Understanding South African Political Violence

A New Problematic?

André du Toit

The **United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)** is an autonomous agency engaging in multidisciplinary research on the social dimensions of contemporary problems affecting development. Its work is guided by the conviction that, for effective development policies to be formulated, an understanding of the social and political context is crucial. The Institute attempts to provide governments, development agencies, grassroots organizations and scholars with a better understanding of how development policies and processes of economic, social and environmental change affect different social groups. Working through an extensive network of national research centres, UNRISD aims to promote original research and strengthen research capacity in developing countries.

Current research themes include: Crisis, Adjustment and Social Change; Socio-Economic and Political Consequences of the International Trade in Illicit Drugs; Environment, Sustainable Development and Social Change; Integrating Gender into Development Policy; Participation and Changes in Property Relations in Communist and Post-Communist Societies; and Political Violence and Social Movements. UNRISD research projects focused on the 1995 World Summit for Social Development included Rethinking Social Development in the 1990s; Economic Restructuring and Social Policy; Ethnic Diversity and Public Policies; Social Integration at the Grassroots: The Urban Dimension; and The Challenge of Rebuilding War-torn Societies.

A list of UNRISD's free and priced publications
may be obtained by contacting the Reference Centre:

UNRISD • Palais des Nations • 1211 Geneva 10 • Switzerland
Phone +41 (0)22 9173020 • Fax +41 (0)22 9170650
info@unrisd.org • www.unrisd.org

Contents

Preface

Political violence has deep historical roots in South Africa. But if violence has figured prominently, it usually has not proved too difficult to make sense of it: the violence of conquest, the violence of frontier wars, the violence of apartheid and of the struggle against apartheid, the criminal violence of gangs and the ritualized violence of faction fights. Understanding such types of violence has consisted in relating the pathologies and instrumentalities of violence in appropriate ways to these primary social processes and political phenomena. The extent and intensity of current political violence is, however, more difficult to comprehend. This essay, by André du Toit, is in part an attempt to provide an interpretation of the "new political violence".

At one level, the current process of transition has resulted in a shift from the politics of violence to the politics of negotiation. At another level, however, the process has been marked by increasing political violence in the black townships. The incidence of interracial violence has been more limited. The current patterns of violence need to be understood in part in the context of local struggles that are independent of the "master narrative" of violence. They are also not unrelated to the processes of modernization generated by apartheid and to the rapidly diminishing expectations from the negotiations currently underway.

The paper places political violence in the context of attempts and steps toward modernization that date back to the seventeenth century. The earlier forms of violence involved warfare between isolated communities, the expansion of the frontier, the formation of the modern state and the suppression of resistance to colonial rule by the Boers and the Zulus. The key feature of African resistance to oppression in the twentieth century was, however, its non-violent character. The resistance was based on demands for full incorporation in the modern state with civil and political rights of citizenship. Even the enforced recourse to violence after the imposition of apartheid did not represent a rejection of the values and ideals of the modern political state and society.

This study has been prepared within the framework of the UNRISD research programme on political violence and social movements, directed by David Apter. The author, André du Toit, is Professor of Political Studies at the University of Cape Town. His publications include **Afrikaner Political Thought, 1780-1850** and **Political Violence and the Struggle in South Africa** (with Chabani Manganyi). He is publisher and joint editor of the journal **Die Suid-Afrikaan** and vice-chairman of the Board of Trustees of IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa).

Dharam Ghai, Director
April 1993

Introduction

Political violence has in recent years become a dominant and pervasive feature of South African politics and society. In various ways this has been a complex and paradoxical development: the violence has been central to the national scene, with open and dramatic conflicts leaving large numbers killed and maimed (e.g. in populist insurrections against the apartheid state, or conflicts between supporters of the African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha), but it has also proliferated in marginal contexts, largely unnoticed by anyone except those directly concerned (e.g. in local feuds or "faction fights"); surprisingly, the violence has been strikingly absent in some contexts where it was most feared and predicted (e.g. by blacks against whites), while it has erupted elsewhere in unexpected contexts and forms (e.g. the revival and use of traditional "cultural weapons"); often the very agents of this new violence have been unclear and its purposes hotly contested (cf. the allegations about the presence of a "third force"). **Understanding** South African political violence has become both an urgent challenge and a special problem.

This paper will make a number of different moves aimed at opening up the problem of understanding political violence in South Africa in contemporary, historical and discursive perspectives. First we will need to make some preliminary conceptual clarifications as to the specific sense of violence at stake, as well as to just what is involved in the problem of "understanding" this violence. Next we will briefly survey the most recent period so as to give some substantiation to the suggestion that in an important sense we are currently confronted with a new and more elusive problem in understanding South African political violence, as well as to gain some idea of how and when this new problematic has come about. The upshot of these introductory sections will be that the task of understanding current and past political violence is an eminently **historical** project, and the major part of the paper will be concerned with an attempt to provide an analytical framework for this purpose. It will be argued that an understanding of political violence in South Africa needs to be located with respect to four different historical contexts: i) the pre-modern context of frontier conflict; ii) the modernizing period of centralized state-formation; iii) the post-1948 period of apartheid and resistance to apartheid; and iv) the current transitional period on the verge of a post-apartheid South Africa. With reference to this periodization of the history of political violence in South Africa, we will trace the emergence of a "master-narrative" structuring conventional understandings of political violence in relation to the general project of **modernization**. It will be argued that it is in so far as the current proliferation and escalation of political violence confounds the expectations embedded in the earlier "master-narrative" that we are confronted with a new and urgent problem in **understanding** political violence in South Africa. Critical reflection and analysis on this turn of events should help to clear the way for a better understanding of both present and past political violence in South Africa.

Some conceptual preliminaries

The proposition that understanding South African violence has become a special problem needs to be focused more precisely. We need i) to distinguish the specific sense of "violence" which is at stake, and ii) to clarify just what is involved in the problem of "understanding" this violence.

Firstly, then, the relevant sense of political violence that needs to be understood. Violence, of course, can take many forms. In the most literal sense violence involves the causing of physical injury or harm to others. Typically, though, violence extends to more

metaphorical senses involving violations of rights and personal integrity as well as expressions of outrage or liberation from bondage (Degenaar, 1990; Garver, 1970). Much violence is not overtly or directly political; we distinguish personal and family violence as well as criminal violence. **Political** violence is typically differentiated from other forms of violence by claims to a special moral or public legitimation for the injury and harm done to others, as well as by the representative character of the agents and targets of these acts of violence (du Toit and Manganyi, 1990). Some kinds of political violence also have a notable symbolic and discursive character: these deeds of violence acquire and generate special public significance resonating far beyond the immediate harm or injury done (Apter and Sawa, 1984).

These features of political violence will no doubt be of particular relevance to any understanding of violence. But what is involved in "understanding" violence? This is not simply self-evident. Indeed, violence as such is often contrasted to rationality and meaningful communication; mere violence is easily termed "senseless". This would seem to indicate that violence as such cannot be understood. Yet there are familiar ways in which violence may be morally justified, e.g. in self-defence, or in which it can have instrumental rationality. In these ways, at least, violence does not pose particular difficulties to our understanding.

Political violence, too, is commonly contrasted to the politics of negotiation and democracy. Still, violent resistance against tyranny or in a liberation struggle is commonly recognized as justifiable. And in other circumstances, too, the instrumental uses of political violence are well known and widely practised. These are ways in which we understand the uses of political violence only too easily and well.

It is when political violence escalates and proliferates in ways which seem to confound the conventional criteria for moral legitimation and do not readily make sense in terms of instrumental rationality either, that we are confronted with a more radical problem of understanding such political violence. It is in this radical sense that understanding political violence in South Africa now poses a special challenge and problem. This paper aims to contextualize that problem and make some preliminary moves towards exploring it.

In the rest of this introductory section we will first sketch just how the new problem itself has come about in the current situation. The main part of the paper will consist of a broad overview of the pre-history of the present so as to clarify the nature and context of this new problem of understanding South African political violence.

The new context of South African violence
Political violence is not, of course, by any means a novel phenomenon in South African society and history; indeed, South Africa has a long and especially violent history. But if violence has figured prominently, it usually has not proved too difficult to make some sense of it: the violence of conquest, the violence of frontier wars, the violence of apartheid, the violence of the struggle against apartheid, not to forget the criminal violence of gangs or the ritualized violence of faction fights, etc. All these forms of violence could without too much difficulty be located and justified or criticized from familiar moral, social and humanitarian perspectives. Until recently there seemed little or no apparent difficulty in understanding (at least in principle, though not, of course, always in detail) **what** the functions and purposes of such political violence were, or **how** they derived from and were related to other social processes and political forces. Significantly, if violence was a familiar phenomenon in many different contexts, this was rarely seen as a "problem" in its own right. Thus, the violence of apartheid was generally understood as part of the pathology of apartheid; the problem, at root, was not so much

the violence engendered by it, but apartheid itself. Similarly, the turn to political violence in the struggle against apartheid was justified and criticized from moral, political and strategic points of view, but precisely for those reasons it was also conceived as embedded in, and subservient to, these larger concerns. In short, until quite recently the problem was not so much the phenomenon of political violence itself, but (violent) conquest, the (violence of) frontier wars, the (violence of) apartheid and of the struggle against apartheid, etc. As such, there was no categorical difficulty in understanding the problem of violence; in large part such understanding consisted in relating the pathologies and instrumentalities of violence in appropriate ways to these primary social processes and political phenomena. Violence was not "the" problem per se.

Of late, though, we have been confronted with the phenomenon of political violence in a different sense, as a major "problem" in its own right, a disturbing phenomenon that can not readily be understood in relation to familiar criteria of legitimacy and rationality. **Understanding** this new phenomenon of political violence is problematic in ways which were not the case concerning political violence in the past. This development is not unconnected with the dramatic process of political transition currently under way in South Africa, and has to be located and explored in that context.

With the 1990s South African history has evidently reached a critical juncture, a basic political transition from minority rule and apartheid to a non-racial and more democratic "new South Africa" (du Toit and Slabbert, 1991, with reference to O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). The transitional process has, in a number of ways, departed from earlier trends and patterns of conflict, and has developed some paradoxical features of its own especially in relation to the question of political violence. In particular, the transition has involved both a significant turn from political violence and a marked escalation of political violence. This paradoxical turn of events needs to be briefly unpacked.

At one level, the transition has meant a turn from the politics of violence to the politics of negotiation. Instead of a continuation of the violent power struggle to wrest control of the state from an entrenched, privileged and powerful minority by means of popular insurrection, armed struggle and international sanctions, the transitional process has taken the essentially non-violent form of a sustained attempt to reach a negotiated settlement and to introduce a new constitutional order. At another level, however, the transition has been marked by an increase and proliferation of political violence. The new politics of negotiation has itself been threatened by sustained and increasing political violence. Significantly this has not come only, or even primarily, from the reactionary "white right-wing" or at the racial interface of the privileged minority of whites and the majority of poor and previously rightless blacks. Rather it has emerged in the form of apparently endemic political violence in the black townships.

The very nature and purpose of this proliferation of political violence is intensely controversial: it is hotly disputed on all sides whether this proliferation of political violence should be understood as "ethnic" conflicts with deep cultural and historical roots, or as a power and ideological struggle between contending political organizations, or as the sinister work of a "third force" behind the scenes, or as a consequence of poverty, social disruption and the general lack of political authority, or as some combination of all of these. This paper will not attempt to settle these controversies. For our purposes it is the paradoxical nature of the transitional process, as involving both a turn from violent polarized conflict between the major political protagonists to the politics of non-violent constitutional negotiation as well as, at other levels, a proliferation and escalation of political violence which need to be introduced, if only briefly, and related to each other. For it is in this double relation that the problem of understanding the current political violence may best be located.

First, then, the dramatic turn to the politics of non-violent constitutional negotiation. On 2 February 1990, a date which has become a symbolic landmark in recent South African history, President F.W. de Klerk announced in his opening speech to Parliament such major measures of liberalization as the unbanning of long proscribed resistance organizations including the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP), the release of political prisoners including Nelson Mandela, the return of the exiles, recognition of the rights to public protest and demonstrations, etc. (du Toit, 1991). These measures were specifically introduced to enable a process of political negotiation, involving the ANC and other previously banned organizations as well as "terrorist" leaders such as Mandela and Slovo. It was generally understood as opening the way for the negotiated introduction of a new and democratic constitutional order.

Since 1990 this process has made substantial strides: the initial pre-negotiation contacts or "talks about talks" between the Government and the ANC leadership resulted in the Groote Schuur and Pretoria Minutes during 1990, and paved the way for the formation by the end of 1991 of CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) as a forum for negotiation involving a range of "representative" political groupings. This progress has not been altogether smooth or uninterrupted. In mid-1992 CODESA was temporarily suspended due to a failure to resolve some crucial constitutional issues. But by the beginning of 1993 serious negotiations regarding the introduction of a shared transitional authority were again under way, and the first ever popular national elections were expected to take place within a year. These developments are all the more remarkable if viewed against the background of the increasingly violent build-up of South African political history over the preceding decades.

The accession to power in 1948 of the National Party (NP) and the subsequent imposition of the policy and ideology of **apartheid**, in the place of earlier more pragmatic and paternalistic versions of segregation and white supremacy, led to successive decades of increasingly violent and racially polarized conflict (Horrell, 1971). Following the massacre of blacks protesting the pass laws at Sharpeville in 1960 and the subsequent banning of mainstream African political organizations such as the ANC and PAC (Pan-Africanist Congress), the NP government increasingly had to rely on coercive measures to maintain the apartheid order. The security forces were expanded and given extensive and discretionary powers by statute. A renewed round of political activity and protest initiated by the Black Consciousness (BC) movement in the early 1970s resulted in the student revolts in Soweto in 1976. This was met with savage repression by the state, culminating in the death of Steve Biko and the banning of a range of BC organizations by the end of 1977. The early 1980s saw another cycle of populist resistance leading to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and issuing in the country-wide popular insurrections of 1984-1987 (Cobbett and Cohen, 1988). The NP-controlled state saw this