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SYMPOSIUM ON POLITICAL TOLERANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA: ROLE OF OPINIONMAKERS AND THE MEDIA

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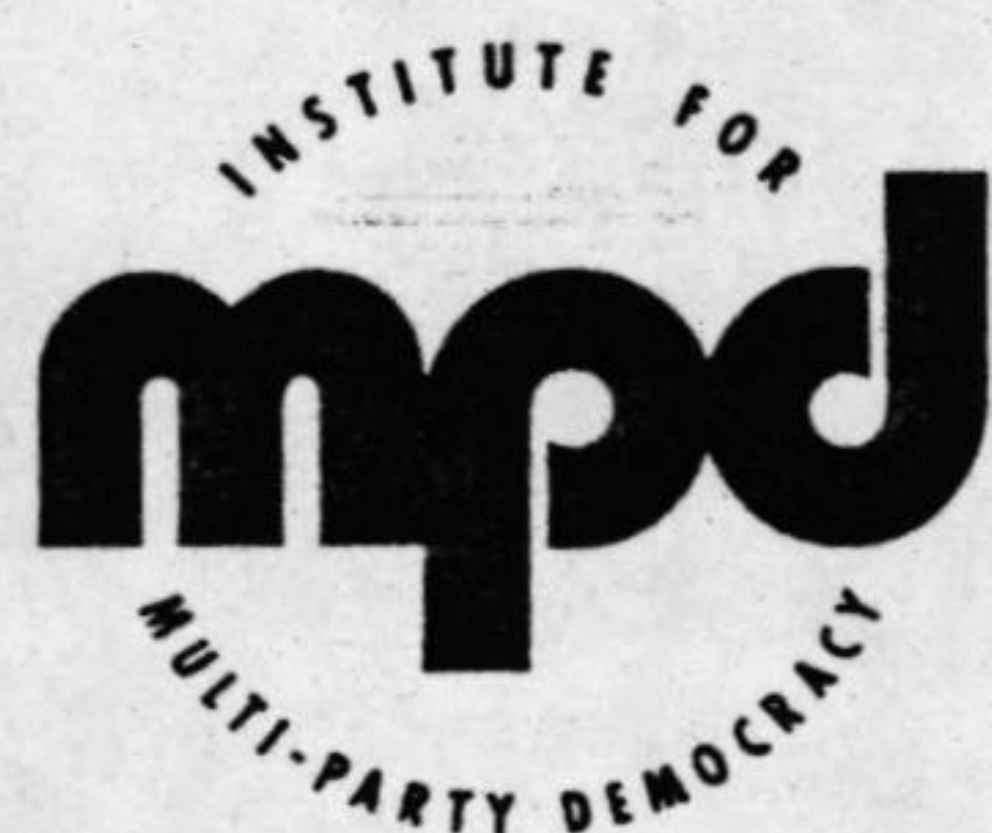
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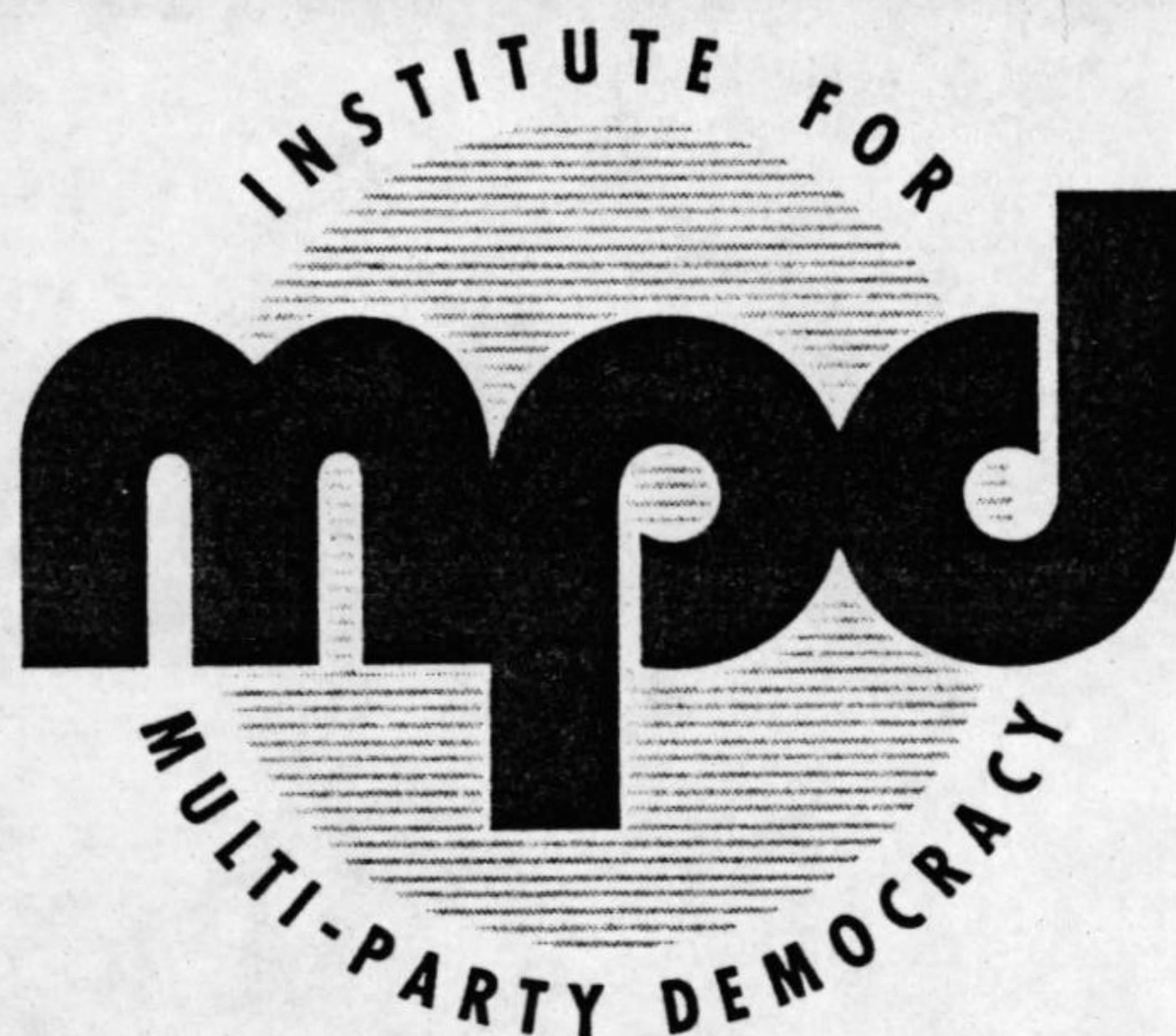
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**THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL TOLERANCE
IN SOUTH AFRICA
BACKGROUND PAPER FOR THE UN/IDASA/MPD
SYMPOSIUM ON
POLITICAL TOLERANCE : THE ROLE OF
OPINION MAKERS AND THE MEDIA**

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**The views contained herein are those of the
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INTRODUCTION

The concept "political tolerance" is slowly finding its way into the vocabulary of most of our political leaders. This development, while gratifying, might mislead us into wrongly assuming that the only people who are expected to practise tolerance in our country are political leaders. On the other hand, political leaders themselves might be misled into believing that all we expect of them is simply to "mention" political tolerance in their public statements, even if they do not practise it in their daily political pursuits.

SCOPE OF TOLERANCE

The concept of tolerance is very broad in scope and it finds expression in various spheres of life namely politics, culture, religion, race relations and so forth. The agents of socialisation in any society namely, the family, the church, the school and the peer group can also play an important role in either promoting or stifling a culture of tolerance. Naturally in a discussion such as this one it is not possible to cover the whole scope of tolerance and the organisers of the symposium have rightly confined the discussion to political tolerance.

FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST THE CREATION OF A CULTURE OF POLITICAL TOLERANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. The Policy of Apartheid

The policy of apartheid which has dominated South African political life for over four decades contributed more than any other factor in stifling any possibility of creating a culture of tolerance in our country. It is not the intention of this discussion paper to catalogue the evils of apartheid which are known throughout the world. Nevertheless, we cannot hope to succeed in the task of socio-political reconstruction if we choose to turn a blind eye to our socio-political past. In other words, it is through a thorough understanding of our past that we will be able to build a prosperous democratic future.

Apartheid created a socio-political system which taught our people that they could not live together and interact as citizens of one country. Apartheid ruthlessly crushed any opposition to it and thus discouraged ideological and political diversity. Structures of civil society were similarly crushed and free anti-apartheid political activity was virtually impossible after the banning of black political groups and the imprisonment or silencing of their leaders. Even blacks themselves were compartmentalised into ethnic entities and consigned to ethnic homelands away from Greater South Africa. Social separation was rigorously enforced and South African children were denied any opportunity of growing up or learning together in social clubs, schools and peer groups.

Given this divided apartheid past from which we are emerging, we must therefore understand that we are ill-prepared for the challenge of fostering political tolerance. We are starting from a position where we have nothing in common except our humanity. We do not share national symbols such as an anthem, a flag, political values or even public holidays. There is indeed no recorded history of South Africans living and governing together since the country was founded.

2. The Struggle Against Apartheid

In as much as apartheid significantly undermined the development of a culture of political tolerance in our society, the struggle against apartheid in its own way also undermined the development of this culture. Anti-apartheid forces found themselves confronted by a challenge to choose "appropriate" tactics and strategies to wage the struggle against apartheid. Naturally, there was no unanimous agreement on this point. If, for instance, you happened not to support all or some of the tactics and strategies defined by the liberation movements to wage the anti-apartheid struggle, you were immediately dismissed as an apologist for apartheid or a sell-out. It was a question of "those who are not with us are against us".

Ultimately, these tactical differences on how to wage the anti-apartheid struggle became so distorted that they were generally perceived as ideological differences or differences in principle. Only a few years ago, it was virtually impossible in this country to convene a conference or workshop where representatives of all our political organisations would share a common platform. Two hostile political camps existed in black politics - namely, "struggle politics" and "system politics" and these two camps avoided each other like a plague.

The government of the day also had its own version of intolerance during this period. Any supporter of all or some of the tactics of the liberation movements in the anti-apartheid struggle was immediately dismissed as a communist, a terrorist or a criminal who had to be ostracised, persecuted and prosecuted. Writings and/or public pronouncements of most leaders of liberation movements could not be quoted. Literature published by banned organisations could not be distributed in South Africa.

This environment of overwhelming political intolerance made it virtually impossible to nurture a culture of political tolerance.

3. Absence of a Curriculum for Education for Democracy in our Schools

If we accept that political tolerance is one of the core democratic values without which a democratic culture cannot thrive, it then becomes surprising that we are not doing anything to ensure that this culture is inculcated by our young ones through the schools.

Democracies which are far older than our "yet to be born" democracy take the trouble to educate their future citizens

on democracy. Evidence now exists that even though human beings do have an instinct for freedom, they are not born with an understanding of democracy as the safest way of guaranteeing their freedom and fostering equality and tolerance. Moreover, a people who do not understand the basic precepts of democracy are unlikely to keep it alive and vibrant for any length of time.

Perhaps the statement of purpose on education for democracy issued by the American Federation of Teachers in 1987 says all there is to say on the need for promoting tolerance through a formal education for democracy programme. For this reason, I will quote the statement in full; ".... first, that democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived. Second, that we cannot take its survival, its spread or its perfection in practice for granted. Third, we are convinced that democracy's survival depends upon our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans and a deep loyalty to the political institutions our founders put together to fulfil that vision".

The statement further acknowledges that "such (democratic) values are neither revealed truths or natural habits. There is no evidence that we are born with them. Devotion to human dignity and freedom, to equal rights, to social

and economic justice, to the rule of law, to civility and truth, to tolerance of diversity, to mutual assistance, to personal and civic responsibility, to self-restraint and self-respect - all these must be taught and learned and practised."

Obviously to teach democratic values such as tolerance we will need literature which will be a product of academic research. Our own Institute has a Political Leadership Programme which has been going on for three years and which targets young political leaders from various political groups. The programme has a module on political tolerance and our lecturers and trainers who are drawn mainly from South African universities, struggle to find relevant South African literature on the subject of political tolerance. To compound the problem, there is as yet no generally accepted methodology to use in training participants in political tolerance.

4. Events After February 1990

When political activity was unshackled after February 1990, the political scene was suddenly flooded by a variety of political groups which all began to compete not only for political space but also for political support. At the same time political activity across the colour line also

became possible as black members began to join predominantly white parties and vice versa. Here was a scenario resembling a group of players suddenly flooding a playing field and attempting to play soccer without any rules of the game having been spelt out in advance.

Many instances of political intolerance have resulted from this scenario - certain black political groups have disrupted township meetings convened by white political parties who are keen to recruit black members, some white right-wingers have assaulted and even murdered black marchers in conservative towns of South Africa, over-zealous policemen have forcefully disrupted peaceful marches and political violence has flared amongst supporters of opposing political parties.

These are some of the challenges we face as we struggle to cultivate a culture of political tolerance in our country.

THE WAY FORWARD

In nine months' time, South Africa will hold its first ever democratic election. We all expect that this election should be free and fair. However, given the level of political intolerance, which in turn breeds violence, hatred and mutual suspicion, there is a danger that we might not realise our

aspirations. We have nine months ahead of us during which polarisation and mutual suspicion must be replaced by mutual trust and a sense of common purpose and patriotism. The question is : how do we do this?

It is the purpose of this symposium to explore possible avenues of strengthening a culture of political tolerance with special reference to the role of opinion makers and the media. There is a growing recognition that both print and electronic media could make a seminal contribution in this regard, especially during the critical period between now and April 1994.

Fortunately for us, it would appear that we stand a reasonably good chance of winning the struggle for political tolerance. There is a lot of goodwill on our side. We have national peace keeping structures on the ground, we have volunteers manning these structures, we have political leaders who claim to subscribe to the terms of the Peace Accord which they signed, we have civil society structures that are beginning to thrive after the repression of apartheid, we have a host of non-governmental organisations which are working in the field of education for democracy, we have an independent press, we have church and business leaders who are sparing no effort in promoting peace and tolerance, and above all, we have a sympathetic and supportive international community in the persons of international peace monitors from the United Nations, the OAU and the Commonwealth.

It may well be that what we now need is a co-ordinated strategy which will harness all this goodwill and cause it to work towards a common goal which is the establishment of a non-racial democratic state on the foundation of tolerance and reconciliation.