

Children of the burning necklace

Conor Cruise O'Brien talks
to the people of South Africa's
black townships and reflects on
the forces of violence now
shaping the country's future

The greatest victory in the struggle against apartheid so far has been the replacement of white indirect rule in South Africa's black urban ghettos by the rule of those who are known as "the children."

The children are those who attend school, when they so choose. Some are as old as 24; most are teenagers; pre-teens, down to eight or so, play supportive enforcement roles. It is the children — in this context the militants among them — who have made life impossible, often literally, for the agents of white power in black townships. It is the children who enforce the boycotts, whether of schools or of white shops. It is the children who discipline those who are seen to step out of line.

The children see themselves as the pacemakers of the revolution, and, like other revolutionaries, they make use of terror. But the

guillotine was merciful compared with the children's chosen method of execution: burning alive, with a petrol-filled rubber tyre, "the necklace", around one's neck. The children humorously refer to each such case as a "Kentucky", after Kentucky Fried Chicken. A Kentucky does not represent spontaneous outbreaks of popular rage. It is a standard ritualized penalty applied to black men and women

Defiance on the way to the funeral; violence, and possibly more deaths, on the way back

designated as informers or collaborators.

On a South African university campus recently I discussed the children and their works with an elderly black theologian, a clergyman living in one of the townships. For obvious reasons, connected with the laws of South Africa, I will not identify him; let us call him Ezra.

Ezra has been a member of the African National Congress since

the early days — long before it was banned, in 1960 — and is still a firm supporter, therefore committed, at least in theory, to aiding the armed struggle ordered by the ANC against apartheid. He does not like the Marxist tendencies of some of the present ANC leaders but does not take them too seriously.

I asked Ezra a question about the state of the Church in the townships today. Very satisfac-

tory, Ezra thought. The churches were always full on Sundays. "The ministers are totally with the people. Ministers were among the first detained, especially Methodist ministers. The black side of the Church is tremendously radicalized." Ezra went on to talk about the police; it is they, he said, who cause most of the violence, especially by their attacks on funeral crowds as they disperse.

I asked whether the parish



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Ezra did not care for my question. At first he tried to brush it aside. "There are generally not incidents on Sunday," he informed me. How about Saturday? Suppose an "incident of popular violence" happened in a certain parish on a Saturday night. Would the parish clergyman take that as a theme for his Sunday sermon? "No," Ezra said. "He would fear for himself." Similarly, if a clergyman were asked to allow his church to be used for a political meeting, he could not refuse. "They are really in sympathy . . . It is a ministry to a very angry people."

True, there was the case of Bishop Tutu. The bishop had not only condemned violence — whether popular or police — but had actually successfully interposed his person, at a funeral, between some children and their intended victim. But this transaction, Ezra seemed to think, had done little to enhance the brave bishop's popularity among the young in the townships. Ezra had watched the scene on television. Some children in the audience "jumped up and down with rage" at the bishop's intervention. Ezra himself clearly thought that the bishop had made a mistake in antagonizing them in this way.

Yet Ezra seemed to have his own reservations, very mildly expressed, about the temper of the

young. Older people were "a bit more irenic than the young ones," as he put it. "You sober down. The children don't know how change works . . . They are very optimistic." The thought of what all that childish optimism might entail seemed to depress his spirit, for he added: "I can't visualize what is going to happen . . . I don't see much that is good in the future."

The hotel porter told me that I should get a police escort. But somehow I didn't feel I would be all that welcome in Bishop Tutu's congregation if I turned up supported by a Casspir armoured personnel carrier. My coloured (mixed race) taxi driver told me he knew the way to St Matthew's, Embeni, but actually he didn't; he just knew the way to Soweto, a sprawling city of small houses, encompassing more than a million and a half people. Once in Soweto, he had to ask the way, about twenty times.

I have driven with Protestants through Catholic South Armagh, and with Jews in the vicinity of Hebron, and felt a bit nervous, but I felt more nervous this time. In fact I need not have been. Among the first people consulted by my driver was a group of young males: children. They showed no sign of prejudice at the sight of a white face and gave directions in a friendly way. The same was true of all the people we talked to in other areas of Soweto. Any militant children who took note of my presence must have considered that the only kind of white person fool enough to ride around Soweto in a taxi looking for directions would be an ANC sympathizer.

In any case, violent hatred of all whites is not general in Soweto. Black leaders claim that their people hate apartheid without hating whites; that may seem improbable, but my experience is a small piece of evidence in its favour.

St Matthew's, Embeni, is an

unfinished church, only half-roofed, but entirely usable on such a bright, warm, South African morning. The church was crowded, for the most part with smartly dressed men, women, and children, including choristers in brightly coloured gowns and boys in blazers. All eyes, all the time, were on Bishop Tutu. My notes taken in the church read:

Tutu baptizing: firm plunger of struggling lambs; (not babies but) big kids. Tutu preaching in Xhosa; simultaneously translated into Tswana. Great facial mobility and range of gestures. Clutching lectern with both hands, then reaching out and seeming to snatch things out of the air. Deadpan, with wide-open eyes, for jokes. Laughter, applause. Then he relaxes, smiles. Affection, approval, amusement, confidence of congregation/audience. A "good turn" and spiritual solace, all in one. Then a few words in English. Change of persona: no comic effects; grave, academic tone. Limited range of gesture now, using left hand. (He said)

"God looks down on South Africa and weeps when he sees how some of his children are treating his other children . . . Christ's religion (is) a religion of the poor, the marginalized, the ghetto people . . . But the others, whom we disagree with, are not to be killed."

If the televised images and printed reports convey to you that South Africa is already in a state of civil war, then that impression is exaggerated. But if they convey to you that South Africa is drifting at an accelerating rate toward civil war, then that impression is in my belief correct.

What can be the outcome? In my visits to various South African cities — Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown, East London, Durban, Johannesburg — I put to a number of well-informed people

the following three propositions:
The maintenance of the status quo
is impossible; reforms acceptable
both to the white electorate and to
politicized blacks are impossible;
revolution is impossible.

The first of those three propositions needs no discussion since nobody disputes it. To the second

proposition most of my informants replied, in substance: "Maybe not impossible. We must continue to hope that reform is not impossible. But it will be extremely difficult, certainly." As regards the third, most informants, black and white, thought that if reforms acceptable to most politicized blacks continued to be denied by the white electorate, revolution would become inevitable, but in the fairly long term. Hardly anyone considers revolution possible within the next five or ten years; even the ANC is said to put the remaining life of the apartheid regime at no less than ten years.

Afrikaners are neither the uniquely virtuous *volk* of their own rhetoric — “the highest work of art of the Architect of the Centuries,” as Dr D.F. Malan the first Nationalist prime minister, once put it — nor yet the moral monsters depicted by outside rhetoric. They are ordinary human beings, with the normal human quotas of greed, arrogance, and so forth, operating within a unique predicament, which they have inherited. I suspect that some of the righteous who denounce them from afar might behave quite like them if they were caught in a similar predicament.

Pride and economic interest are here intertwined. There is probably no people that would willingly accept such a precipitous fall in power, status, and income as would be required of the Afrikaners in the event of the great transition. So the Afrikaners, despite their shaken morale, despite the defection of a certain intellectual elite, and despite their partial Americanization, seem likely to go on voting for the parties of the *laager* — the Nationalists and the parties to the right of them — so as

to retain the Afrikaner monopoly of political and military power.

While holding on to that monopoly to the very last possible moment, the Afrikaner leadership is likely to try various schemes involving the co-opting of blacks or the delegation of subordinate authority to blacks. That is already happening, in a crude but partly effective way, in the homelands, where black elites and their dependent clansmen have common interests with the Afrikaners rather than with the black revolutionaries.

- All the demographic odds are heavily against the whites. In 1983, according to official South

African statistics, black births outnumbered white by ten to one. (And these statistics are geared to understating the demographic disparity, by omitting the figures from the all-black "independent" homelands.)

The more black children, the more turbulent the black children. Politicization spreads fast in an expanding population with increasing unemployment, especially as the more energetic and ambitious children realize that politicization brings with it power within the ghettos. The children who count for most are the children with the necklace.

The more children, the more unrest; the more unrest, the more repression; the more repression, the more international pressure and the more economic misery.

Even at an advanced phase of the unrest the South African Defence Force would probably still be able to hold, for a prolonged period, those parts of South Africa they would want to hold: primarily the Cape, plus the mineral-rich areas of the Transvaal. The 1977 UN Security Council embargo on the supply of weapons to South Africa has had the effect of making South Africa largely self-sufficient in conventional arms manufacture. (It is also said to possess a nuclear capability.) The economic difficulties attendant to such unrest would be very serious but probably not crippling.

It is true that a general strike, a

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complete withdrawal of black labour, could defeat this last stand of Afrikanerdom. But it should be noted that the present wave of unrest in the townships is almost exclusively confined to the unemployed young. The employed have been mainly quiescent; the black trade union leaders, once the focus of protest against apartheid, have taken a back seat politically since the children took over. A recent strike, in the principal hospital in Soweto, failed despite ferocious intimidation designed to keep it going. One nurse accused of strike-breaking was burned alive, but the strike nevertheless ended a few days later. The children are now threatening to enforce a general strike during this year, and they may find that miners are even harder to burn than nurses.

Up to almost the end of 1985 the unrest consisted mainly of what the children did, together with sporadic and relatively minor attacks, most with grenades but

more recently with land mines, in border areas.

But in the last days of 1985 the figure for whites killed by blacks shot up. Six white civilians, including four children, were killed on December 15 by land-mine explosions in a game reserve near the Zimbabwe border. The ANC claimed that these explosions were "justified." On December 23 a bomb in a crowded shopping centre at Amanzimtoti, a white beach resort south of Durban, killed another six white civilians. No organization claimed responsibility for the Amanzimtoti bomb.

So by the end of 1985 the children seemed to be setting the pace for the guerrillas as well as for the townships. And several correspondents noted a hardening of mood also among whites, especially Afrikaners, after the two December incidents. Pressure for a tougher military response to black terrorism was rising.

Will US arms finally be obliged to intervene?

If South Africa were left to itself, I think Algerian repression could succeed, in its own ghastly way. I don't see how the ANC or the children could stand up against it.

If South Africa were left to itself... But even already it isn't. I'm not talking about sanctions and disinvestment, which, combined with the internal unrest, are quite unlikely to end Afrikaner domination. I'm talking about external military intervention.

To appear as the champion of South Africa is not a coveted international role now. It will be even less coveted if the rulers of South Africa meet rising unrest with far more thoroughgoing repression. The word genocide has already been used, wildly, to characterize the actions of Botha's government. But future forms of repression may be such as to lead many people not only to throw the word around but also to believe that genocide is actually happening. And then there will be an international call for someone to stop the genocide.

I put forward as a possible scenario, in some such situation, the following:

The UN General Assembly

passes a resolution calling on its members to supply contingents for military intervention in South Africa. The Soviet Union and its allies announce that they will take part. I don't think that unilateral Soviet intervention will actually happen. But I think that the possibility of something on that order happening is already influencing the course of events.

If the Soviet Union seemed to be moving toward assuming the kind of role I have described, the United States would have three options, all of them unattractive. The first would be to do

nothing. Since the effect of that would be (or be seen as being) to hand over South Africa, its mineral resources and its strategic position to the Russians, I take it that this option is in practice impossible.

The second option would be to tell the Soviet Union, "Hands off South Africa!" Because Moscow seems unlikely to want to risk inter-superpower war over a remote region in which it has only contingent interests, it would presumably back away. But as it backed away, it would unleash a propaganda barrage to which the US would be extremely vulnerable — credibly represented as the protector of a white regime practicing genocide against blacks. There are already signs — under the present relatively mild conditions — that Washington is increasingly reluctant to appear in the role of South Africa's protector. So this option seems improbable (though not impossible, like the first).

The third option is for the United States itself to support a military intervention, which would then become a United Nations operation backed by both superpowers, and probably sanctioned by the Security Council as well as the General Assembly. Under this option the United States could hope to protect its own interests in the region with international approval. So this option, though no doubt repugnant to many US policy makers, looks like being less repugnant than the other two.

Under certain freak circumstances the normal condition of superpower rivalry can turn into limited superpower consensus. That happened in November 1956 over Suez when both the US and the Soviet Union, in different tones of voice, ordered Britain, France, and Israel to get out of Egypt, which they did.

In some such way as that, the immensely difficult transition of power might be achieved. In all the above I have of course been guessing. But I have tried, in my guessing, to respect existing patterns of force. Obviously, it would be foolish to attempt any similar

analysis of what might happen after the transition. Still, certain shapes can already be dimly made out, looming in the fog.

Even after apartheid and all its elaborate mutations have been thrown to rust on the scrap heap of history, South Africa will still have enormous problems. There will be more and more children, and more and more of the children will be unemployed. It may be nearly as hard for a black government to control Soweto as it is for a white government.

A multi-racial bourgeois coalition might not be wholly attractive, though it might, with luck, work quite well. But it would be better than apartheid, and better than the Botha-esque mutations of apartheid. And it would be a lot better also than the rule of the children with the necklace, or rather of whichever ominous child emerged as the victor out of the internecine competition for power within a political movement whose sanction, symbol, and signature is the burning alive of people in the street.

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