

Explaining Endemic Violence in South Africa

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Introduction

It has been argued that the legacy of apartheid has bequeathed to South Africa a "culture of violence". This has been rooted in the notion that violence in South Africa has become normative rather than deviant and it has come to be regarded as an appropriate means of resolving social, political and even domestic conflict. This is quite easily visible across the entire political spectrum, where violence has been sanctioned as a means both of maintaining political power, as well as an accepted means of attaining change or resolving conflict.

The consequence has been that, despite the prospects of peace heralded by the process of national political negotiations, the past four years have been amongst the most brutal in this country's history.

Part of the explanation lies in the fact that the era of negotiations established the terrain for an intensified political contest. For the first time in this country's history, the key political interest groups had to establish their credentials in terms of their national representivity if they were to occupy a seat at the negotiation table with any degree of clout. The resultant power struggle, involving all the key political interest groups has, almost inevitably, played itself out through the style of violent confrontation so firmly established in the preceding decades.

The racially-based, hostile stereotypes generated by apartheid, coupled with the resultant political intolerance, have continued to articulate closely with the experiences of economic impoverishment and encroaching poverty for the majority of South Africans. In the absence of an effective social welfare net and in the context of dramatic levels of unemployment, conditions are created which offer a solid foundation for the social, political and criminal violence which pervades South Africa.

Yet, considering the extent to which bread and butter issues such as housing, jobs, rents, wages and education have become politicised in South Africa, it should come as no surprise that people have developed very high expectations of the process of political change. The constant stalling of negotiations has created a climate of

extreme impatience and frustration which has enhanced the prospect of violence. Once the collective inhibitions on resorting to violence as a means of resolving conflict have been overcome within this broad political culture, it is inevitable that the resultant violence will begin to spill over into the social and domestic arenas of society – the workplace, the home and in the communities. The result is that violence begins to intrude into all these dimensions of social life, often manifesting itself through conflict over the most basic resources within impoverished communities.

Individuals, feeling powerless or helpless in the face of dramatic social and economic upheaval, frequently symbolically reassert their power through violence in those dimensions of their lives in which they still feel they hold sway. This results in much aggression which, although social or political at root, is expressed through displaced violence within the family and in the home.

It is not possible in a paper as brief as this, to document, analyse, or even describe the violence in South Africa in all its complexity. What this brief outline should demonstrate is that the search for mono-causal explanation is fruitless. The convenient terms in which the violence has been labelled, by politicians and the commercial media, often does more to disguise complex causation than it does to explain it.

The violence has been variously labelled as "black on black" violence, ethnic conflict, conflict between hostel dwellers and squatters or township residents, conflict between ANC and IFP supporters, or between the police and township residents. It has been referred to as violence between the poor and the very poor, conflict generated by government or by a "third force", or it has been described simply as violent crime. None of these descriptions is simply wrong. Yet none, on its own, will properly explain this complex situation. It is only when South Africans accept that we are dealing with a host of overlapping causal factors that we can begin to address the problems constructively.

Even statistical information is an inadequate yardstick of the problem. The notorious lack of reliability and the politically contested nature of most of the statistics which are generated about political and criminal violence, make it difficult to rely on this sort of information. There has been a prolonged "battle of the statisticians" on this issue, relating not only to political violence, but to crime statistics as well. It is argued here that, at very best, the sort of "body count" statistics generated, if taken together, only give us a limited indication of what is actually going on. They are generally plagued by the problems of under-reporting or by perceptions of bias by those gathering the data. At worst, it could be argued that the picture which is painted in statistical terms has the ironic effect of numbing us to the human suffering which the statistics ostensibly convey – instead of guiding us in the development of the remedial and preventative steps which need to be taken.

Some Recent Trends in the Violence

Despite what has been written above, some trends over the past years remain discernable and are instructive. Amidst the competing claims over who is most responsible and over whose political interests are best served by the violence, certain trends remain clear:

- The transitional phase in South Africa's history, heralded by the move towards a negotiated settlement, has had the effect of discrediting the traditional apartheid-based mechanisms of authority regulating the society. In particular, this has meant that old forms of repressive control exercised through the deployment of the security forces have become untenable during this era. However, the **failure** – or at least the haphazard nature – **of the negotiation process, has meant that alternative forms of consensus-based social regulation have not been effectively forged.** The result is a "window period" in our history in which the society is under-regulated by any legitimate source of authority. This has generated a climate of lawlessness and has facilitated the resort to "legal self-help", thereby contributing to the spiral of revenge, retribution and increased violence.
- The contention that much of the violence can be explained away in terms of ethnic conflict requires some discussion here. It would indeed be somewhat surprising if the ethnic orientation of 40 years of apartheid did not, in some way, shape the identities of people living under the system. However, it is really where racial and ethnic identities correlate with conflicts over material resources or political allegiances that their potential as vehicles of violence becomes explicable. The short-hand description of township conflict as "black on black" violence, so often resorted to by the commercial media, therefore serves to disguise the underlying causes of violence rather than to elucidate them. It reinforces the unhelpful notions of "black barbarism" and feeds the fear which has for decades been the foundation of white politics under apartheid. The real danger, however, resides in strategies of political organisations such as the IFP, the National Party, far right political organisations and to some extent the Pan African Congress, which deliberately mobilise political support in ethnic or cultural terms. **Once mobilised** in violent situations, such **ethnic-based political identities**, like religious identities, become particularly volatile, defensive and extremely difficult to control or to demobilise.
- **Third force destabilisation.** Many researchers have argued that the close correlation of upsurges in the violence with key points in the negotiation process, indicates the clear involvement of a "third force" which as a political interest in destabilising and, if possible, derailing the negotiation process. It is argued and seems clear that both within the state security establishment, as well as within right-wing groupings and even within the government, there are those who have such an interest in undermining the process of change. However, there is a danger of an over-simplified conspiracy theory which does not adequately explain the nature of such destabilisation. For example, it is clear that it is not simply these white political activist groups who are "pulling the triggers" – that is, who are directly involved in perpetrating such acts of violence. It is argued here that a properly sophisticated understanding of "third force" involvement in the violence must entail a distinction between such politically motivated interests in destabilisation on one hand, and the "war-based", materially-rooted interests on the other. Those who seek to disrupt the process for political purposes, are clearly reliant on the assistance of surrogates who have developed a more materialist interest in ongoing violence. In poverty-stricken communities confronting economic recession and contracting job markets, violent conflict quickly generates its own sub-economy – based on the trade in arms, assassinations and protection. The insecure climate, coupled with the quest for defence and the resultant proliferation of private armies, generates ready-made foot-soldiers in the conflicts described. Candidates are readily found amongst disillusioned youth, criminal gangs and within the defensive and insecure hostel populations.
- **The dramatic growth in right-wing violence.** The essential context to violence perpetrated by ultra-right groupings is the proliferation of both mainstream and fringe groupings in the wake of the unbanning of the liberating movements in 1990. The

choice to remain outside of the negotiation process has also locked these political groups into a highly militarised and conflict-oriented political discourse which has been further serviced by the popular ethnic-based, racist explanations of township conflict. The overwhelming defeat of parliamentary right-wing groupings by the Nationalist government in the all-white referendum of March 17, 1992, probably served to consolidate this position. The Human Rights Committee has argued that: "[r]ight wing actions [are] a mixture of organised premeditated attacks, and of impulsive and irrational outbursts against innocent victims." Perhaps the most significant recent attacks have been the invasion of the multi-party talks at Kempton Park, the involvement of high-profiled right-wingers in the assassination of South African Communist Party leader, Chris Hani, and the spate of acts of sabotage which seem likely to continue into the election period.

- Despite competing claims that particular political interest groups have been responsible for "switching on the violence" in order to control the negotiating process, it is clear that **the violence has developed a momentum of its own**. This has rendered it much less possible for any of these interest groups to simply "switch the violence off". In the final analysis, it is clear that the levels of violence have become central to further stalling the national negotiation process.
- The independent dynamic which the violence has developed is reflected in the **increasingly blurred dividing line between political and criminal violence**. This contributes to explaining both the dramatic increases in criminal violence and the extent to which criminal violence has become politicised. There have been reports of a dramatic increase in the levels of violent crime over the past two years. It was reported by the Minister of Law and Order that in 1992 there were 20 135 murders in South Africa (up from 14 693 in the previous year), more than 24 700 rapes and 79 927 robberies. In total this means that there were 77 South Africans murdered, 68 raped and 775 assaulted, on average, every day during 1992. There were 219 robberies, 201 car thefts and 709 household burglaries each day. The South African murder rate of approximately 50 people per 100 000 in 1992, was 5,5 times higher than the US average for the same year.
- The above trend is facilitated by poverty, unemployment and consequent **conflict over scarce resources** which dominates township communities and which often (although not exclusively) lies at the root of the involvement of the most economically impoverished communities such as squatters or hostel dwellers. An illustrative example of this has been the increase in "taxi wars" in the PWV and the Western Cape. At origin a conflict over relatively lucrative transport routes in the deregulated transport sector, the taxi war in the Western Cape rapidly translated into a conflict of political affiliations. Ironically, the effect of the structures of the National Peace Accord has been to occasionally compound this problem through framing such conflicts (and the resolution of them) in terms of politically defined interest groups and parties. The result is that violence emanating from a range of ostensibly non-political sources **rapidly becomes politicised**.
- A related trend has been the **failure of the state's law enforcement agencies** to establish their good faith and thus to develop any trust-based relationship with township communities through meaningful reform of the SAP. This has resulted in an escalation of violence through the resort to informal justice with a consequential spiral of revenge and retribution. In the process, the dividing line between political and criminal violence has once again become increasingly blurred, resulting, whether by accident or by design, in the cumulative effect of further political destabilisation. This also lies at the root of the ongoing attacks on members of the security forces, who themselves have been regularly implicated in alleged partisan behaviour in the violence.

- Perhaps the most significant trend has been the **increasingly arbitrary and random nature of the violence** as victims have been less and less politically selected. One example of this has been the frequent random attacks on mourners at funerals and vigils, and massacres at beer halls in the PWV region. An even more striking example has been the violence on the trains. The recent upsurge in arbitrary attacks, the renewal of massacres on the trains and the increase in allegedly racially motivated attacks on white South Africans such as the Kenilworth Church and Heidelberg Tavern massacres, are further indicators of this trend. In particular, the massive upsurge of violence on the East Rand reflects the continuation of many of the processes outlined above, rather than an entirely new phenomenon. The immediate result of the arbitrary and random nature of violence of this sort is that it further entrenches widespread feelings of insecurity and fear, which in turn often lead to forms of violence which are rationalised as being defensive in nature.
- It has already been noted that much of the social tension, fear and insecurity manifests in the form of displaced aggression within the domestic or family arena. In this manner, we are seeing the effective **domestication of much of the conflict** in South Africa. Here, out of the view of the public eye, it is those structurally weaker members of our society – women, children and the elderly – who bear the brunt of a violent victimisation which the crime statistics cannot even begin to penetrate. Child abuse, marital rape, wife battery, etc. are all encountered more and more frequently. Such domestic violence is at its most brutal when it coincides with racial tensions such as in the ever-increasing attacks by white home-owners on their black domestics workers, on farm workers, or the regularly reported slaying of elderly white farmers.
- Another arena into which violence threatens to spread is the working environment. Despite the achievements of the system of collective bargaining in institutionalising conflict in the industrial context, the relative peace of the workplace cannot be taken for granted. The relationship between the community and the workplace is a reciprocal one and **there is the real danger that, unless pro-active steps are taken, community violence will pollute the relative peace of the workplace.** The manifestations are often less obvious than may be expected – ordinary workplace relations may become the vehicle for expressing frustration, low levels of concentration may result in increased industrial accidents, alcohol and substance abuse may become more prevalent, absenteeism may increase or productivity may drop considerably or, at worst, the workplace could become the scene of actual violence. In any event, the costs of high levels of violence in financial terms is astronomical. In one article, it was conservatively estimated that the costs of political unrest alone, prior even to the outbreak of the so-called Transvaal War in August 1990, amounted to as much as R3-billion. The cost in human terms is clearly much greater.

Some Social-Psychological Factors

It is probably true to say that apartheid society was premised on the marginalisation of whole communities who were denied a political voice and who were educationally and economically disempowered. In this manner, and through their very lifestyles, South Africans on all sides of the political spectrum have been substantially dehumanised. This has fundamental implications for the capacity of individuals to engage in acts of violence and brutality – and is exacerbated by the high levels of fear and insecurity in a society which is experiencing dramatic social transformation. The result is that much

of the violence that is perpetrated is in fact rationalised as being defensive in nature, by people who experience themselves as disempowered and under attack.

In explaining the complex trends in violence in South Africa today, insufficient attention has been given to these social-psychological aspects of the problem. This involves not only examining the effect of violence on its victims, but also demands that we give some attention to the psychological motivations of many of the perpetrators. A primary characteristic of perpetrators of violence is that they feel powerless. For them violence is a means of reasserting control. In reasserting his power, the perpetrator also reaffirms his manhood. Since violence mainly involves men in South Africa, whether it be in youth gangs or hostels, the affirmation of manhood through violence takes on even greater significance. Linked to the issue of powerlessness is the marginalisation that offenders experience as a result of unemployment, under-education and political voicelessness.

Grappling with Solutions

The multi-causal explanations of violence which have been outlined here demand that we seek multi-layered solutions to the violence. More than anything, this also demands that we are realists. It is therefore important to distinguish between the short, medium and long-term solutions which are proposed.

Short Term Solutions

There are a range of short-term solutions which must be sought immediately if we are to simply contain the damage caused by ongoing violence. This may involve the negotiated consensus-based control of law enforcement agencies, the bolstering of the structures under the National Peace Accord, the development of a business role in spreading the relative peace of the workplace and the development of comprehensive victim aid strategies.

Medium Term Solutions

In the medium term we need to look to issues of reconciliation and the de-escalation of political conflict through political settlement, a national election and the negotiation of a new constitutional dispensation, the establishment of consensus structures with credibility, the modification of expectations of change and the process of nation-building.

In the Long Term

In the long term we need to look to socio-economic reconstruction of South Africa in order to eliminate the conditions which underpin much of the violence and negligence in our society. This can only be rooted in the generation of economic growth coupled with effective education.

The following proposals should be viewed in terms of these staggered processes of social recovery and are aimed at tackling the problem in all its complexity. The range of solutions posed is by no means exhaustive, however.

- One very important measure which is frequently taken for granted, is the crucial **need to monitor and research the violence**, so that solutions proposed are realistic, appropriately complex and properly devised. The solutions sought and proposed must be tailored to specific circumstances. This may need to be sufficiently flexible to take into account regional differences. It may require simple containment strategies at one time (such as the fencing of hostels), but may become more proactive at other times, for example through active processes to generate dialogue between hostel dwellers and townships residents. Neither approach is simply right or wrong – yet it has its own time-based rationality if properly approached.
- One of the most vital criteria in undermining the political culture of violence in South Africa is **the need for a rapid political settlement and a unifying national election of a representative government**. This demands that the key political actors overcome the regular stalling of the negotiations process in order to deal with the insecurity and fear bred of a haphazard and uncertain process of social transition.
- It is of limited value to have a national political settlement if this is not given content at the grassroots level. For this purpose, the rebuilding of local level organisation is vital. This entails the encouragement of the reconstruction of sources of social authority, such as civic organisation, with a respected and locally rooted leadership which is able to assert discipline in times of social stress.
- A further critical measure must be **the establishment of a credible law enforcement agency or peace force, subject to multi-party control and direct civilian accountability**. This may also demand some form of socially controlled restitution through the active prosecution of dissident security force personnel as an important means of undermining the historical organisational culture of sanctioned covert activities. It also entails the revamping of training in order to facilitate discretionary policing and to reorientate law enforcement agencies towards socially appropriate skills development.
- One of the simplest solutions in theory is also one of the most difficult to implement in practice. This is the obvious need for tighter weapons control. This must include legislation illegalising the carrying of all weapons, except by permit, including so-called cultural weapons.
- **The development of comprehensive victim-aid programmes**. Although frequently regarded as a remedial measure, the provision of appropriate psychological, medical, legal and financial aid is a vital mechanism which can contribute to inhibiting the generational nature of the violence and its cyclical regeneration.
- Simply stated, economic reconstruction is essential to future peace and security in South Africa. We must rebuild the communities devastated by apartheid and the violence which it has generated. The first step is immediate emergency relief. Thereafter we must look to reconstruction tailored to dealing with the developmental necessities of the society. This will inevitably have to reflect some processes of equity through the strategic reallocation of resources within the society. If this is not done, the equity base of economic growth will be undermined, frustrations further exacerbated and the potential for violence enhanced rather than undermined. Much of this is dependent on successfully cultivating re-investment, economic growth, job creation and the planning of a comprehensive social welfare net.
- Ultimately, we need to build a democratic culture to substitute for the culture of violence which has become so prevalent. This is about building and educating for political tolerance, best demonstrated by the political leadership itself. In this regard there is a vital role for the business community – both employers and employee representatives. The culture of collective bargaining and the relative peace of the working environment offers an important forum from which to begin to build this democratic culture. If we view the problem of violence as a human concern rather

than just a productivity problem, then we can not only inhibit the spread of violence into the workplace but we can potentially look for methods to spread the peace. The involvement of business representatives and trade union leaders in the peace structures at a local level is a crucial dimension of direct involvement at community level as well. There is also a range of in-house "care strategies" that can be developed by business leaders to deal more directly with the problems experienced by their employees.

Conclusion

There are at least two principal reasons why societies such as South Africa don't change. These have fundamental implications for issues of reconciliation in the social context of transition and a negotiated political settlement.

Firstly, the example set by civil law enforcement agencies including the routine use of daunting force in even the most innocuous situations, is sanctioned and official. The Commissions of Enquiry which today almost inevitably follow, whether it be at Boipatong or at Bisho, have taken on the form of a kind of ritual following "the slaughter" – an inadequate substitute for any real remedial or proactive measures. The "cowboy mentality" of those in authority sends a message just as clear and no less pervasive than the political assassins and the criminal killers.

In the current crisis of uncertainty in South Africa, a kind of certainty and self-sufficiency is to be found looking down the barrel of a gun. In a land of ever-growing crime, racial friction, economic recession, uncontrolled urbanisation and the consequence of shattered urban lives in undeveloped squalor, the resort to violent "self-defence" is hardly unusual or exceptional. In this context even lunatic ideology is captivating for the simple reason that it gives people something to believe. To re-inculcate a sense of human value, we need to empower the disempowered and aid the victims. National reconciliation is the only vehicle – and it will have to be achieved through a process of nation-building and participative democracy.

Victim aid coupled to an institutionalised system of restitution is vital to any programme of reconciliation in South Africa. The failure of such restitutive measures will undoubtedly result in widespread processes of revenge and retribution – already beginning to plague this society. Failure to institutionalise such a system of restitution will similarly result in the likely meting out of informal justice, with the consequence of increased violence. The simple fact is that justice must be done and must be seen to be done. The past must be engaged with and acknowledged, rather than merely ignored. In practical terms, this means that the trauma of victims of violence or of human rights abuses must be recognised and publicly acknowledged, and the perpetrators must be penalised in some public way for their past actions. The politically convenient solution of a general amnesty for political crimes may simply not be an adequate solution to the long-term problems posed by victimisation and marginalisation. Realistic reconciliation programmes of this sort are an essential precursor to the rebuilding of a new and different national identity.

