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URGENT NEWS DESK/ATTENTION NEWS EDITOR

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In his article "Police involvement in the Natal conflict", Father Timothy Smith makes the error of reducing his level of debate to its lowest common denominator. He interprets the Natal conflict in terms of the familiar "villains/angels" genre, a flawed theme which most violence commentators appear to succumb to. For the politically uninitiated, this is translated to mean the "victims" - in other words, the umbrella organisations operating under the "progressive" banner - versus Inkatha "aggressors" and their "accomplice", the South African security forces. He also offers glib explanations to what essentially involve complex dynamics. For example, he makes the generalization of always equating "impis" with Inkatha. He inserts pejorative labels into his analysis with ease and then in turn links them to Inkatha. Many of the clashes he speaks of were spontaneous community responses and not premeditated Inkatha "offensives", as he suggests.

Such arguments serve to blur the multi-faceted nature of the Natal conflict. By fragmenting his assessment into finger pointing cliches, Father Smith displays extraordinary insensitivity to those victims of violence who do not fit his definition of a "politically correct" organisation. Surely all are victims of a human tragedy and ultimately share a common experience of its brutality? If we are to conduct an intelligent debate, the myth of "villains and angels" must be debunked for what it's worth. Accusation and counter-accusation is counter-productive.

The context in which Father Smith's article was written must be viewed against a history of manufacturing perceptions. Perception warfare has moved full circle from the "total strategy" era which demonised the ANC/SACP alliance and their internal wing, the UDF, as the "enemy" of the state. It has been eclipsed by the unrelenting campaign to discredit the IFP. The shifting of the blame for the violence from the ANC to the IFP forms the lynchpin of such a campaign. The IFP has become the convenient scapegoat responsible for orchestrating violence. This in turn has diverted attention away from ANC-initiated violence.

To this end, the ANC employed a two-pronged propaganda strategy to distort and manipulate the facts, ranging from feeding disinformation or selective information to journalists regarded as pliant and uncritical, to blatant fabrication. Although we do not doubt the relative veracity of individual cases, the ploy of zealously obtaining affidavits, court interdicts, restraining orders, and the like, by organisations or persons sympathetic to the UDF/ANC alliance must be viewed in the context of this strategy. Smith frequently refers to these sources to buttress and authenticate his arguments. So predictable.

ANC propaganda succeeded in sanitising the role of the ANC and its surrogates in the conflict to such an extent that its members were no longer perceived as aggressors (or, for that matter, even participants) but instead relegated to the role of "innocent bystanders". Father Smith's account slavishly follows the trend.

But be that as it may, it is indeed astonishing that a priest will use the church as a platform to launch his overtly partisan views. Father Smith is entitled to his own personal political viewpoints. However the clergy are respected as servants of the community, precisely because they steer clear of expressing party political opinion. Smith's public alignment (to the point of even syndicating his article in the mass media) is clearly in conflict with his role in society. By choosing sides, he compromises his integrity and ability to facilitate reconciliation and the attendant healing process in this country. Although we regard certain types of political activism as incompatible with clerical duties, this is not to suggest that politics has no place in religion. It is the form which this role takes which is critical. Father Smith tends to be extremely selective in his expose of injustice.

Ironically, in a paper tracing the roots of the conflict presented to a University of Natal seminar on political violence in April 1988, Smith makes it clear it was Inkatha on the defensive. In a telling reference to how violence spread to his mission (in the upper Vulindlela area) we quote his pertinent comments:

"...up until September of last year it was one of the most peaceful places to be. Incidents of violence there were, but isolated and certainly never politically motivated. The September floods was the turning point...After that it was amazing how quickly the 'amaqabane' spread their influence. By mid December they were a powerful force even at Elandskop, and there were nightly meetings in the area, followed by marching and sloganeering. People were afraid to go out at night and we cancelled evening meetings. Rumours spread that the indunas and chiefs had fled." He also speaks of an "Inkatha counter-attack".

We seek to make no political mileage when we note his former revealing inference that Inkatha was the initial victim. Such an implication appears to conflict with the general pro-UDF overtones of his recent article. Ironically, his earlier account also describes the UDF's attempt to impose its hegemony on the region, which again contradicts Smith's recent counter-conclusions. Smith is welcome to peruse and evaluate for himself the lengthy dossier of attacks and acts of intimidation documented against Inkatha members in the Pietermaritzburg region since 1987.

For the sake of fairness, Smith should also consider the following. His "oversights" of violent excesses perpetrated by UDF-affiliated comrades include, inter alia:

- 1) Attacks on Azapo activists, particularly in Sobantu and Slangspruit, in 1986, which marked the beginnings of large-scale violence in the Pietermaritzburg region. Azapo was subsequently "expelled" from these areas. This pattern was repeated at KwaPata, near Dambuza, and Imbali Stage 1, where Azapo structures were crushed. A year later, conflict between the UDF and Inkatha erupted. Significantly, in spite of ideological differences (more so than between Inkatha and Charterist-aligned groups), and the fact that Azapo was well-entrenched in Sobantu, both movements were able to coexist in relative harmony.

- 2) The massacre of several families aligned to Inkatha such as the murder of seven members of the Thabethe family at KwaShange in September, 1987. Mr Leonard Thabethe was the Inkatha branch chairman at KwaShange.
- 3) An ambush on Inkatha youth returning from a meeting at KwaVulisaka (September, 1987). A number of these youths were permanently crippled after this incident. An ANC leader, Mr Alfred Ndlovu, was convicted of being an accessory to this attack.
- 4) UDF/SAP collusion in the widely-publicised 1987 "KwaShange massacre" in which 17 Inkatha Youth Brigade members were brutally shot and hacked to death by a hit squad while holding a meeting in the area. Two members of the SAP were subsequently convicted of murder in the Natal Supreme Court in connection with the attack. This cannot be described as an "isolated" attack either - similar cases have been documented involving UDF/ANC members who have infiltrated the security forces. Co-incidentally, KwaShange was declared a "liberated zone" by the UDF shortly after this attack.
- 5) the coercive and intimidatory tactics employed by UDF comrades to enforce boycotts and stayaways such as the erection of burning barricades and the disruption of public transport; the assault, sometimes murder, of workers who refused to heed boycott calls; and the stoning and ambushing of public transport ferrying workers to and from their places of employment which, for example, provided the prime catalyst triggering the so-called March 1990 "Seven Day War".
- 6) The barbaric "necklace" killings and "people's courts" which the comrades used to eliminate those they defined as "collaborators". Many innocent township residents perished in this gruesome manner. He also makes no reference to the humiliating ordeal suffered by victims of "modelling", suspected "sellouts" who were paraded naked through township streets and simultaneously accompanied by physical assault, taunts and verbal abuse at the hands of their comrade "escort".
- 7) The killing of Inkatha members, including school pupils, on public transport.
- 8) Documented incidents of violent internal fratricide between rival groups of UDF/ANC youth.
- 9) The UDF/ANC campaign to systematically eliminate IFP leaders and marginalise traditional/tribal leadership. Our research indicates that for every UDF/ANC leader slain in the Pietermaritzburg region, five Inkatha leaders have been assassinated. Sadly, the SAP's track record in apprehending their assailants has been abysmal.

Smith further ignores other vital factors, such as:

- 1) The massacre of non-aligned families by UDF comrades because they were "neutral" in the conflict or because they lived in "enemy" territorial zones.
- 2) The impoverished socio-economic environment in Pietermaritzburg's urban/peri-urban black townships and

outlying rural areas which gave vent to feelings of alienation, frustration and despair.

- 3) That much of the so-called "political violence" has been perpetrated by criminal thugs ("comtsotsis") bent on exploiting the feud in order to pursue their own unlawful activities. By sowing terror and confusion, such elements operated relatively unmolested under the guise of political banners. For example, the June 17 edition of the New African newspaper reports that "comtsotsis" in KwaMashu who have been operating for years within the structures of the local ANC Youth League are believed to have killed "more than a hundred residents" in the area.

It is clear that the violence in Natal was linked to the Charterist perception of KwaZulu as an apartheid structure. The strategy of non-collaboration involved the elimination of those identified as "collaborators" which made Inkatha leaders (as participants in local authority and "homeland" structures) legitimate targets for assassination. Thus, while the ANC suggested it was destroying the apartheid system, from Inkatha's perspective it was in fact attacking a rival liberation movement which had elected to achieve liberation through a form of qualified participation.

The evidence implicating elements at all levels of the UDF in fomenting violence is damning. Smith's failure to explore their role in the violence is inexcusable and indicates apparent tacit approval and/or acceptance that these atrocities could somehow be condoned or justified. If one accepts this to be true, Father Smith stands accused of double standards. He is far from even-handed in his outrage and condemnation.

That he has fastidiously recorded (albeit selectively) exact dates and accumulated volumes of evidence to support his anecdotal claims reinforces the suspicion that his "analysis" is motivated by a malicious personal vendetta against Inkatha. But stigmatising Inkatha cannot be regarded as offering a positive contribution to the attainment of peace because it exonerates the UDF/ANC, one of the major antagonists in the conflict.

Smith does make several valid points. We concur that neutral police action in the very beginning, the apprehension of those suspected of murder and their prosecution by law would have had an immediately dampening effect on the conflict. However, conducting a witchhunt with the aim of identifying villains and angels will not help, Father Smith. After decades of brutal institutionalised violence and nearly a decade of vicious internecine violence, whose hands can truly be said to be 100 percent clean? Neither the reputation of the ANC nor that of Inkatha emerges unscathed from this conflict and no organisation can be absolved in its responsibility to end it. The second interim report of the Goldstone Commission seems to confirm this cogent observation. To his credit, IFP President Mangosuthu Buthelezi has acknowledged this fact.

ENDS.

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