



JUNE 1985

Not a bad analysis of a messed-up State, 23 years ago. A back-takingly fair-minded, at any rate. It's telling that the first, gloomy, sentence could be perfectly accurately be said of South Africa right now, although the 2008 version of "disruption" is very much lower key than its 1985 predecessor. Police bullying is not a factor now, but the endless string of crime, accompanied by governmental cock-ups and "incapacity" has brought the longest queues ever to the consulates of the stable West. The last sentence is precisely as accurate as ever, needing not a syllable adjusted. This is still a great society stuck like a mushroom under a cowpat of political sterility

Autumn of discontent

*How do we reconcile the doom and gloom of South Africa's public life with the ever-improving relationships ordinary people see in their daily affairs?, asks **Denis Beckett**.*

We've known bad times before, but never quite the broad spread of disruption of the last few weeks. Periods of turmoil used to come at intervals; now they run together in a chain. Previously official responses concentrated on agitators; now the focus is on causes of grievance. Where only the rarest peaks of black disturbance penetrated the sheltered cocoon of white existence, now the subject is a source of discussion and foreboding all over.

Previously it was primarily the newspapers which conveyed knowledge of fire and flame to the public, with the airwaves giving uncertain assurances that all was under control. Now TV provides the focus in the regular ritual of killings, burnings and lootings, with variation supplied by bomb blasts, arms caches, detention deaths and stayaways. The bald outlines may do little to reflect the sense of ferment which underlies such apparently minor items as

AUTUMN OF DISCONTENT

that bus-drivers are refusing to enter certain areas, and convey but a tiny portion of the impact of disorder which comes from exposure to the distress of a township motorist whose car has been stoned or a housewife who dreads Fridays because the weekend has to be faced. But the newsreader's measured tones carry an insistence which has fallen away from the papers' unrest roundups, and even from *The Sowetan's* banner headlines which have now acquired a new routine ("Police Kill 3"), ("Cops Shoot 4") in place of the old one about Bucs and Birds.

We've seen a large-scale revival of what those who attend them call Martyrs' Funerals, with the ANC flag on open display. We've seen too the resurgence of the demonstration march. Anglican priests marched without incident through Johannesburg to present a protest to police. The city saw three processions by trade unionists, two ending in arrests. The *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* marched through Pretoria in support of the police. And a small group of silent "apolitical friends" protested against Bishop Tutu's appointment to the Johannesburg See. They looked like barroom buddies, tattoos and all, but carried posters which seemed to have been phrased by copywriters and painted by signwriters.

All these demonstrations were theoretically illegal. Isn't it time to draw a clear distinction between violent demonstrations and the other kind? As matters stand the contrast in treatment – tolerance of right-wingers and arrests or heavily armed police presence at even those of the left which patently have no prospect of turning to violence – adds a large and unnecessary plank to the litany of black resentment. In a healthy South Africa we'd be littered with demonstrations. The objective should not be to suppress expression of dissent but to channel it into peaceful avenues. In which respect existing law and practice, and the Ban-Them mentality prevalent among white conservatives, both disserve their present purposes and cultivate the likelihood of an ethos of reverse discrimination in a changed society.

The current turmoil has also brought an upsurge of rumour regarding the police. In circles ranging from Nationalist to radical there are questions as to the strength of loyalty within the force, and suggestions that factions among the

police are ripe recruits for right-wing mutiny. The biggest single fillip to these rumours has been the publication of a picture showing uniformed policemen hoisting ultra-rightist Eugene Terre Blanche to their shoulders in the course of the AWB's Pretoria march. However, the impression commonly created by this event is not justified. Police had warned Terre Blanche that the gathering was illegal and was to disperse. Terre Blanche was without loudhailer and invisible to most of the 2,000 crowd. The police lifted him for the purpose of addressing them. It is true enough that the same genial treatment is not likely to have been extended to a left-wing protest, but particularly considering that the specific purpose of the rally was to show support for the police it is hardly surprising that a little human flexibility appeared. It was not a matter of gratuitous hailing of a hero and cannot be taken as a barometer of police loyalty or even an indicator of the attitudes of the individual policemen involved.

The renewed deaths of detainees is also popularly interpreted by blacks as evidence of a police desire to embarrass the government's reform stance. But this seems far-fetched. Are the policemen concerned meant to have coldly calculated the consequences?

Terre Blanche refuses to estimate the level of his support within the police but tells *Frontline* he "will laugh at anyone who says we have no support there." He argues too that "it is logical that where people have undertaken to uphold a law and order determined by four decades of Nationalist policy they will distrust politicians who turn their back on that policy."

That seems a euphemistic way of putting the undeniably accurate proposition that some in the police force see themselves primarily as the crack troops in a war for the preservation of white supremacy. Even in the unthreatened white suburbs it is not unusual to come across policemen who see their central task as being to show the blacks who's boss. How much more so in trouble-torn townships, where the philosophy that "if we don't beat them, then they'll beat us", is inevitably maximised. In that context, it is to be expected that there are policemen who treat the official injunctions to be respectful and courteous to blacks as no more than a public relations formality. Nor can that context change, no matter how much persuasion or disciplinary action there may

AUTUMN OF DISCONTENT

be, as long as the assumption of the political process as a war of attrition between white power and black demands exists.

Questions were also asked regarding the antics of a possible pro-government, or at least pro-apartheid, Dirty Tricks Department. Notably, the rivalry between Azapo and the UDF took some extremely strange turns. The bad blood between the two is real enough, inspired by competition for leadership and conflict over who is to conduct such things as memorial rallies, Sharpeville day, Soweto day, Biko day, etc, and political funerals. Additionally, various freedom songs have come to be identified with one or the other faction and their singing is met with retaliation by the rival. To complicate it there is the growth of gangs of self-proclaimed supporters who are often unknown to the leaderships and use their nominal affiliation as little more than a badge of identity for local gang activities.

Nonetheless much of the recent aggression has been suspicious. One assaulted Azapo man was a minor office-bearer whose membership was all but unknown. One anti-Azapo pamphlet, which both Azapo and UDF leaders first heard of when broadcast by the SABC, purported to come from a UDF committee which does not, in fact, exist. When the homes of UDF men Aubrey Mokoena and Frank Chikane were bombed after their release from prison, both they themselves and Azapo's leaders unhesitatingly blamed "the system". Leaders on both sides say that far from aggravating the hostility, the effect has been to bring them closer.

There was also Vaal Reefs' dismissal of 14 000 miners (many of whom will be rehired, subject to their "training and employment records"). South Africa's biggest mass sacking, from the world's biggest mine, came across as a slap in the face to many of those blacks who have tended to look up to Anglo American as the most benign of the institutions of the establishment. Disillusion was expressed, and a feeling that when the chips were down Anglo too turned out to be just another instrument of oppression, rubbing black noses in white power while paying lip service to reform. The blow was compounded by the perception that the workers were sacked because they refused to do jobs legally restricted to whites, which they were being made to perform without either the pay or the training which should accompany them. Exploitation at its most

blatant, it seemed, with the company taking cynical advantage of apartheid legislation.

Here, too, the issue was not as simple as met the eye. On paper the Mines and Works Act restricts various jobs to whites, but this has been substantially modified by regulation, so that for instance the statutory requirement that only “scheduled persons” (mainly whites, although also including some other ethnic categories such as the quaint “St. Helena Creoles”) may charge explosives is now regulatorily defined as being fulfilled if a scheduled person is within 30 metres of the point where the charging is taking place. In practice most of the charging is done by a particular, recognised, category of black miner into whose job definition this task is formally written. Strictly, the illegality persists, since little attention is paid by either white miners or black to the 30-metre rule, but it is not a case of straightforward abuse.

Moreover, after a three-month build-up which included unheard-of incidents such as white miners being physically harried, and culminated with strikers locking themselves together with incommunicado officials into hostels, tension was acute. “People say there’s nothing worse than firing strikers”, says one of the executives involved. “I can think of at least two worse things: having a racial civil war break out on the mine, and having the riot police take the issue over.”

In other respects, too, the last few weeks have seemed almost designed to maximise racial fears, and confusion among blacks. A report in *The Star* to the effect that blacks rejoiced in the death of the white kids killed in the Westdene bus crash has become a major talking point, stimulating yet more white people to stiffen the sinews and prepare to dig in and defend apartheid to the bitter end. The report also prompted several *Frontline* readers to call in question the contradictory observations in last month’s edition. It seems commonly assumed that there is or ought to be a “black attitude” towards any particular event or issue. The truth is surely that there is a huge multiplicity of attitudes among blacks, with resentment at apartheid doing much to magnify the most threatening and hostile of those attitudes. At the same time it became evident that the theory that the driver was setting out to do his bit to reduce the white population is held by more than a fringe of the white population.

AUTUMN OF DISCONTENT

The abolition of the Mixed Marriages and Immorality laws not only had the predictable damp-squib effect among blacks but also elicited some active criticism to the effect that this merely gave advantage to wealthy whites in competition for the favours of loose black women.

Five white schoolboys who beat two black men to death were sentenced to a year's worth of weekend duty in a hospital, becoming the latest in a long line of judgments which clearly would not have been the same if the racial identities of villain and victim were different.

The government announced the launch of multi-racial regional service councils as the next step in its reform programme. Criticism focussed on the contrast between the appearance of decentralisation this offered and the substance of increased central power which appeared in the small print. Little attention was paid to the harsher flaw, being the virtual certainty that black participation will go the same way as has black participation in the community councils – where at least five councillors have been brutally murdered and 147 have resigned.

All this bad news is difficult to square with the constantly improving set of relationships so visible wherever political issues are not at hand. Day-to-day life has never been less hung up on racial distinctions, never more sane and sound and reasonable.

It's not by basic instinct that our people seem locked into conflict, but by a political system which brings out the worst on all sides. Black communities cannot be expected to acquire order and discipline as long as co-operation with authority is synonymous with collaboration with apartheid. It isn't through inborn evil you hear white people talking with glee about shooting and killing; it's because they are desperate to stave off the future, which they take to be black and bad because their leaders have never given them coherent reason to believe otherwise.

A great society lies within us, struggling to escape the deadweight of political sterility, like a mushroom under a cowpat.