

# VIOLENCE : AN INTEGRAL PART OF S.A. CULTURE

Professor M.G. Whisson, Department of Anthropology at Rhodes University, analyses the role of physical conflict in the nation's political life.

**V**IOLENCE or, as Radcliffe-Brown put it in the gentler language of 1940, "physical force", is a concept and practice at the heart of politics.

Politics is about power, and power, De Crespigny reminds us, is the ability to compel others to conform to our will for them regardless of their own — which implies the possibility if not the necessity of violence.

Political activity is directed first at achieving authority in the political community, which means the general acceptance of a claim to a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force. That authority may be delegated by the state to its officers in the security services and even, under restrictions, to parents, teachers and others in authority over minors.

The use of violence to achieve goals — any goals — is thus by definition a political act, since it is an assertion by the actor that she (or, more probably he) either does not accept the authority of the state in its claim to a monopoly over the use of force or is acting as a delegate of the state within the terms of the delegated authority.

The controlled, if not legitimised, use of violence is an important aspect of the socialisation of most children in this country. Rugby football, the definitive sport of white South Africa, demands the use of physical force and the controlled use of violence for success.

Any moral argument used in the debate must be seen as an attempt by one party to deny authority or legitimacy to another as the accuser may well not be in a position to use the force necessary to compel compliance.

For example, if, by the exposure of the payment of State funds by the Nationalists to Inkatha, the capacity of elements in the Nationalist coalition to coerce people is reduced in the areas under coalition control, a moral argument achieves a shift in the balance of power. "Seizing the moral high ground" has strategic advantages which are as practi-

cal as they are moral, and moral arguments play an important role in shifting the commitments of waverers in the coalitions, even if coercion and short term interests determine their actions.

In the South African scene the principle players are a coalition centred on the National party and its associated organs of state power, and a coalition centred on the A.N.C.

Neither party recognises the right of the other to exercise a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, which means that while the former coalition has the forms of state authority (tax collectors, security forces, courts, legislature) it does not possess the substance of political legitimacy in the eyes of a substantial proportion of the population. Rent and school boycotts, "illegal" strikes and marches, arms caches and coercive violence ensuring conformity to "calls" for mass action are some examples of the denial by the A.N.C. coalition of legitimacy to the National party state.

The major coalitions are by no means stable, each has active elements close to the centre which are capable of independent violent action against the will and interests of the formal leadership. Each also has a potentially powerful radical competitor straddling the edge of its coalition well able to profit from any sign of weakness, collaboration or compromise with the opposing coalition.

In addition there are many people, with widely differing levels of organisation and sophistication, who are prepared to use force in defiance of the law to achieve essentially economic rather than political goals. They may be distinguished conceptually from the political players in that they seek their economic rewards directly rather than on the yonder side of a political struggle from which very few can expect to gain significant material benefits in the short term.

The current contest for power and authority has to be conducted at both the physical or violent coercive level and at the moral level, as victory in both is

necessary if a stable government is to be established.

Since the explicit use of coercive force undermines the claims, a considerable measure of deceit is necessary for either coalition to achieve dominance. The art of distancing oneself from the wild men is a subtle one however. Thus far it has been performed by both Mandela and De Klerk deploring all violence, suggesting that the other side started or provoked it, and signally failing to identify or discipline the culprits on their own side. Events in Natal provide graphic and gruesome examples of how the contest for political power and authority is being waged and how violence is used together with moral arguments in the contest.

"Faction fighting" has been a part of the Natal-Zululand scene for many decades — long before the birth of Inkatha or the rise of the U.D.F. -Cosatu alliance.

The violence is exacerbated by poverty and population growth, but the perpetuation of clan loyalties and residual land claims means that what in other, similarly deprived areas like the Cape Flats, Soweto or the peri-urban slums of Latin America erupt as gang fights for turf and racket control, in Zululand are articulated into the clan identity of everyone in the region.

At a more general level, it could probably be shown that over the past century or so the black residents of Natal have become divided between those who can claim ancient hereditary clan rights to their lands and territory, and those who have been dispossessed by colonial and gross apartheid demarcations.

Faction fights which stem from ancient quarrels, or from peri-urban overcrowding are readily appropriated by the political players and used, where possible, to their advantage. Local faction leaders, sensing access to weapons or overwhelming force, will claim support from the local Inkatha "war lord" or from the local "comrades"



according to their best judgement of their own interests, leaving their enemies little choice but to seek support or refuge from the other side.

The Pietermaritzburg "war" which erupted on March 27, last year, was the brutal culmination of this process of co-opting individual local squabbles into large scale political faction fights for turf control. As with the murderous exchanges which have occurred in Msinga for sixty years, each side has its explanation for who started it, and why it should have started on that particular day.

As Kentridge describes it (*Outlook*: May 1990), although Inkatha could only attract 8,000 people to its rally in Durban on March 25 (despite a generous donation to expenses from the Department of Foreign Affairs Anti-Sanctions fund), it could, presumably with the help from the same source, deliver "a force up to 12,000 men, many carrying guns and some even armed with sub-machine guns (which) attacked the same areas again and again". The Inkatha forces "were waging a massive, concerted and planned attack on non-Inkatha settlements in Vulindela and the Edenvale valley".

Remarkably, the "week of murder and pillage" by the 12,000 armed warriors left less than ninety dead — and the police estimate was considerably lower.

While this was clearly a very serious business, comparable to a bad day in an Indian general election campaign, the mortality rate does not suggest a well organised, heavily armed assault by 12,000 men for a week, let alone one which received aid from the professional security forces of the S.A.P. and S.A.D.F.

The numbers game is clearly one which demands interpretation. Reports which present very large numbers of warriors and casualties seize the headlines and from a distance may support important arguments about the wickedness of the organisers of the warriors and the people inflicting the casualties. In the contested areas, the impact may well be different as those who can allegedly organise and kill on this scale demand respect — they clearly have the power to coerce. Likewise, though people in distant places may be shocked at accounts of necklacing and the rough

treatment meted out to people who have ignored calls to consumer boycotts, the message is not lost on the township residents that the comrades are the law against which there is no appeal.

In general the A.N.C. coalition, being in opposition to the government (be it the National party one or the local Inkatha one) is able to criticise and promise without having to deliver. Inkatha, despite its subordinate position in the government structures, is vulnerable to criticism and is expected to deliver on promises. Its response has been to argue that most of Natal's recent troubles are due to unemployment brought about by the behaviour of its opponents through violence, industrial action and support for sanctions. The logic may be reasonable, but to the unemployed shanty dweller the promise of a job and a house after victory in the struggle is much more persuasive. The growth for the A.N.C. coalition has not occurred as it has done elsewhere, fairly evenly across the urban and peri-urban areas, with a succession of protests led by militant comrades, intimidated local councils and coercion backed by populist rhetoric, although the methods appear to have been much the same. Instead, the local authorities, rooted in Zulu culture in the KwaZulu region, have met fire with fire and the region has become a patchwork of fiefdoms, some controlled by groups of comrades claiming allegiance to the A.N.C. coalition and the struggle while others claim allegiance to Inkatha and Zulu cultural integrity. Boundaries are negotiated violently and accepted temporarily.

Elsewhere there has been less effective opposition to the A.N.C. coalition and in general communities have accepted the comrades instructions to boycott certain shops, stay away from work, attend gatherings or whatever else they are told to do.

The strategy of violence and intimidation has been successful to a degree in that the A.N.C. coalition now controls sufficient territory nation-wide and sufficient influence through the media to be able to present itself as a player to operate on equal terms with the National party government. The government has lost the moral battle which enabled it to control the country by the direct use of force by its security forces in the areas controlled by the A.N.C. coalition — the balance of terror has shifted in those areas and the people fear the comrades more than they fear the police. Its efforts



A mourner brandishes his shield as he carries the coffin of a victim of a bus massacre.



to work through other parts of its coalition, notably Inkatha, have appeared to be more of a holding operation than a viable long term strategy, but could be intended to keep the A.N.C. coalition off balance until people in the areas under A.N.C. coalition control are weary of boycott politics and the failure of the A.N.C. coalition to deliver anything of material benefit. The use of under-cover agents and proxies for this purpose is morally extremely risky as discovery is almost inevitable and damages the reputation and credibility of the National party coalition — leading to attrition to the right by those who want to fight openly and to the left by those who want to negotiate honestly.

The two coalitions now find themselves both mutually dependent and competing violently in order to strengthen their coercive power. The mutual dependence is based on their credibility to control an overwhelming proportion of physical force. If they should lose that credibility, their negotiating positions are fatally flawed and other power brokers will have to be accommodated.

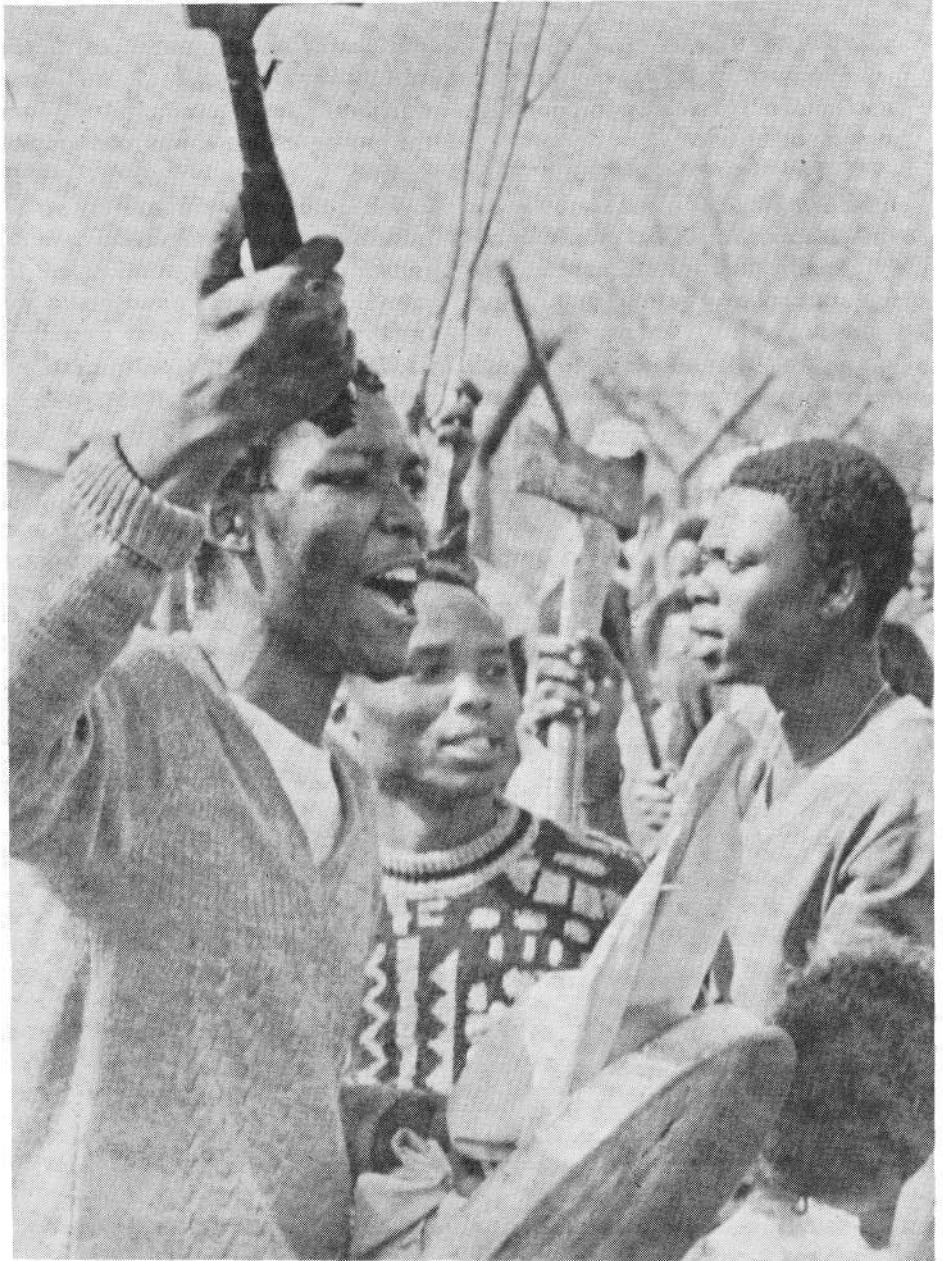
The only way that each can indicate its strength is through the display of force, winning a real contest here or there or demonstrating its coercive power in mass action.

Each must also be able to present a credible united front as a coalition and make it clear that it can control the radical elements in the areas that it effectively controls.

De Klerk is thus continually challenged to prove that he has the hard right under control, whether that element is in the security forces or in the Conservative party and its co-ideologues.

That challenge puts him in a very difficult situation. If he does have those elements under control, then he can (and should) sack or prosecute those responsible for violence stemming from the National party coalition side — which subverts his capacity to coerce the majority. If he does not have those elements under control, then he cannot claim a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, and a *de facto* coup has occurred which leaves him in no position to negotiate until the real leaders emerge.

The A.N.C. coalition is faced with a similar challenge, but enjoys more freedom of movement. As it does not claim to be the government over the areas which it, in fact, largely controls, it can deny responsibility for violence in them and even demand that the National party coalition eliminate the violence in



Youths armed with axes, spoiling for the fight.

them — by surrender rather than force. However, by denying responsibility for, or the ability to control violence directed against elements of the National party coalition (including but not exclusively government property and agents), the A.N.C. coalition is admitting that it does not command the authority or support necessary to make it one of the two equal parties to negotiation, and that others on its radical wing and beyond have real control of events.

Violence and the control of violence is thus the key both to understanding the political process and to its outcome.

The outcome does not turn on what you, or I, or we believe to be right or wrong, just or unjust, but on the manipulation of material resources (including guns) and moral arguments to achieve power over the opponent's areas of control; to consolidate authority over one's own coalition — especially one's own radical wing both in and out of the

coalition; and to bring the opposing coalition to the negotiating table weakened but intact.

Violence is an integral component of the South African culture as it is of most other cultures. The "gentle Tasadays" and the Arapesh of the world are almost invariably located beyond the reach of any but the most romantic anthropologists.

South Africans glory in their generals, their guerillas, their rugby players, even as they assert their dedication to the quest for peace. It is by unpacking that paradox or hypocrisy that we begin to understand the social process. ●

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