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INKATHA AND THE PIETERMARITZBURG KILLINGS.

KwaZulu bantustan leader. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and the central state authorities have recently made some attempt to distance themselves from the actions of the so-called "Inkatha warlords" responsible for over 600 deaths in Natal during the past few months. Although Buthelezi initially denied that Inkatha officials were responsible for the killings in Natal, it is now widely accepted that they originated in a strong arm attempt by Inkatha to enforce loyalty in an area - the Natal midlands - where Inkatha has historically been weak. Now both Buthelezi and the central state have been forced to implicitly acknowledge the involvement of Inkatha officials, although in the time honoured tradition of clandestine operations responsibility for these killings is being attributed to the unauthorised excesses of individuals. One Inkatha warlord was recently sentenced to death for two murders. Another, Thomas Shabalala, who was perhaps the most notorious, is also facing a murder charge. A member of the Inkatha central committee, Shabalala has now been suspended at Buthelezi's instigation.

These developments raise a number of questions. Why did inkatha resort to this form of action in the first place, and why has it pulled back from it now?

Nkosinathi Gwala, a researcher at the University of Natal, believes that the wave of killings in the Natal midlands, which began late last year and continued during the first part of this year, were "a reflection of the very deep legitimacy crisis facing Inkatha as a 'liberation movement'". According to Gwala, the Natal killings were the result of an attempt by Inkatha to enforce loyalty under conditions in which its support base was shrinking. An essentially similar conclusion was reached by Paul van Uytrecht, Manager of the Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Commerce. He told the press earlier in the year that the violence began when "Inkatha warlords had tried to enforce loyalty...at schools, hospitals and workplaces".

There are, in fact, strong parallels between Inkatha and Unita. Both began as ethnic nationalist movements seeking to base their appeal on tribal loyalties as a means of promoting the political, material and personal interests of a small leadership clique. The present Inkatha movement was formed by officials of the kwa Zulu bantustan administration in 1975. These recognised that the extreme fragmentation of kwaZulu made "independence" a non proposition. Instead they sought to establish a claim to national leadership as the basis for being admitted into some kind of compromise "power sharing" arrangement with the existing holders of state power. As part of their attempt to mobilist support and gain legitimacy, the Inkatha leadership attempted to manipulate the symbols and traditions of the ANC. The Inkatha flag thus has the same colours as that of the ANC and the dress of the youth and women's section are similar in style. In 1977 Inkatha black consciousness organisations by organising on the Witwatersrand, and in Soweto in particular. When this failed, it fell back on its base in kwaZulu and has since attempted to promote its claim to national leadership on the basis that it is the predominant political movement in the Natal region, and as such a force or factor that cannot be ignored at the national level.

It is in this context that the growth of the democratic movement came to be seen a major threat and challenge to Inkatha. Almost every major advance in democratic organisation or mass struggle has been interpreted as a threat and a challenge to Inkatha's hold over its base. The ANC leadership has thus been accused inter alia, of singling out Inkatha rather than the apartheid regime as its main enemy. At a public meeting in 1985, Buthelezi made a blatant appeal to tribalism, threatening that "Zulus would rise in their thousands to drive out the exiled (ANC) leaders if they ever set foot in South Africa". The formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) was greeted by charges that it had been set up by the ANC specifically for the purpose of destroying Inkatha and the UDF leadership were accused of "cowardice" for not admitting that the UDF and the ANC "were the same". The formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) was interpreted in a similar way and Inkatha set up its own "trade union" section - the United Workers' Union of South Africa (Uwusa) - in an attempt to undermine Cosatu.

As mass organisation and struggle develop, Inkatha turned increasingly to strong arm tactics. In the process it has shown that its much vaunted claim to be an adherent of non violence is restricted to actions against the state. It has been quite restricted to actions against the state. It has been quite prepared to resort to violence against democratic organisations.

1984 saw the first of a series of violent clashes between Inkatha vigilantes and members of UDF-affiliated organisations. In May of that year, one of the UDF co-presidents, Archie Gumede, was knocked unconscious by Inkatha supporters at a public meeting in Durban. In July 1984 members of the Lamontville-based Joint Rent Action Committee (Jorac) - a UDF affiliate - began to be attacked and killed by Inkatha vigilantes, known as amabutho. Lamontville, a township in Durban, was due to be incorporated into KwaZulu and the growth of Jorac, which opposed this move, was thus viewed by the KwaZulu bantustan authorities as a direct threat. These incidents took place at precisely the time when the state authorities were beginning to turn to vigilante groups as a means of responding to the growing challenge of the democratic movement. Vigilante gangs - the domestic variant of the bandit groups deployed by the apartheid regime in the southern African region - had a number of advantages for the rulers of the embattled apartheid state. Just as regional aggression could be presented as "civil war", internal repression by the state could be presented as "black on black violence". Moreover the level of brutality could be escalated at lower diplomatic cost than would have been the case had the states own forces been directly involved.

With the clear connivance from the central state, the assault by the amabutho escalated rapidly in 1985. According to press reports, a meeting of the Inkatha leadership in "Code 26" (a KwaZulu electoral district near Durban), decided in early August 1985 to deploy heavily armed vigilante forces in an attempt to make Inkatha the sole functioning political organisation in the district. Thomas Shabalala, the now suspended Inkatha central committee member facing a murder charge, openly declared at the time that he, "long(ed) for the day when there will be open war between the UDF and Inkatha - it will prove who is who in the political battle". On August 1 1985, Victoria Mxenge, UDF treasurer and wife of Griffiths Mxenge, who was himself assassinated in 1982, was murdered outside her home in Umlazi near Durban in circumstances which suggest involvement by vigilantes. Mourners at her funeral in mid-month were attacked by an impi led by the local KwaZulu legislative assembly member.

At about the same time, Inkatha youth rampaged a number of townships, attacking suspected UDF supporters and stirring up anti-Indian sentiments. Numerous other incidents of murder, assault and intimidation by amabutho have occurred since. Not surprisingly, no police action was taken against Inkatha amabutho and indeed there were numerous reports of direct collaboration.

The most recent wave of killings in the Natal midlands - and the townships of Pietermaritzburg, in particular - appear to have resulted from an attempt by Inkatha to capitalise on the State of Emergency and move into areas where it has always been weak. Inkatha has never had much support in the Pietermaritzburg area. It has traditionally been an area in which there has been strong support for the ANC. The recent wave of violence began with a forced membership drive by Inkatha. This was resisted and a wave of clashes followed, resulting in an estimated 600 deaths.

There is no doubt that Inkatha's entry into the Pietermaritzburg area initially had the support of the police and probably the tacit acceptance of much of the local white business community. Both after all would have liked to have seen Inkatha establishing its hegemony. However, as the conflict escalated and it became apparent that Inkatha was failing to establish its dominance, the violence came to be seen as damaging to business interests. Commerce was being undermined. After an unsuccessful attempt to mediate, officials of the local Chamber of Commerce began to criticise actions of "Inkatha warlords". Finally, the central state found it prudent to step in. In May a special police unit, commanded by Brigadier Jack Buchner, was sent into the area and kwaZulu police (who had sided with Inkatha) were removed. Some of the most notorious of the "Inkatha warlords" have now been put on trial and Buthelezi has been obliged to disown them.

There is no doubt that popular resistance to Inkatha intimidation in the Natal midlands, has been a set-back for both Inkatha and the state. This was reflected in the response of Natal to the June 6-8 Stay Away strike called by Cosatu. Despite implicit threats from Inkatha and a specific appeal from Buthelezi to ignore the strike call, an estimated 80% of the workforce in Natal stayed away on the first day, 78% did so on the second and 72% on the third day.

However, as indicated earlier establishing hegemony in Natal is essential to Inkatha's entire strategy. While Inkatha and the state have now been forced to pull back from one particular assault in one area, it is unlikely that they will have abandoned such tactics altogether. A statement from the ANC on the Pietermaritzburg killings released in February said that continuing factional violence only served to strengthen the enemy. It called for the youth to unite against the common enemy. Those forces seeking to promote factional conflict within the oppressed have now suffered a setback. Their claim to be proponents of non-violence has been exposed for what it is. The Pietermaritzburg killings need to become a spur to greater unity in struggle and to greater clarity on the part of the international community about the nature of our struggle and the forces involved in it.

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