but preferable to the present.

- (b) Workshops, Seminars and Conferences Inside South Africa
With a non-racial democracy as its central theme, IDASA would like to organize workshops, seminars and conferences between academics, experts, administrators in order to propogate alternatives in the various spheres of our national life. For example, a national conference on Democracy in South Africa is planned for next year where educationists, unionists, ~~social~~, urban planners, conservationists, constitutional experts can meet, present papers and criticize each other's contribution. But IDASA will also sponsor and support more limited projects where, for example, Afrikaner student leaders would like to meet with trade union representatives; or Dutch Reformed Theological students would like to meet representatives of Civic Associations in townships; or medical students can be put in touch with conditions of rural health and poverty.
- (c) International Conferences on Democracy for South Africa
Many South Africans live in Africa, but are not really part of it. Other countries in our continent have gone through crises of post-colonial transition. Much research has been done and practical experience gained on what should and should not be done in areas such as productivity, agricultural reform, land use patterns, education and government. Only once one has been to African countries and seen and talked to people who are involved in problems which we obviously are going to have to face in a post-Apartheid South Africa, will we better be able to avoid the mistakes that have been made and to pursue successful strategies. IDASA is confident that it will be able to get South Africans who can benefit from such visits into some of these countries and to participate in workshops and seminars there.

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(d) Research and Publications

IDASA will not focus on original research projects, but will try to collate research that has already been done and relate it to interested organizations and individuals.

Also "publications" is used here in the widest possible sense to include film and video material as well. Again the central thrust will be on alternatives for a non-racial democracy in South Africa.

At the moment IDASA has sufficient funds to set up at least two regional offices and a head office (which will be based in Cape Town). Further funds are still needed and being sought. We are also in the process of setting up a Board of Trustees and looking for personnel to assist on a permanent basis. Individuals cannot join IDASA as one joins a political party or organization, but they can become patrons or supporters, be on its mailing list and make their talents available for IDASA activities. This will be organized on a regional basis where individual talents can best be deployed and the precise manner in which this will occur will be made known from region to region.

Some of what IDASA is going to do has been and is being done by others. This presents no problem. Where duplication exists, this can be rationalized and where overlapping occurs co-ordination can take place. But essentially IDASA is a grass-roots, bottom-up initiative and will only progress in response to clearly defined needs and requests of the communities and organizations who wish to promote its central values of a non-racial democratic South Africa. IDASA does not claim any pole position in bringing such a South Africa about, but certainly would like to be part of the race.

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