

## **Violence in the Political Culture of Contemporary South Africa**

**L. Molamu and T. T. Fako**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to examine aspects of political violence in South Africa and its impact on the social fabric of black communities. We shall specifically focus on state violence and factional political organizational violence. The study is based mainly on newspaper reports on violence in South Africa. However, we have also drawn extensively on the published writings of other researchers in this general area of enquiry.

Violence is a heterogeneous phenomenon which manifests itself in a variety of actions (Bienen, 1968:103). In South Africa various forms of violence have come to the fore. Criminal violence has manifested itself by a dramatic increase in the number of car-hijackings, armed robberies and burglaries<sup>1</sup>. Domestic violence, rape and child abuse represent other ugly aspects of social violence. In addition, a spate of violent political activities has been a feature of the past decade in South Africa (McKendrick and Hoffman, 1991; Morris and Hindson, 1992). The broad objective of "political violence in South Africa is precisely about ownership, control and distribution of resources generally in the post-apartheid era" (Ajulu, 1992:69).

According to the *Sunday Times* (22nd August, 1993) thousands more South Africans have died violently since 1990 than were sacrificed by the United States in nearly 10 years of war in Vietnam. In less than three-and-a-half years in South Africa, 52,800 people have died violently, 8,967 of them the victims of "political unrest". This is nearly as many as died in the three years of the second Anglo-Boer War and twice the number of South African servicemen killed in the First and Second World Wars combined. Guns have contributed hugely to a great many "non-political" murders. According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), official initiated violence has risen much faster than non-official initiated violence in recent years. In 1992, there were as many as 269 policemen killed and 95 private police homes attacked<sup>2</sup>.

A significant part of the discourse on the current phase of political change in South Africa has taken on board the whole question of social and political violence. What is now generally viewed as a period of transition towards the so-called post-apartheid South Africa has been marked by widespread social turbulence (Etherington, 1992). One of the enduring features of this turbulent and complex political process has been the upsurge in patterns of violent behaviour. These developments must also be viewed against the background of the current economic recession. Increasing economic hardships have included extraordinarily high and sustained levels of unemployment amongst blacks. The spiralling cost of living and inflationary conditions have fuelled the widespread discontent - especially amongst black people. The deep-seated frustration and bitterness has led to an upsurge in violent behavioural patterns.

### **Political Culture and Apartheid**

The fundamental features of the racial order in South Africa were first drawn during the years of European colonial expansion (Adam, 1971; Simons and Simons, 1969). The class and race relations which evolved were distinguished by the subordination of the black majority. The political domination was characterized by the progressive

disenfranchisement of the black population. This political process was accompanied by the violent implementation of policies which included the infamous Land Act, influx control, pass laws and a whole host of discriminatory legislation.

The Nationalist Party, supported mainly by Afrikaners, has monopolized power since 1948 when the ideology of apartheid was introduced into South Africa's political culture<sup>3</sup>. The thrust of Afrikaner nationalism, upon which the Nationalist Party relied so heavily, was essentially to control the economy from a position of political power (Cassim, 1988:10). In other words, control of the economy was also meant to ensure that white supremacy was not undermined.

The structures and social relationships which emerged as a product of the evolution of institutionalized racism profoundly influenced the varying sets of attitudes, beliefs and values of both black and white people. Many social scientists attribute socialization as a learning and social process through which the ideological rationalization of the domination of black people has been achieved. For instance, Magubane (1979:223) observed that, "the white population's status as a "superior" race was cultivated systematically and became a kind of psychological structure and fetish". The majority of black people were subjected to a position of inferior human beings. In this context racism and racial prejudice became important elements of the political culture in South Africa.

The Afrikaners, specifically, as a group, are rooted in a shared historical experience which in turn informs their attitudes, beliefs and forms of behaviour (Van Jaarsveld, 1964). Thus, for instance, conduct which may be defined as prejudice is often acquired in a context in which white individuals learn that such behaviour is normal and acceptable. The inculcation of such racially prejudiced patterns of behaviour in young white children is generally perceived as appropriate. From the moment a white child is born, he or she is exposed to an environment in which the facts of race are

taken at their face value. It is in the context of the specificities of the South African political culture that the various dimensions of political violence should be addressed. A sensitivity to the historical and structural factors of racism should inform the analysis of this type of violence.

### **Political Violence and the State Machinery**

The apartheid state has been an instrument of white domination for many years and the violence which has characterized this instrument has been both systematic and multidimensional (Greenberg, 1987). It has resulted in deprivation and poverty experienced by many black individuals and communities. This section will focus on the coercive power of the state and the violence manifested through the activities of the security forces.

As in other countries, the state in South Africa has established a battery of criminal and security legislation for use against political opposition. These included, for instance, the Suppression of Communism Act which was first enacted in 1950 and empowered the arbitrary banning of individuals and organizations which opposed the government. In addition, there were the Internal Security Act, the Public Safety Act, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Unlawful Organizations Act and the Terrorism and Sabotage Acts. One of the net results of this development was the creation of a massive environment of fear and terror.

Recent empirical studies show that in the early years of the apartheid era, the ruling Nationalist Party had established hegemony over the armed and security forces (Wolpe, 1988:80). Increasingly, the latter were deployed to try and stem the tide of the popular resistance<sup>4</sup>. Thus violence by the state was directed at political activists with the express aim of inculcating fear in them and others who may, openly or covertly, have shared their political views. In this respect bannings, arbitrary arrests,

torture and murder of many activists were a disturbing feature of state-induced violence.

The objective of such state-sponsored violence was to attempt to influence the political behaviour of others in a way that would fit in with the apartheid scheme of things<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, for instance, Shaw and Leppan (1985:263) noted that, "The issue of potential military response to opposition is pervasive in South African politics and planning, an essential aspect of the defence of white power and privilege".

The violence of the various agents of the South African state has, in many instances, provoked the counter-violence of the opponents of the apartheid state. There is, however, another side to this issue. Davies and O'Meara (1990:82) point out that the generals in the South African Defence Force (SADF) believed that the "survival of South African apartheid depended primarily on the development of an adequate political response". In this regard the approach which was adopted by the state was the "total strategy" which involved a modification of key aspects of urban policy, a review of labour legislation, an incorporation of Coloureds and Indians into representative institutions at central government level and the control of the reorganized state security systems by the military (Swilling, 1987:412). There was a widespread belief amongst black people that a complex network of South African police and members of the SADF, concentrated mainly in the special forces and working in conjunction with former operatives, were actively destabilising black townships.

The South African Police (SAP) constitutes one of the primary agencies of the state whose functions include:

1. the maintenance of law and order,
2. the investigation of any crime or suspected crime,

3. the prevention of crime,
4. the preservation of internal security.

The history of the SAP has been punctuated by violent activities<sup>6</sup>. Since the middle 1970s South Africa has been wrecked by increasingly organized and radical black political resistance (Kane-Berman, 1979; Hirson, 1979 Cooper, *et al*, 1984; Swilling, 1988). This revival of organized mass opposition to white monopoly of power was accompanied by an increase in repression and arrests<sup>7</sup>. There has been for instance, substantial evidence to show that torture has been used quite extensively by the security police during interrogation<sup>8</sup>. The Security Police or Security Branch constitute part of the SAP and has been concerned primarily with the internal and external surveillance of political activists in attempts to stem the tide of political resistance. Some of the methods which were used by the Security Branch of the SAP were extremely violent. An Amnesty International (1978:56) Report noted, for instance, that, "All the evidence indicates that torture is extensively inflicted on political detainees, and that the government sanctions its use".

The extensive use of Municipal Police in many townships throughout the country bears additional testimony to the pervasive nature of political resistance<sup>9</sup>. Nine policemen have been charged with murder following a report by the Goldstone Commission of Inquiry into violence in Sebokeng in 1990<sup>10</sup>. Seven policemen have also been charged with the Trust Feed massacre near Pietermaritzburg in 1988 (The Star, September 11, 1991). On several occasions police allegedly witnessed hostel<sup>11</sup> inmates attack residents in various townships<sup>12</sup>. For instance, in Boipatong, near Vanderbijlpark, approximately 300 armed men from the KwaMadala hostel were escorted back to their dwellings by police after a violent conflict (The Weekly Mail, July 19-25, 1990).

Since the 1980s South Africa was wracked by increasingly organized and radical black

political resistance (Cooper *et al*, 1984; Swilling, 1988; Seekings, 1991). Baynham (1987:111) viewed this upsurge as "the severest security crisis faced by any South African administration since Union". The number of mass organisations which articulated the growing mobilisation and radicalisation of the black rural and urban communities posed this unprecedented threat to the apartheid state. The sustained challenge to the existing political order triggered off a hardline, military response. This revival of organised mass opposition to white monopoly of power was accompanied by an increase in state repression and the number of arrests. The response of the state to the threat to national security was to act violently against these threats.

The South African Defence Force (SADF) was the second organ of the state and its primary purpose was to protect national security. Its functions included the readiness to stem both external threats and internal insurgency. The activities of the SADF became closely connected with those of the SAP at the level of mass resistance increased and became more effective. The SADF increasingly intervened by force in a bid to influence political events from behind the scenes<sup>13</sup>. In this regard the top military officers, the overwhelming majority of whom were of Afrikaner descent, viewed the widespread popular discontent with growing unease. The mounting political threat, combined with the devastating negative effects of the economic crisis generated in part by economic sanctions, moved the SADF to seek to protect the interests of the Afrikaner volk with increasing violence.

Over twenty years ago Huntington (1968:194) perceptively observed that:

"The most important causes of military/intervention in politics are not military but political and reflect not the social and organizational characteristics of the military establishment but the political and institutional structures of the society. Military explanations do not explain military interventions".

The renewed campaign of state terror against anti-apartheid activists was carried out by shadowy agencies such as the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB), Five Reconnaissance Regiment and 32 Battalion. They constitute the Special Forces of the SADF (The Weekly Mail September 20-26, 1991). Some of the activities of those units were clandestine and often of an extremely violent nature<sup>14</sup>. An International Defence and Aid study showed that in Namibia, where for a long time the SADF was operational. "The growth of special units in the past few years has been accompanied by an increase in the level of atrocities carried out by South African forces against the local population" (International Defence and Aid Fund, 1982:22).

The violent assaults, disappearance and/or death of many political activists have been attributed to members of state organizations<sup>15</sup>. For instance, at GaMothapo Village near Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal, members of the SADF were reported to have been involved in an event in which teargas was fired into a one-roomed house. The occupants of the house were accused of hosting ANC meetings (The Sowetan, July 24, 1991).

Increasingly, many allegations have been made in which the SADF was accused of having trained and deployed killers. For instance, the spate of massacres in trains in the Pretoria - Witwatersrand - Vereeniging (PWV) area has been attributed to members of the SADF. The New Nation (July 19-25, 1991) stated that, "Many of the operatives working in these units were mainly Mozambicans, Angolans and Zairians who could not speak the local languages. Some of them were kidnapped from their countries and forced to join the SADF". In July 1991, the New Nation reported that "the violence that has been sweeping the country for the past two years, including the train massacres, were planned and carried out by the Special Forces of the SADF" (New Nation, July 19-25, 1991).

The multiplicity of violent activities were viewed by some as the deliberate and



calculated steps to derail the reform process. It was also felt that the upsurge in violence constituted a reflection of the crisis of hegemony. Conventional wisdom has it that some disillusioned right-wing elements within the armed and security forces were not entirely convinced about the political benefits of the Nationalist Party policies. The complicity of some members of these forces in a number of violent acts represents, in part, a rejection of what they viewed as Nationalist Party government accomodationist policies.

### **Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and Violence**

The role of the IFP in the present conjuncture must be analysed against the structural conditions which marked its re-emergence. Inkatha ye Nkululeko Yesizwe - Inkatha National Cultural Liberation Movement was first founded in 1922 (Mzala, 1988; Cope, 1990). The primary objectives of this movement were "to preserve the Zulu heritage and mobilize popular support for the king of the Zulus" (Haysom, 1986:90). It collapsed after a short period of existence. The present IFP was resurrected in 1975. Its membership has been overwhelmingly Zulu and its objectives increasingly presented as being national (Brewer, 1985). Zulu ethnicity has been used primarily as an instrument by the leadership of the IFP. And one of the net effects of the activities of this organisation has been to collapse the distinction between ethnic identity and political affiliation <sup>16</sup>.

As an organisation the IFP has been closely tied to the bantustan policy and the structures created under that policy (Mar and Hamilton, 1987; Sutcliffe and Welling, 1988). And, as Lemon (1987:380) noted: "Inkatha is compromised as a national political force by its role as the governing party of KwaZulu which forces it to manipulate a Zulu ethnic base". The organisation has thus been dependent largely on a localised constituency and nurtured on an aggressive ethnic symbolism (Marks, 1986:119)<sup>17</sup>.

KwaZulu as a political and administrative entity constituted an impoverished and fragmented self-governing homeland created by the South African state. It relied on the central South African government for some three-quarters of its revenue and most of its investment (Marks, 1986:117). Pomeroy (1986:215) noted that;

"Of all the divisions that the apartheid regime and its western powers have sought to devise between the multiracial people of South Africa, however, the most openly destructive is the movement called Inkatha, headed by the leader of the KwaZulu bantustan, Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi".

In a lucid and thoughtful analysis Pomeroy (1986:216) concluded that with Mangosuthu Buthelezi at the helm of the IFP, the organisation assumed a military character. In this regard Buthelezi has used traditional Zulu power structures to build the IFP. Clan chiefs and local notables often play leading roles in the organisation.

In the middle 1980s, Buthelezi called on members to establish citizen units for combat purposes (City Press, June 30, 1985). In many subsequent speeches Buthelezi has made reference to the warlike potential of his Zulu regiments (Marks, 1986:121). Wittingly or unwittingly, the media in South Africa has presented images of the "primeval and warlike nature of Zulu impis", ready to discipline politically wayward urban-dwellers. The military element is evident in the way IFP members who, as migrant workers resident in many hostels on the Witwatersrand, are organised. The Weekly Mail (August 30 - September 5, 1991) reported that hostel inmates are organised into regiments.

It is against this background that the increasingly violent and counter-revolutionary actions of the IFP should be viewed. The generally aggressive and violent behaviour of some members of the IFP is, in general, consistent with the socio-political tensions

in the townships which have increased tremendously especially during the period preceding the national election in April, 1994. The IFP like other political parties, had increased its activities in a bid to contest control of several areas. This led to bitter and violent conflict.

The mid-1980s saw the beginning of power struggles between, on the one hand, supporters of the United Democratic Front (UDF), an anti-apartheid alliance linked to the then proscribed African National Congress (ANC) and, on the other, the IFP (Sutcliffe and Wellings 1988; Gwala, 1989). Members of the IFP became involved in the violent disruption of meetings organised by the UDF and its affiliates. Retaliatory political violence against members of Inkatha was, for instance, focussed on the hostels in the urban areas around the Reef.

Collusion between the state security forces and Inkatha has been reported extensively in the South African Press<sup>18</sup>. In August 1991 President F.W. de Klerk admitted that SADF has supported the IFP by training an elite unit of 150 "Zulu fighters". Those members of the IFP were trained in 1986 in "counter-insurgency warfare" at a base called Hippo, on the banks of the Cuando River in the Caprivi Strip (The Weekly Mail, August 2-8, 1991). Other reports suggest that members of the IFP were trained by the SADF as security guards for leaders of the KwaZulu homeland (The Weekly Mail, August 9-15, 1991). The training included intensive instruction in the use of AK-47s, explosives, light machine guns and combat.

The series of violent attacks in many parts of the country must be seen against this background of state security forces/Inkatha collusion. For instance, in Boipatong near Vanderbijlpark, a vigilante force of 300 men who were inmates at the KwaMadala hostel, attacked township residents<sup>19</sup>. The main target of these attacks were members of the ANC (The Weekly Mail, July 19-25, 1990). Residents of the township claimed that the hostel was used as a springboard for attacks by members of Inkatha (Sunday

Star, June 9, 1991).

In KwaDela township, near Ermelo in the Eastern Transvaal, the presence of Inkatha vigilantes was reported (City Press, August 11, 1991) <sup>20</sup>. Wesselton township, also near Ermelo, was viewed as "a haven for vigilantes known as Amakati Amnyama or "Black Cats" (Sowetan August 14, 1991). The latter were also reported to be members of a gang of Inkatha-aligned vigilantes and were reported to have killed a number of people (City Press, August 25, 1991; September 17, 1991).

Several incidents in which Reef train commuters were violently attacked were reported between August 1990 and July 1991. In this period, more than 60 commuters died and hundreds injured as a result of attacks on train commuters on the Reef (The Star, July 26, 1991). In Sebokeng in January 1991, 39 people were killed when a gang armed with AK-47 rifles shot mourners at a night vigil of a member of the ANC (Sunday Star, June 6, 1991). By May 1993 all the suspects who were held in connection with the Sebokeng massacre had been released "due to lack of evidence" (The Star, May 5, 1993). In Alexandra, the Alexandra Civic Association (ACA) and other ANC-aligned organisations accused the SAP of assisting members of IFP to carry-out physical attacks against residents (Saturday Star, August 17, 1991).

In yet another case, affidavits in the possession of the Legal Resources Centre in Durban, allege that members of the SADF supplied arms and ammunition to Amasinyora, a gang which was involved in violent crimes in KwaMashu near Durban (Sunday Star, July 28, 1991). A bloody confrontation in the East Rand between Inkatha-supporting hostel-dwellers and residents in neighbouring townships has also been widely reported (The Star, May 4, 1993).

The principal evidence cited by a variety of newspapers has been eye-witness accounts and affidavits. The overall picture that emerges from these data are

suggestive of involvement of security forces in the political violence <sup>21</sup>. Naidoo has concluded that, "Violence has been a key part of the state's internal destabilisation strategy - through the direct role of the security forces and hit squads, as well as through vigilante groups throughout the country" (Naidoo, 1991:47). In sum, the role of the security forces, in many instances, appears to have been actively supportive of vigilante groups (Haysom, 1986:137).

According to a report of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) vigilantes were responsible for 2140 (83 percent) of all politically related deaths (The Star, September 5, 1991). Of these vigilante related deaths, 1982 were recorded in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging (PWV) area. The report suggested that Inkatha attacks on opponents outnumbered ANC attacks by 11 to one. In his study Haysom (1986:97) concluded that "some Inkatha supporters and leaders have been the driving force behind the vigilantes".

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to describe some of the fundamental characteristics of the phenomenon of social and political violence in contemporary South Africa. The empirical evidence seems to suggest who some of the main perpetrators of this kind of violence have been. Some of the most violent and sinister political activities have been attributed to elements in the military and police agencies, malcontents from various political parties, the elusive and brutal vigilante forces as well as common criminals. The scars left by years of violence continue to be felt and tend to exacerbate political tensions.

The current spate of violence constitutes one of the major mitigating factors against development in many communities in South Africa. The extent to which violence has affected social life is yet to be fully told and understood. The broader implications of

the apartheid policies of destabilization has been the persistence of retaliatory violence which have threatened all aspects of community peace and security. Many black communities - especially in the urban areas - have experienced a disturbing erosion of family and school values. Indeed, the capacity of children to attend schools and of families to use medical facilities was been widely affected by the violence.

In the townships and squatter camps in the PWV area, the slaughter of hundreds of people continued unabated. Dramatic worldwide coverage of the scale and extent of violence in South Africa gave the impression of a society chiding headlong into a state of anarchy. In this rather gloomy scenario social disintegration appeared imminent if the politicians did not fruitfully grasp the nettle of negotiations in a bid to turn South Africa into a unitary non-racial state. It is hoped that the halting and tortuous democratization process will prove to be responsive to the needs of all the people, and is bistrressed by political stability and economic development.

**NOTES**

- (1) Police national statistics indicate that in 1990 there were 15109 cases of murder, 125000 serious assaults, 61000 robberies and 20321 cases of rape (The Star, September 18, 1991) See also Ndabandaba (1987).
- (2) For further details on fatal attacks on people, criminal violence and violent deaths in South Africa, see Sunday Times, August 22, 1993.
- (3) Political culture may be defined as a set of attitudes, beliefs and values held by a population toward a specific political system of which that population forms a part. See also Lucian, Pye and Verba (1965); Almond and Powell (1966).
- (4) In the 1980s the National Security Management System (NSM) was formed by the state in a bid to combat "total Marxist onslaught from within and without" See Davies and O'Meara (1990).
- (5) For a discussion of the repressive structure and the corresponding dominance of the coercive apparatuses of the state, see Wolpe (1988).
- (6) For an account of policing in South Africa see, for instance Black Sash (1988) and Seegers (1991).
- (7) The repertoire of mass resistance included boycotts, mass meetings, political rallies, strikes, demonstrations and communal insurrection, see for instance, Moss (1980), Saul and Gelb (1981), Lodge (1983),
- (8) See for instance, Amnesty International (1984:127-130).
- (9) For an account of the role of Municipal police in the townships see, for instance, de Villiers and Roux (1989).
- (10) The Goldstone Commission of Inquiry into Violence in Sebokeng.
- (11) Hostels are barrack-like structures which accommodate migrant workers. They are single-cell blocks of dwellings with minimum facilities.
- (12) For references to sworn affidavits by eye-witnesses to some of the activities in which police collusion is alleged see, for instance, The Sunday Star, September 1, 1991.

- (13) For a discussion of the nature of some of the activities undertaken by the SADF in the townships see for instance, Human Rights Committee.
- (14) For a discussion of the role of assassins in defence of the apartheid system, see Pauw (1991).
- (15) For a discussion of similar activities by a state agency in Latin America see Pion-Berlin (1988) and Jakubs (1977).
- (16) For its own political purposes the government has portrayed the increase in violence between competing political interests as ethnic conflicts, see Mohamed (1992:9). For an enlightening discussion on the politicization of ethnic identity in Sierra Leone, see Kandeh (1992).
- (17) For a list of allegations of state complicity in attacks by members of the IFP on ANC supporting communities, see *The Weekly Mail*, August 2-9, 1991; *The Citizen*, August 3, 1991. For a discussion of aspects of Zulu cultures and violent behaviour see for instance Laitin (1987). See also Ottaway (1991) and Adam and Moodley for a brief discussion on the ethnic image of the IFP.
- (18) In the South African context, the term vigilante refers to violent gangs whose primary objective is to intimidate, injure or murder anti-apartheid activists (Haysom, 1986:2).
- (19) For a report on attacks on the home of residents of KwaDela see *Sunday Star*, August 14, 1991; *City Press* September 1, 1991).
- (20) The accused individuals in the case of Swanieville, Krugersdorp where 28 residents were murdered and 67 injured and maimed were acquitted. The Judge in the case ruled that it could not be proved beyond reasonable doubt that the police had aided the attackers.



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