

While at certain levels a climate of *glasnost* and tolerance has taken root within the liberation movement, at other levels the opposite is happening. JENNY CARGILL reports on the alarming degree of political intolerance - cutting across the entire political spectrum - which seems to have gripped many townships



Reggie September, Christmas Tinto, Walter Sisulu and Jack Simons at the ANC/PAC protest march in Cape Town

Creating a culture of debate

As the ANC's campaign for an elected constituent assembly firms up, worries about the demand persist.

A question that is increasingly intruding into the debate relates to the practicality of an election when political intolerance rules in so many townships and settlements - and appears likely to do so for some time.

The 1989 Harare Declaration links the demand for an elected constituent assembly with the creation of a free political climate. Then, FW de Klerk's government was held responsible for clearing the way. Legislation like the Internal Security Act had to be repealed and repressive security activity brought under control.

Today, these demands still stand - and with justification - but the responsible parties has undoubtedly broadened as black communities experience an intolerance and violence that was not anticipated in the Harare Declaration.

No culture of debate

In interviews and discussions, ANC organisers and activists working at branch and community level now invariably voice their concern about the lack of what they call a 'culture of debate'. No longer can they readily apportion blame to the 'other side'. 'The intolerance we are now seeing is cutting right across the political spectrum,' argues one.

There are a number of turns to intolerance, which add to the complexity of the

problem:

• Communities find it difficult to accept the *right of the existence of other political parties*. Not unexpectedly, says one ANC organiser, the Inkatha Freedom Party is not accepted in the Transvaal as a political organisation given the legacy of violence. But he also doubted whether strongly ANC-supporting townships would allow the PAC or Azapo to campaign on their own platforms.

Of course, this form of intolerance is both a black and a white affair. Despite the February 2 unbannings, the De Klerk government has failed to convince black communities that it has turned its back on its previous intolerance. Signs of state meddling in the relationship between the ANC and the SACP persist.

• Intolerance is being used as an effective weapon for *building power bases* and weakening others. Inkatha has been found particularly blameworthy here, as bloodied assegais and axes established its presence in the Reef townships.

The flip side of this coin was the weakening of the ANC. Its credibility undoubtedly suffered as it failed to meet community demands for defence. In addition, political affiliation started carry-

ing an extra-ordinarily high price. Kallong is a good example of just how damaging the violence was to the ANC's recruitment drive. At the height of the East Rand violence last year membership figures stood at around 7 000. After the hostels emptied for Christmas and peace returned, the numbers almost doubled to more than 12 000.

• Another source of intolerance is 'the *third force*' or 'hidden hand', drawing support from the white rightwing and elements within the security forces.

* Intolerance also contains an assertive *criminal element*. For some time, 'Comtotsis' have been abusing the very communities they say they serve and brought into disrepute the people courts. Once regarded as an instrument of liberation, people's courts are, in some cases, being disbanded by the ANC.

But the criminal element in politics is increasingly taking on a Mafia-style character. Protection money is now being extracted from residents made particularly vulnerable during violent confrontations. In addition, there are strong suggestions that the March killings in Alexandra can be sourced to councillors angered at losing access to kickbacks and patronage.

• Another source of intolerance is community impatience and anger with activists who *disregard democratic processes*, say ANC organisers.

• *Tribalism and ethnicity* are entrenching themselves as a particularly worrying source of intolerance.

• The *squatter settlements* are becoming increasingly assertive politically. The social instability and limited political development of these communities is stamping its own particular mark of intolerance.

There are no easy answers. But there are a number of demands and actions occupying the political agenda which point to a seriousness at tackling the intolerance, and the too often violent consequences.

The government, of course, is still being targeted. For instance, the ANC wants an independent commission of inquiry which would 'investigate and recommend appropriate measures against those responsible for the violence'.

But political organisations are carrying some responsibility themselves. Examples of this are the January 29 peace pact between the ANC and Inkatha, joint action around common demands which have seen the ANC, PAC and Azapo share platforms, and the planned Patriotic Front which has been postponed to April or May.

Nevertheless, the intolerance and the

killings continue. While comprehensive statistics are lacking, there have probably been upwards of 250 deaths subsequent to this year's high-profile political bridge-building efforts.

Activists point to the problem of getting leadership accords accepted by the rank and file. Local agreements are being pursued and there are tentative signs of success. In Vosloorus, for example, talks have resulted in an Inkatha-supporting residents committee agreeing to the ANC-aligned civic leading negotiations with the Transvaal Provincial Authority. Implicit in these local level talks is some acceptance of the notion that political legitimacy is not the exclusive property of one party.

But efforts so far at freeing the political climate have not allayed activists' concerns that the causes and consequences are still not being adequately addressed.

The legacy of ungovernability

These concerns have triggered some soul-searching about past liberation tactics. Said a long-standing SACP member: 'When we captured townships, we didn't only capture territory. We also unwittingly established the political hegemony of the ANC and aligned organisations.'

He also argues that the ANC is suffering the legacy of its policy of ungovernability adopted at the start of the 1984 township uprisings. It was highly popular with the youth, in particular, but there was far less success in implementing the rider to that concept - namely, replacing government structures with what the ANC called 'organs of people's power'.

None of this, of course, acquits the state of blame. Argues the SACP's Cheryl Carolus: 'You must remember that we have had a state which legalised the suppression of dissenting voices. The lesson to people has been that scores are settled in a violent way.'

But the ANC is likely to pay the highest price for this intolerance. Communities expect it to be the most morally correct. Therefore, invariably it falls harder than any other party when it fails.

Some ANC organisers are worried that the intolerance will, as one put it, 'drive people to become apolitical'. There are already signs of this as recruitment figures still fall far short of expectations.

'We have to think about the kind of scars that are being left. I don't think we are addressing that fully,' says another.

'And we have to constantly ask ourselves whether our political activity is reinforcing intolerance or undermining it.'

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