

Rivonia: Who were the Criminals?

The New African

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WHITE SOUTH AFRICA was on trial when the Rivonia group were brought to court in Pretoria. The world looked on and saw apartheid in the dock, side by side with its no less guilty aider and abettor, White supremacy. Nelson Mandela and his colleagues were the witnesses for the prosecution. Dr. Yutar almost exemplified in person the accused, though his tendency to caricature the least acceptable features of South African *baasskap* perhaps reduced sympathy for the predicament of White South Africans below even the modicum that a fair-minded world is prepared to allow.

The protests that followed the sentence expressed the fury of all those who were impotent to do otherwise than expose in words the injustice of a sentence passed by the accused on prosecution.

In these protests there were the usual misunderstandings of the charges against White South Africa and its allies. Rivonia is poor evidence of the police state tendencies of the South African Government. Judge De Wet carried out the laws according to their letter, and merely acted in the spirit within which they were enacted. White South Africa has been able to evade its guilt to some degree by clearing itself of the charge that the trial was rigged, that the Rivonia men were unjustly punished for trumped-up offences.

Dr. Verwoerd made clear again the position of his Government and its followers as the accused by his attempt to justify the sentences on the grounds that the people convicted were "communistic criminals", that they were carrying out a "communist plan aimed not only against South Africa but against the Western world". He said in effect that his people were right to treat those whom some thought to be, in his phrase, "heroes campaigning for freedom" as they were treated because they were not human beings but communists. Verwoerd made the world see once again the accused pleading in mitigation for his actions.

White South Africa was indeed on trial, and it would be hard to find any evidence in its favour at the Rivonia trial. References were made to hospitals and housing for Non-Whites, Transkei self-government was mentioned, too, but such witnesses for the prosecution as Mandela, Sisulu and Mbeki answered any doubts the outside world may have had as to the reality of the oppressed's grievances by their handling of such evidence.

The Rivonia trial may have given White South Africa its last opportunity to show the world that it is at least aware of the nature of the charges it faces, perhaps even to have shown some willingness to meet the demands made by all humanity against it. White South Africa failed to seize this chance, and can now hope for no sympathy as our country moves into the new phase of its growth to non-racial nationhood. In this new phase the world will seek a way of getting South Africa over the stumbling block of White supremacist rule, so as to minimise the South Africa issue as a threat to peace. Some Western powers will drag their feet, but none will do so with an eye to the perpetuation of White privilege, which showed itself at Rivonia to be without responsibility. The common cause will be the transfer of power to majority rule, with the least risk to the peace of the world. After Rivonia there is no likelihood of a break in this common aim.