

Zulu Vendetta Clouds the South African Election

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Special to The New York Times

MAQONGQO, South Africa — The red dirt road that twists up the hill to this Zulu village is a route of ambushes, assassinations, flights and funeral processions stemming from the factional feuds of South Africa's largest tribe.

One massacre in particular put this corner of the mainly Zulu Natal Province, a lush region known as Table Mountain, on the map of horrors.

Last March young partisans of the African National Congress, expelled from their homes by the elders of the

Inkatha Freedom Party, waylaid a minivan groaning slowly up the hill to the primary school and coldly emptied rifles and machine guns into the shrieking children. Six students died, followed within a week by 14 more deaths in the Inkatha reprisals.

Revenge Called the Aim

Table Mountain is peaceful for the moment, and rival Zulu leaders are preparing for South Africa's first free elections next April. But no one here imagines that, in this most savagely divided province, democratic politics

will neatly take the place of war.

Across Natal, hate and fear have partitioned places like Table Mountain into one-party fiefs, raising doubts not only about the possibility of a normal election, but also about how the winner will be able to govern.

"Tell God to save us after these elections," said Charles Maphumulo, the acting Zulu chief on this side of Table Mountain.

A 71-year-old Inkatha stalwart, the

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chief said that to his villagers the election is not about race, tribe, economics or personalities, and certainly not about the lofty principles like federalism negotiators are debating in Johannesburg. The issue, he said, is which party will be in a better position to avenge itself for years of grievances.

If the African National Congress wins, he asserted, rocking forward in the kitchen chair he had propped under a shade tree in his front yard, "you won't see me again, or my house."

Natal, the birthplace of Inkatha, is the province where the black resistance against white rule evolved into a fratricidal war of black against black.

When Mangosuthu G. Buthelezi founded Inkatha in 1975, it was widely regarded as a legal surrogate for the banned African National Congress.

A Break With the Mainstream

Mr. Buthelezi, who administered the area of Natal set aside under apartheid as a Zulu homeland, used his position to campaign against the segregated system and for the release of the congress's imprisoned leader, Nelson Mandela.

But in 1983 Mr. Mandela's supporters organized a nationwide front to assert control over the anti-apartheid movement, sometimes by force. In Natal, the front mobilized students and challenged Mr. Buthelezi, branding him an apartheid puppet.

Increasingly, Mr. Buthelezi, a proud descendant of Zulu royalty, broke with the anti-apartheid mainstream and went his own way. Almost alone among black leaders, he opposed economic sanctions against South Africa. He scorned the Communists who aligned themselves with Mr. Mandela. He accepted secret support from the South African Army.

Since Mr. Mandela was freed and the ban on the congress was lifted, Mr. Buthelezi has promoted a bitter Zulu nationalism among his followers, warning that "foreigners" like Mr. Mandela want to dominate the Zulus.

The vendettas spawned here spread like a virus to the crowded black townships around Johannesburg, where Zulu migrant workers clashed with other ethnic groups.

Competing Visions

In Natal itself, the African National Congress dominates in the metropolitan townships and squatter camps. Inkatha holds sway in the more traditional rural areas.

Mr. Buthelezi, who is bargaining for a constitution that will entrench Natal's autonomy, still threatens to boycott the elections scheduled for April 27, but his party has already begun a campaign.

Mr. Mandela and Mr. Buthelezi have begun crisscrossing the province, raising money, urging their followers to obtain voter cards, and offering their competing visions of the future — Inkatha's notion of a Zulu state within a South African federation, Mr. Mandela's ideal of a country where ethnic groups retain their cultural identity but are politically one.

But the rival parties are largely restricted to campaigning within their own bastions of support. And nonpartisan election experts who have scouted Natal fear a spate of violence intended to frighten rival enclaves from going to the polls.

Patchworks of Loyalties

"It's really a one-party-state mentality that pervades Natal," said Radley Keyes, a leader of the liberal Democratic Party and a frequent peace arbiter in this area.

Regions like Table Mountain, which are rural but within commuting range of cities, are patchworks of loyalties. They present an especially daunting prospect for those who will supervise the elections.

This village, the seat of a tribal domain encompassing 20,000 people, was African National Congress territory until its chief was slain in 1991. Mr.

Buthelezi installed Charles Maphumulo as acting chief, and in the ensuing protests anti-Inkatha dissidents were driven out, their homes razed to the ground.

To the remaining residents of Maqongqo, the African National Congress is not Nelson Mandela. It is an undisciplined army of young upstarts indoctrinated with revolutionary ideas and scornful of traditional tribal authorities.

Mr. Maphumulo, the acting chief, was incredulous at the suggestion that congress organizers might be allowed in to campaign for votes.

"Here?" he said, stiffening in his chair. "No. No, no, no. Not here. I don't want all that nonsense. They are spoilers too much."

A Congress Stronghold

Just across the flat-topped hulk of Table Mountain in the village of Kwa-Ximba, Chief Zibuse Mlaba oversees an African National Congress stronghold of 50,000 people.

Mr. Mlaba, who is 38, is a third-generation supporter of the A.N.C. and a key congress emissary to traditional Zulu leaders. His older brother was shot dead, he presumes by Inkatha, and after several attacks he travels with

two armed bodyguards.

In Kwa-Ximba, Mr. Buthelezi is disparaged as a man desperate for power and playing dangerously on the anxieties of old chiefs to hold back the inevitable. Anyone who supports Inkatha there keeps it a deep secret.

Chief Mlaba has already made his bargain with more modern ways. In Kwa-Ximba the hereditary chief and tribal elders now share power with a council dominated by the African National Congress. After elections, he said, tribal authorities will retain their role as arbiters of ritual and custom, but will surrender executive power to an elected council.

The compromise has produced a fitful peace that has allowed regional authorities to introduce a small measure of prosperity. Every house has electricity and running water, the roads are paved, and there is a clinic. The Inkatha chief across the mountain in Maqongqo said he had been too busy coping with violence to procure any of these amenities.

Mr. Mlaba concedes many chiefs in Natal fear the erosion of their customary power, and are uneasy about the A.N.C. because few of its top leaders are Zulus.



Photographs by John Woodroof for The New York Times

"Tell God to save us after these elections," said Charles Maphumulo, the acting Zulu chief on Table Mountain in Natal, where he fears revenge for years

of grievances by the winners. He asserted, with two aides, that if the African National Congress wins, "you won't see me again, or my house."



Chief Zibuse Mlaba of Kwa-Ximba, a stronghold of 50,000 members of the African National Congress on Table Mountain in Natal, said many local leaders

fear erosion of their customary power if the African National Congress wins the elections in April, as few of its top leaders are Zulus.

As a result, congress partisans here do not dismiss Mr. Buthelezi's threats of civil war.

Blade Nzimande, a congress leader for the central Natal region, said that if the A.N.C. wins the elections, it may require a state of emergency and a heavy crackdown to subdue resistance from Inkatha and its tribal supporters.

"We are under no illusions," he said. "We will have to govern under very difficult circumstances. Natal is likely to be the last province to settle down peacefully."

Time Is Against Him

In the long run, Chief Mlaba said, the trend is against Inkatha. The tribal order is slowly eroding as more and more Zulus fall within the thrall of the cities, and the appeal of Zulu nationalism will fade unless a new government does something to rouse fears of ethnic persecution.

Across the mountain, Chief Maphumulo reluctantly agrees that time is against him.

Within three years, he is to give way to his nephew, the rightful heir, who ascends to the chieftainship after he has completed a special school for tribal leaders. The chief-in-training is 18 years old, and supports the African National Congress.