

Self page 2002/22

Proponents and opponents of apartheid are equally caught up in bad 'family' habits, writes R W Johnson

## The curse of South Africa's ethnic politics

**T**HE row over the atrocities in the ANC camps should not be seen as just one more moral fable, but rather as one more instance of the harm done by the ethnic organisation of politics in South Africa.

To say this is not to allude to the fact that Zulus got the worst of it in the camps, but to point to something far deeper. For the ethnic organisation of politics was not just about the crudity of racial domination. It is a far subtler, more comprehensive phenomenon that has affected the opponents of apartheid quite equally with its proponents, and has created wider behavioural habits that span all political tendencies.

Throughout South African history the primary form of political organisation has been what we may call the "ethnic huddle" where a group of Xhosas/Afrikaners/Zulus/Hindus, or whatever, puts their heads together to devise a defensive strategy vis-a-vis other groups who are seen as menacing the interests of their ethnic "family".

Within that huddle the solidarities are intense and the worst crime is that of treason to the "family". In the eyes of one's own group, the members of opposing groups lost some of their reality as people: they were just part of the hostile world without and social contact with them was kept to a minimum. This attitude allows one to contemplate with equanimity even quite appalling disasters or atrocities befalling "enemy" groups.

These habits of behaviour were long since transposed on to political groups, including those most deeply opposed to ethnic politics on principle. Thus the Angolan atrocities.

The men in Quatro were accused of treachery — the worst crime the ethnic "family" knows — and thus, in the eyes of their captors, had become a virtually sub-human category, fair game for the most unspeakable treatment. Much the same social dynamics lay behind the multiple atrocities that have occurred in police cells or Koevoet camps.

The habits of the ethnic "family" have been transposed on to the political "family" at everyday level as well. It is a prime rule of the ethnic huddle that one does not socialise with members of enemy groups — and so today, 2½ years on from February 2 1990, it remains a matter for excited public comment that, for example, a Joe Slovo should be seen talking to a Roelf Meyer and whether or not Mandela and Buthelezi should meet at all.

South Africans are so inured to this sort of thing that they seldom realise how peculiar it is that such meetings do not take place all the time as a matter of course.

Similarly, there is often a blank disbelief that anyone can be genuinely independent — if you try to think or write without fear or favour, you will typically find that others will credit you with a "secret agenda" of Machiavellian complexity rather than accept that genuine independence is possible. For, of course, there is no role for independents in the ethnic huddle and that is the sub-con-

scious model always in mind. Such a model is naturally sectarian and produces a "he who is not with us is against us" attitude.

The corollary is that those who remain snugly within the ethnic huddle are "family" and benefit from the same split-level morality that is seen in Mafia clans; a Michael Corleone can kill a policeman with impunity because outside the family rules are made to be broken, but his brother Alfredo has to be executed because he commits treachery.

These same instincts can be seen at work within all the major South African political families.

Ministers like Vlok, Viljoen and Pik Botha, all implicated in major scandals, were kept on within the Cabinet simply because they were "family".

Moreover, even in a government bereft of talent, it is a cardinal rule that appointments still have to be kept within the family. It was bad enough having an outsider like Derek Keys brought in at Economics, but when De Klerk wanted someone with ability to

take over from Barend du Plessis at Finance he was not allowed a second outsider: the only solution was to give Keys both jobs.

Similarly, the Government has been trying to raise heaven and earth to indemnify its police and army killers, for they too are "family". Even Barend Strydom, it turned out, was regarded as "family" in the end; had his name been Jim Smith he would doubtless still be in jail.

In the same way, the ANC has maintained in important positions not only many who are far too old or incompetent to do anything but harm to the organisation, but also many officials with known criminal careers.

It is no secret that in exile several leading ANC figures were deeply involved in the stolen-car and Mandrax-smuggling rackets in neighbouring countries, any more than it is a secret that since their return to South Africa a number of ANC leaders have been getting rich at a rate inexplicable in terms of the salaries they draw from the movement. Such misde-

meanours are tolerated with the same ease with which the Government accommodates corruption in its own midst: again, both are "family".

More remarkable, the ANC has actually maintained in office those whose records include torture and murder. No problem arises where such crimes were committed against outsiders (e.g. necklacing an alleged informer); the row over the Quatro camp atrocities arises precisely because in that case the victims were members of the ANC "family".

In Britain or America a political party implicated in torture or murder would lose power for a generation, or more. Here, thanks to the curse of ethnic politics, both major contenders have such records, want us to let the culprits go free — and then vote for one or other of them as champions of human rights. As Yossarian was wont to say, "That's quite some catch, that Catch-22." □ R W Johnson is on sabbatical from Oxford University at the University of Natal, Durban.

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