Is the use of violence an effective tool for political change?

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On 10 May 1994, Nelson Mandela was sworn in as President of South Africa following the country's first free, democratic elections. For many, this change seemed miraculous considering the years of oppression which had preceded it under apartheid (Waldmeir 1997). For the African National Congress (ANC), the result appeared to vindicate more than 80 years of both non-violent and violent struggle. In considering the extent to which violence can be used effectively as a tool to bring about political change, this essay will assess the significance of its adoption by the ANC in the final 33 years of this anti-apartheid struggle. It should be recognised that violence in the political sphere, directed towards political aims and against political institutions will necessarily lead to political change, but the change wrought by violence rarely coincides entirely with the aims of its agents. Violence should be considered an effective "tool" only if it can be used successfully to bring about specific, *targeted* political change. Whilst this can happen, it requires a lot of luck. Generally speaking, violence is too difficult to control, its consequences too unpredictable, for it to be considered effective as a tool.

The anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa is an interesting case to consider here because the overriding political goal – that of ending apartheid – was undisputed and objectively realised. This essay will focus specifically on the ANC since, as successor to the apartheid government, of all the groups involved in the struggle it is the ANC that appears to have been most successful in achieving its political

goals. Violence is also generally seen to have been important in bringing about this political change. The ANC, perhaps unsurprisingly, maintains that 'it overthrew apartheid largely through its armed struggle' (Ellis 2012: 301): Mandela, for instance, would have us believe that 'It was the reality and the threat of the armed struggle' that forced the government to the negotiation table (Mandela 1994: 558). This, however, is an unfortunate case of victors rewriting history according to what they would like to have happened.

Beginning with a consideration of the ANC's fundamental aims beyond apartheid and an explanation of some of the background to the armed struggle, this essay will challenge the myth that ANC violence served effectively as a tool for the realisation of the group's political goals. It will contend that the ANC's armed struggle was less important in bringing an end to apartheid than other factors, and that, if anything, a continuation of the non-violent struggle would likely have been more effective. Furthermore, the armed struggle could be seen to have undermined the ANC's long-term goals through contributing to the development of a "culture of violence" in the country. Despite the myriad failings of ANC violence, however, it is difficult to see how the group would have survived, let alone been elected to power in 1994, without it. Violence was integral to the success of the ANC, but not in the way its leaders would have envisaged. The complex effects of ANC violence should bear out the conclusion that, given the 'all-pervading unpredictability, which we encounter the moment we approach the realm of violence' (Arendt 1970: 5), whilst it can be effective, its use as a tool for specific political change is not recommended.

Some background

The political goals

In order to assess how effective violence was as a tool for the political change that the ANC was seeking, it is first necessary to identify the exact nature of that intended change. Primarily, the aim was to dismantle apartheid, but this would not solve the problems of black South Africans. Apartheid was a policy that had been adopted by the National Party government to institutionalise racism; it provided for segregation and unequal treatment on a *de jure* basis. Even when racism and inequality of treatment and opportunity were not enshrined in law, though, they would continue to exist on a *de facto* basis. The destruction of the apartheid system, on these terms, was little more than a means to an end. It was a necessary first step if any substantive progress was ever going to be made, but it was far from sufficient on its own. An end to apartheid was not commensurate with an end to the struggle.

The ANC's political objectives beyond apartheid are stated most eloquently in the "Freedom Charter", which was drawn up by members of the Congress Alliance – the ANC and allied political groups – at the Congress of the People in Kliptown, June 1955. The document subsequently became 'the guiding manifesto of the…Alliance' and the 'primary political and economic programme' of the ANC (McKinley 1997: 20-1). The Charter's 10 demands, including that the people should govern, that land and wealth should be redistributed, and that all should be able to live decently and in peace and friendship (Congress of the People 1955), represent principles that the ANC has stood for ever since. The Charter

was 'reaffirmed…as the "ideological lodestar" of the ANC' at the Kabwe Conference of 1985 and formed the basis of the party's Constitutional Guidelines of 1988, which would in turn come to shape the new Constitution of South Africa following the 1994 general elections (McKinley 1997: 67, 90). The efficacy of the ANC's violence, therefore, should be measured not only in terms of how far it contributed to ending apartheid, but to what extent it helped or hindered the realisation of these further fundamental political goals that the Freedom Charter embodied.

The turn to violence

On 16 December 1961, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), "the spear of the nation", announced its arrival onto the scene with a number of acts of sabotage and the publication of its manifesto (MK 1961). Two years later, the group was officially recognised as the armed wing of the ANC (Ellis 2012; McKinley 1997). MK's armed struggle was to be the next phase in seeking the realisation of the ideals of the Freedom Charter, which after 50 years of 'knocking…patiently…on a closed and barred door' the non-violent struggle had failed to fulfil (Pillay 1993: 47).

This development shocked many (Magubane et al. 2004). The ANC's prior commitment to non-violence had persisted 'beyond question and debate' (Mandela 1994: 261) for almost half a century since its foundation as a modest pressure group in 1912 (Mbeki 1992). The decision was not taken lightly, though. The Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, in which 69 unarmed protesters were shot dead by police, is often cited as a turning point in the move towards armed struggle (Ellis 2012; Butler 2004), but even this initially

prompted a non-violent ANC reaction (Mandela 1994: 226). The group was subsequently banned, but it was another year after that before 'the balance was [finally] tipped in favour of violent resistance' following the brutal response to ANC-led stay-aways in June 1961 (Magubane et al. 2004: 53). Even then, convincing the ANC National Executive of the need for violence remained no easy task. Chief Luthuli, head of the National Executive, proved particularly intransigent at first, but was eventually persuaded that 'a military campaign was inevitable' (Mandela 1994: 260). In accepting this, he reluctantly joined the ranks of a striking 'diversity of people' who had, by 1961, concluded that 'force was needed in opposition to the state' (Ellis 2012: 19).

There were multiple reasons for the increasing prevalence of this belief at the time. In the first instance, it seemed apparent to many that non-violence had brought the African people 'nothing but more repressive legislation, and fewer and fewer rights' (Mandela 1994: 350). Furthermore, the banning of the ANC in April 1960 led many leaders to believe that former methods of opposition, now entirely illegal, had been rendered 'both redundant and untenable' (Magubane et al. 2004: 70). The time had come to either 'submit or fight' (MK 1961). The ANC's hand was also forced by the militancy of the masses. 'The peasants had always been consistent in thinking along military lines' (Mbeki 1992) and this rural resistance 'flared in the 1950s' (Magubane et al. 2004: 56). By 1961, many had already taken up arms. Leaders were acutely aware that they could not 'carry on forever using unarmed people against armed police' (Magubane et al. 2004: 69). There would come a time when the masses would no longer respond to calls for non-violent action, and that time seemed fast approaching.

The end of apartheid

It is unclear how, exactly, the ANC believed violence would help bring an end to apartheid. According to Mandela, the MK leadership hoped acts of sabotage, ranging from tampering with electricity pylons to the destruction of cattle kraals (Magubane et al. 2004: 129, 122), would be sufficient to 'bring the government to the bargaining table' (Mandela 1994: 272). If this failed, guerrilla warfare would be adopted to achieve the same end. From the end of 1962 onwards, MK recruits were sent abroad to China and other African countries, such as Tanzania, to train as guerrilla soldiers in preparation for this possible escalation of the violence (Ellis 2012: 29).

These recruits saw the situation very differently, though. According to one recruit, 'the expectation within ANC circles was that an insurrection toppling the oppressive regime would occur within a matter of months' (Mbali 2010: 79). Joe Slovo and other SACP strategists involved in the foundation of MK also hoped the sabotage campaign 'would serve as a detonator, provoking a more general rising against a state that they believed to be brittle' (Ellis 2012: 37). Howard Barrell, a journalist who served covertly as an ANC operative at the time, argues that at least from the middle of the 1970s 'the ANC was…caught up in this notion of the state as an entity that had to be overthrown' (Walker 2010).

If it was true that insurrection had been the aim all along, the armed struggle failed dismally. Government overthrow was always unlikely: the military and

state security apparatus were too strong and consistently loyal. Even by 1991, after 30 years of armed struggle, 'the means of state coercion remained overwhelming' (Butler 2004: 24). MK was too ill-equipped and inefficient an organisation to stage a military coup (Barrell 1993; Mbeki 1992), and the ANC's grassroots, largely neglected during its focus on the external struggle, never developed sufficiently for the successful coordination of a mass uprising (McKinley 1997). ANC leaders acknowledged at the time that they were 'not in control of many of the activists who invoke[d] [the group's] name', let alone those that did not (Friedman 1987: 61).

Even if we accept Mandela's claim that the goal had 'always' been a negotiated settlement (Mandela 1994: 578), the efficacy of violence in realising this goal should be considered limited at best. The sabotage campaign was marred by frequent failures (Barrell 1993: 452) and led 'simply to more repression and arrests…without exerting significant pressure on the government' (Magubane et al. 2004: 138). Despite the grand plans of "Operation Mayibuye", the guerrilla war never materialised. When the masses responded to ANC calls to make South Africa "ungovernable", it was usually not long before the 'insurrectionary tide' was 'rolled back' by the might of the apartheid state (Barrell 1993: Introduction). Furthermore, the violence 'remained largely restricted to the townships' where it posed little direct threat to white interests, let alone 'white rule', with almost every victim black (Friedman 1987: 60).

That the National Party engaged in negotiations when it did was not a result of the armed struggle, but a reaction primarily to externally dictated economic

pressures. The statist, anti-market economic policies of the apartheid regime became 'decreasingly viable' in the globalised and interdependent world of the 1970s and 1980s, prompting the beginnings of a domestic crisis (Butler 2004: 22). The end of the Cold War also saw South Africa stripped of the support of Western powers such as the United States, who no longer had any need to sweep the gross injustices of apartheid under the carpet. The imposition of sanctions by these powers deepened the 'international isolation' of the regime and made the economic situation within the country even more critical (Ellis 2012: 301).

Apartheid was further undermined by the economy's increasing reliance on black manpower in light of these developments. For the sake of financial survival, industry needed to expand and develop, but this could not happen without training more blacks as skilled workers (Friedman 1987: 68). This would prove difficult in a country where 'tens of thousands of politicised youth', in the wake of the Soweto uprisings of 1976, had 'opted out of the school system…[with] no prospect of their being absorbed into the economy' (Friedman 1987: 68). For the situation to change, black education policy would require drastic reform. Changes to influx control institutions, which, 'never very effective in operation', were already crumbling, would also be necessary (Butler 2004: 23). Urban black populations would grow rapidly, with black poverty becoming 'more visible and more of a threat to stability as a result' (Friedman 1987: 69).

Considering the above, it is likely that the National Party would have felt compelled to engage in negotiations regardless of ANC violence. Even de Klerk's predecessor, the more hardline P.W. Botha, had recognised the ultimate

inevitability of negotiations: he, too, made contact with an imprisoned Mandela whilst 'under severe economic pressure' (Asmal 1995). This move, a precursor to de Klerk's apparently more progressive approach, also indicated an awareness that the longer the government kept its head in the sand, the weaker its position would be when the negotiation process finally began. The sooner the National Party engaged in negotiations, the sooner sanctions would be lifted and the greater chance there was that it would be able to dictate the nature of any reforms. On these terms, the National Party was not forced into negotiations by the armed struggle, as the ANC would lead us to believe, but engaged in them on the basis that, considering the economic circumstances, they offered the best chance of perpetuating Afrikaner power.

The alternative

Not only was ANC violence less effective than other factors in bringing an end to apartheid, but the group's turn away from non-violence could also be seen as a tactical error. With sufficient mass and grassroots organisation, non-violence should have been able to achieve all that was achieved by violence and more, particularly in placing further international pressure on the apartheid regime.

Following its banning and the establishment of MK, the ANC claimed that its emphasis remained on mass action (Magubane et al. 2004: 136), but even if this was initially the case, it was not for long. The leadership 'took a number of decisions to lessen the supremacy of armed struggle' over the coming decades,

but ‘decisions along these lines were seldom implemented’ (Barrell 1993: Introduction). Once forced underground the group ‘lost contact with the oppressed people at home’ (Mbeki 1992), and the armed struggle, to be conducted externally by a trained elite, became a ‘task to which all else had to be subject’ (Barrell 1993: 461).

This focus on armed struggle to the exclusion of all else was a mistake. To the extent that activism did play a role in ending apartheid, at least in terms of improving conditions and morale on the ground and maintaining the attention of the international community, this was primarily the responsibility of non-violent movements autonomous (at least initially) from the ANC (Barrell 1993; Walker 2010; Butler 2004). The growth of the militant trade union movement, which stressed the importance of ‘building tight grassroots and democratic organisation’ (Friedman 1987: 59) and culminated in the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, was particularly significant in this sense. The United Democratic Front (UDF), formed of a number of ‘civic associations and community organisations’ in August 1983 (McKinley 1997: 59), was also highly influential and joined COSATU in seeking to establish a power base of committed, disciplined members who could ‘deliver real gains to the powerless’ (Friedman 1987: 59). This approach was in stark contrast to the lack of ‘cohesion, specific strategic direction or…grounded base’ of the ANC (McKinley 1997: 70), and by the mid-1980s it was becoming clear that it posed ‘a more serious challenge to the state than the ANC’s military campaign’ (Barrell 1993: 464).

The ANC's adoption of violence also served to justify the apartheid government's repressive policies to the international community and to potentially sympathetic whites within the country. Repression of non-violent protest is much more likely to "backfire", resulting in 'the breakdown of obedience among regime supporters…and international condemnation of the regime' (Stefan and Chenoweth 2008: 11). Little evidence of this was seen in the first half of the twentieth century because instances of "backfire" are largely dependent on media coverage (Stefan and Chenoweth 2008: 41). In this sense, the conditions in which the struggle operated began to change rapidly from about 1960 onwards: Mandela was struck by how television in particular 'had shrunk the world' during his time in prison (Mandela 1994: 576). Favourable conditions for a successful mass non-violent campaign, therefore, were only beginning to develop just as the ANC turned away from this line of action.

The claim that non-violence would have become more effective as the sophistication of the media and communications technologies increased is to some extent borne out by the impact of the Sharpeville massacre on international perceptions of apartheid. Following the massacre, 'press photos displayed the savagery on front pages around the world' (Mandela 1994: 225). Substantial international condemnation of the regime ensued for the first time, with the United Nations (UN) taking its first action on South Africa just under two weeks later. UN Security Council Resolution 134 concerned 'the situation arising out of the large-scale killings of *unarmed* and *peaceful* demonstrators' (UN 1960, my italics). It deplored the action and called on the South African government to abandon its apartheid policies. This was a striking case in point of

the potential power of confrontational non-violent protest, a tool that would only have become more effective in the coming years.

Turning to violent protest, by contrast, risked alienating the international community. Despite sympathy for its cause, the ANC was placed on the US terrorism watch list (Huffington Post 2013). Margaret Thatcher refused to impose sanctions on the apartheid regime on the basis that the ANC was 'a typical terrorist organisation' (Independent 1996). Non-governmental organisations, too, would not campaign for the ANC. Amnesty International, for example, refused on the basis that it 'would not represent anyone who had embraced violence' (Mandela 1994: 603).

Non-violence would never overthrow the state, but insofar as that was never possible anyway violence stood little chance of doing so either. If, as Mandela claims, the aim had been the negotiating table all along, non-violence would likely have been much more effective at getting there. Not only were instances of mass political mobilisation more effective than ANC violence in challenging state power, but a policy of non-violence would have been more difficult for the government to repress without significant backfire both internally and externally. The armed struggle also served to alienate foreign powers that could potentially have supported the movement. In this sense, violence actually undermined the ANC's goals.

The armed struggle and the long term

It was not only in terms of ending apartheid that the ANC's goals were seemingly undermined by its armed struggle: violence would serve to make it more difficult for the group to realise some of its further goals once in power, too.

It would be unreasonable to blame all of South Africa's current problems on the ANC's armed struggle. The country remains 'one of the most unequal...in the world' (CDE 2010: 3), 31% of the population lives below the poverty line (CIA 2013) and mass unemployment is 'a matter of profound and growing dissatisfaction' (Butler 2004: 62). Many of these issues are so entrenched as part of the legacy of apartheid that expecting a solution within two decades is unreasonable (Butler 2004: 63). That the ANC has failed to successfully answer demands from the original Freedom Charter such as that the nation's wealth be shared amongst the people, or that 'There shall be Work and Security' (Congress of the People 1955), cannot be blamed on its violent approach to the struggle, nor has it been for want of trying whilst in power (CDE 2010: 3).

However, in at least one fundamental area, it is likely that the ANC's turn to violence prompted unintended and unwanted effects in the long term. This relates to the final principal demand of the Freedom Charter: that 'There shall be Peace and Friendship' (ANC 1955). Crime is, after unemployment, South African voters' greatest concern (Thuynsma 2012: 136). Over the 2012/13 period, there was an average of almost 45 murders every day (SAPS 2013). Sexual offences are

also shockingly common, with more than one in four South African men admitting to rape (Jewkes et al. 2009).

A number of factors must be taken into account when seeking to explain the prevalence of crime in South Africa. Issues such as those mentioned above – inequality, poverty, unemployment – are no doubt all critical. The failings of the criminal justice system, the corruption of police and officials and the high rates of orphanage resulting from the country's HIV/AIDS crisis are other likely contributing factors (Butler 2004: 142). But South Africa is a peculiar case because, given its extreme levels of inequality – 'In 2008, the richest 10 per cent of households in South Africa earned nearly 40 times more than the poorest 50 per cent' (CSVR 2010: 3) – reported property crime tends to be 'relatively modest' (Butler 2004: 141). The country's crime problem is specifically *violent*.

An explanation for the peculiarly violent nature of most crime in South Africa might be found in the "culture of violence" that is considered to exist in the country. This is believed to derive at least in part from the widespread political violence of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Butler 2004; CSVR 2010). To give some indication of the extent of the problem at the time, in March 1990 alone, 230 people died in internecine violence between supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party and those of the allied ANC, SACP and UDF, and this only one month after the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Mandela from Robben Island, which was expected to quell the chaos (Mandela 1994: 566). Had the armed struggle achieved its goals quickly and efficiently the problem might not have become so acute, but over the course of three decades it was perhaps

inevitable that the practice of violence should seep into 'the whole body politic' (Arendt 1970: 80). Some argued that by calling for "ungovernability" in particular, the ANC had given 'ideological sanction to what eventually became simple criminal behaviour', creating a 'monster' it may not be able to control once in power (Fukuyama 1991: 74). ANC rhetoric declared that violence was not only justified, but a necessary means of struggle, and it is exactly this language that now informs violent crime in South Africa, with violence seen by many as 'a necessary and justified means of resolving conflict or other difficulties' (CSVR 2010: 4).

The ANC's intentions were undoubtedly good, and it could not have foreseen the persistence of violence in South Africa to such an extent, nor that the armed struggle itself would be so prolonged. However, violence is a dangerous tool. Its consequences are unpredictable, but 'the most probable change is to a more violent world' (Arendt 1970: 80). In this case, it is likely that the adoption of violence by the ANC in the liberation struggle, through inculcating a 'pervasive normative acceptance of violence' in South Africa (CSVR 2010: 4), has unintentionally undermined the group's fundamental goals. Mandela argued that 'Freedom without civility, freedom without the ability to live in peace, is not true freedom at all' (Mandela 1994: 560). On these terms, in seeking freedom the armed struggle patently failed.

The value of violence

However, in at least one way violence benefitted the ANC immeasurably. Paradoxically, having abandoned any substantive attempt to develop a committed base of mass support, the group's symbolic power came to grow exponentially over the decades between its adoption of the armed struggle and its arrival in power (Barrell 1993).

Without turning to violence, it is unclear whether or not the ANC would even have survived as an organisation. By 1960, the group's 'status as the prime vehicle for black political expression' was being threatened by the more militant Pan African Congress (PAC) (Ellis 2012: 16). In the face of rural militancy, some leaders felt they were 'becoming irrelevant' (Magubane et al. 2004: 59). The ANC had long been 'lagging behind the militancy of the masses' anyway (McKinley 1997: 25), and adopting violence in some form was integral to its attempt to reassert itself as the leading element in the anti-apartheid movement. The armed struggle, 'Even when cited merely as a rhetorical device', demonstrated to people that it had not given up the fight despite being forced underground (Mandela 1994: 578). It mitigated the "politics of despair" that had come to characterise the attitudes of many; it offered hope after years of failed non-violence (McKinley 1997: 29). Ironically, the more ANC missions failed – the more MK cadres either died or were sent to prison – 'the greater the evidence that the ANC had dared to struggle against a brutal, powerful and internationally infamous enemy' and the greater its symbolic power became (Barrell 1993: 468).

Even Mandela recognised that the armed struggle 'had a popularity out of proportion to what it had achieved on the ground' (Mandela 1994: 578). Foreign powers such as the United States came to see the group, despite the terrorist classification, as indispensable to a future settlement (Mandela 1994: 563). This sentiment was echoed within the country (Friedman 1987: 67). Such was this symbolic power that even Inkatha, despite being in constant violent conflict with ANC leaders and supporters at the time, would not negotiate with the government unless Mandela was released (Friedman 1987: 60). Youth in the townships 'mimicked armed MK combatants,' carrying 'wooden AK-47 replicas' into their battles with the South African Defence Force (McKinley 1997: 78). When Mandela returned home to the village of Qunu after his release from prison in 1990, he was astonished to hear schoolchildren 'singing songs about…Umkhonto we Sizwe' (Mandela 1994: 572).

This is all indicative of the hegemonic position the ANC achieved in the 1980s 'both inside the country and internationally' (McKinley 1997: 82), but the best measure of this popularity can be found in the election results of 1994. The ANC won a clear majority after more than three decades in exile, with over three times as many votes as its nearest competitor, the National Party (Election Resources on the Internet 1994). Not only had apartheid been brought to an end, but the ANC had also found itself in an unprecedented position to realise its goals beyond this. Violence might have worked against the ANC in other ways, but it is unlikely the group would have found itself at the head of a democratically elected government, with a popular mandate to reform South Africa according to its wishes, without it. The ideals of the Freedom Charter remain to be fulfilled, but it

was violence that placed the ANC in a position to realise these further political goals in the first place.

Conclusion

The conditions in South Africa under apartheid were, contrary to the beliefs of ANC and MK leaders at the time, not ripe for a successful armed struggle. The state security apparatus was too strong, the liberation movement on the ground too disparate and disorganised. The development of more sophisticated communications technologies and changes on the international scene, whilst difficult to predict at the time, were making the likelihood of a successful non-violent campaign greater than ever. The ANC's turn to violence, on the other hand, undermined its goals by alienating potential supporters in the short term and contributing to the development of a "culture of violence" in South Africa that would scar the country in the long term.

Yet, although violence might have made it more difficult for the ANC to realise some of its further goals embodied by the Freedom Charter once in power, it is likely it would not have achieved power, and would duly have been in a weaker position to realise those goals, without it. It was the armed struggle, despite its failings, that prevented the ANC from being displaced as the leading element in the struggle by other groups such as the PAC. Having been forced into exile, developing a mass base was going to become close to impossible anyway. In the absence of this grassroots organisation, symbolic acts of political violence, even

when they failed, proved the best means of ensuring the group's prominence and, ultimately, delivering it to political power.

Violence should not be seen as having been an effective tool in the ANC's anti-apartheid struggle just because it helped the party achieve political power, though. Where it was expected to succeed, the violent struggle failed. It undermined political aims in the long and short term. The fact that it should have enabled the ANC to achieve power despite this manifest failure is evidence of the sheer unpredictability of the effects of violent action on the political world. Under different circumstances – in a different time, under a different regime – violence might have been more effective, but even then it would have been subject to the 'intrusion of the utterly unexpected' (Arendt 1970: 4). The use of violence will always bring about some form of political change; at the very least, it will change opinions and in so doing reshape political behavior. However, its effects are so hard to predict or control that its use as a tool for targeted change is inadvisable.

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