

2. AFTER THE BOMB

Has the drift to political violence in South Africa now become an uncontrollable slide? We ask the question not only in the light of the Pretoria bomb blast and the Government's reaction to it, but in the light also of a new readiness to turn to violence at other levels of our political life. Consider the following catalogue of only some of the better-known incidents of the recent past.

Griffiths Mxenge, Durban lawyer and ex-ANC member, was kidnapped and later found brutally murdered. That was eighteen months ago and there has still been no arrest. Saul Mkize was shot by a policeman while leading a protest meeting against the Government's plan to destroy his freehold Driefontein community. Since then two other members of that community have died in detention.

The once peaceful Durban township of Lamontville is now racked with factional violence. Harrison Dube, leader of a campaign against government proposed rent increases, was shot to death outside his home by two masked gunmen. At his funeral a teacher, accused of being a police informer by some of the mourners, was attacked by them and killed. The following week, at the funeral of yet another young man shot at a demonstration, part of the crowd did their best to kill a leading member of Inkatha, and ended the day by dancing on the grave of the teacher murdered the week before. Outside Cape Town the squatter communities have once again been driven out of their meagre shelters as the worst of winter sets in, and with greater vigour and ruthlessness than ever before. Throughout the country the incidence of deaths from arbitrary and reckless use of their guns by the police increases steadily.

The Rule of Law, which once seemed to hold sway in South Africa, has taken a battering these past 35 years, so one should perhaps not be surprised to see the law of the jungle taking over, not only amongst the Government's supporters but also amongst its opponents. And, as the Pretoria bomb and the retaliatory raids on Maputo remind us, it is not only at the local level that this is happening. Those, of course, were merely the latest and grimmest in a sequence of incidents stretching back beyond the first SADF raid on Maputo, each of which has either claimed or threatened innocent lives. An eye for an eye has become the order of the day, and what more destructive slogan could there be than that? As Gandhi reminded us, all it can lead to is total, mindless blindness on both sides.

Can this slide to a South American kind of anarchy be stopped? It certainly won't be by the Nationalists' new constitutional proposals, which merely entrench the cause of the bombings, the exclusion of black South Africans from the machinery of power. The proposals do worse than that. They perpetuate the illusion in the minds of the Government's supporters that it has a policy, which the new constitution will embody, which can satisfy black aspirations. Unfortunately for them apartheid, whatever it is called and in whatever form it is presented, will never do that; and until that simple point is recognised, and the Nationalists are willing to talk about an alternative, the bombings will, we suspect, continue and spread.

Is there any prospect that the Government, having extracted its measure of vengeance for the horrors of the Pretoria bomb by its Maputo raids, will now really sit down and think about the consequences of where it is leading us all to, black and white? Or is it so blinded by its own propaganda that it sees every act against it and every criticism of it as part of the total, Moscow-orchestrated onslaught on it?

A future composed of an escalating series of mindless reactions to mindless acts is the last thing that any country needs, so what do we do to divert our country from that course? If we were all Gandhis we would know what to do and do it, but our history since 1948 has shown us that we have no Gandhis here. The role of us lesser mortals who reject violence, either because we have experienced it and didn't like it, or because we reject it as a solution to any problem, or because we do indeed think its probable consequences are too ghastly to contemplate, may turn out to be an unspectacular one. Unless new and effective means of bringing non-violent pressure to bear on the Government can be devised, our task may be the humble one of plodding on; keeping the light of sanity burning; trying to brake the slide to indiscriminate violence; keeping alive the ideal of a future South Africa where rights and responsibilities are shared by all. Not a spectacular job, for sure, but not one to be scoffed at either. For one day, in their desperation, the Nationalists may be forced to turn to just such people, to help save them from the disaster of their past, and to mediate for them with the black South Africans whose rejection has, since 1948, been the cornerstone of their policy. □