

Violence, Conflict and Security in South Africa

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Some fifteen years after the formal ending of apartheid, South Africans are disturbed by the violence in their society.

After the triumph of political accommodation that permitted the transfer of state power in 1994, and the process of reconciliation spearheaded by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many observers hoped that violence would abate. A democratic political system, many believed, would gradually take the sting out of conflict and address the root causes of crime.

There is no more important matter for research in the social sciences than the nature and causes of South Africa's epidemic of violence. Associated questions concern the ways in which violence relates to social and political conflicts more generally, and what can be done to protect society against it.

No serious observer doubts that South Africa's violence has historical roots, sometimes far in the past. Nor does anyone doubt that it is connected to the country's high levels of crime in general, and that the latter are related to poverty, unemployment and other social and economic issues. But crime and violence are not the same. South Africa's epidemic of violence appears to be more than a consequence of crime or poverty alone. It has other dimensions (Altbeker, 2007), as witnessed by the high incidence of domestic and sexual violence.

The relationship between violence, conflict and security in South Africa may be studied from a number of angles. Among these are the following:

1. The legacy of the past: for over a century, government policy, and demands for labour for farms and mines, produced a characteristic system of political economy based on black migrant labour. This has had a formative effect on family life and on psychology. Research is needed on how precisely the legacies of these past events are transmitted over generations.
2. South Africa was the scene of a complex low-intensity war from 1960 to 1994 (Ellis, 1998; Suttner, 2008). The population of South Africa became itself the site of guerrilla warfare and of state counter-measures. The consequences of this strife contribute to today's violence, in ways that require detailed study.

3. The formation of townships in South Africa in the twentieth century, contemporaneously with systems of migrant-labour, produced distinctive patterns of political activity and of policing in which the relationship between coercion, exchange and representation—articulated both by the state and those opposed to it—was complex and ambiguous (Glaser, 2000). This too is a historical legacy that requires deeper study.
4. During the late twentieth century, highly localized political and social conflicts became subsumed into a national political struggle. In some cases, local conflicts subsided after 1994. In other cases they proved stubbornly persistent, even if their national political significance declined (Taylor, 2002). The relationship of local political and social conflicts to national politics remains one of the threads of South Africa's recent history, in need of further research.
5. South Africa has high levels of domestic and sexual violence, to judge from media reports and from statistics that are never complete, since much domestic violence goes unreported. A challenge for researchers is to investigate the nature of such violence and to ascertain how sexuality has become related to social and political issues more generally (Posel, 2005).
6. Commentators have noted that the political transition in South Africa provided new opportunities for international organized crime (Shaw, 2002). South Africa is connected to international trades in drugs, stolen cars and other commodities. The importance of such connections, their relationship to globalization more generally, and whether they are linked to global reformulations of crime, politics and society (Glenny, 2008) are matters for further investigation.
7. Some residential communities have seen a rise in the more or less violent scapegoating of individuals or particular groups, for example in the form of witchcraft accusations (Kgatla, 2007) and attacks on foreigners. These too are matters requiring further study.
8. South Africa's recent history of political negotiation and its triumph of national reconciliation have been celebrated worldwide. However, the continuing proliferation of violence raises a number of questions about these achievements (Wilson, 2001), including the nature of reconciliation, the social 'reach' of national political processes, and the relationship between psychological, spiritual and social domains of trauma and healing.

The above are examples of research questions concerning violence in South Africa, its roots in recent or not-so-recent history, and its relationship to other matters. Specific vectors or histories of conflict lend themselves to study, such as disputes over agricultural land, but also in regard to housing rights and other urban issues. Some such disputes assume a political character, as parties in conflict enlist the support of politicians, or as local 'strong men' emerge, imposing a form of quasi-political authority. Parties to disputes may avoid recourse to the law, or may use the law in combination with other approaches, so that informal methods of both coercion and negotiation prevail, sometimes in combination with more formal methods. South Africa's legal and policing system is in any event fully stretched dealing with cases arising from the country's high incidence of violent crime. In all cases, however, South Africa's history of conflict is inseparable from its remarkable record of reconciliation and political accommodation.

All of these questions, and others besides, may be investigated from a variety of perspectives and using the methods of a variety of disciplines, including criminology, political science, sociology and others.

The present proposal welcomes multidisciplinary approaches. Its first priority is to investigate violence in South Africa in historical perspective. It aspires to establish the chronology of some of the more entrenched conflicts and to analyse how and why actors use violence, and the ways in which local conflicts may be connected to national politics. It will consider the extent to which local entrepreneurs of violence may be distinguished as being of a primarily political or criminal character. This project also aims to investigate the roots of conflict, violence and reconciliation within the lives of individuals and families, as reflected in patterns of personal and family conflict that may manifest itself in domestic violence, witchcraft accusations and other forms that are often excluded from political analysis.

Applicants may wish to orient their proposals to one of the eight research questions enumerated above. However, they are not required to conform to any one of these, and are encouraged to formulate their own research questions for consideration.

References

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Biographical note

Supervision in the Netherlands will be by Stephen Ellis, Desmond Tutu professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University, Amsterdam. Professor Ellis is also a senior researcher at the Africa Studie Centrum, Leiden. A historian by profession, Stephen Ellis has published several books and over a hundred articles on aspects of history and politics in West Africa and Madagascar, as well as on South Africa.