

INTERACTING FACTORS IN SOUTH AFRICA'S URBAN CRISIS

“Any community or society requires established authority figures to propagate norms of behaviour and to promote social order. Of particular relevance, then, is the failure or refusal of local level leadership in the townships in some parts of the country to establish norms of orderly political behaviour . . . In (some areas) the formal community leadership has all but collapsed in a concerted campaign to make townships ungovernable . . .”

Professor Lawrence Schlemmer, sociologist, University of the Witwatersrand.

The variables which shape African townships as social “pressure cookers” prone to simmering instability belong in a matrix of interacting factors, according to social scientist, Prof. Lawrence Schlemmer, of the University of the Witwatersrand. He notes that research conducted for Indicator SA strongly suggests that various “patterns” of unrest “lend credence to the view that there is a fairly concerted and well supported campaign in the townships to create a situation of turmoil and ungovernability.”

In several areas “the established formal community leadership has all but collapsed under the impact of the campaign.” The following is an extract of a paper published in Indicator SA by Professor Schlemmer on “South Africa’s Urban Crisis.”

“Any political movement or pattern of political unrest must be analysed at two levels. “One level is that of the manifest goals and objectives among leading participants. “Another level is that of the

conditions, frustrations and motivations existing among the rank and file members of communities which create the propensity for unrest or the inclination to participate in the pattern of behaviour prescribed by the leading figures . . .

“In trying to understand unrest one has to consider a complexity of interacting factors — a matrix of

conditions. This analysis will not attempt to assess the weight of all the variables, but they can be listed for the sake of illustration:

- . . . Youth and young adult unemployment.
- . . . Bitterness about the failure to reach desired educational levels in a school system with critically high failure rates.
- . . . The economic recession and inflation leading to severe restrictions on spending money.
- . . . Irritants of rental and busfare increases.
- . . . Mobilisation by activists in political movements, more focussed than but nominally under the umbrella of the UDF and perhaps the National Forum.
- . . . Feelings among Africans of being relatively more deprived than before due to the introduction of parliamentary rights for coloureds and Indians.
- . . . The stress of overcrowding in township housing.
- . . . The opportunities which unrest offers for more mundane anti-social behaviour like looting, vandalism and displays of public aggression.
- . . . Corruption and/or ineffectiveness in township local leadership creating popular resentment.

THE NEED FOR SOLUTIONS

“**S**ince 1976, the amorphous nature of black protest has resulted in it being generically tagged as “unrest” by the media and political commentators alike. The hidden implication of this catch-all description is that these traumatic cycles of violence and counter-violence simply form part of the larger, age-old political dilemma that plagues South Africa.

“The fact that neither the paths of reform nor repression seem to hold out current prospects of a return to social stability have invited comparison to other unstable and dangerously divided societies in the throes of protracted low-level urban violence, such as Northern Ireland and Lebanon.

“Ever since the political upheaval of 1976/77, the state’s security forces have for the most part managed to contain the several cycles of devastating riots within African residential areas, where most of the damage to property has consequently been wreaked.

“The most vivid expressions of black protest have thus been removed from the eye of many white commentators,

who often tend to view these developments from an abstract distance as symptoms of a general malaise.

“From these theoretical perspectives, the civil unrest is deemed to be indicative of alternately, South Africa’s industrial revolution and modernisation process; the “violent evolution” of reform; the group tensions of a plural, racially structured society; black perceptions of relative deprivation; or lastly, of class struggle within a capitalist crisis made of historic, economic contradictions.

“These models provide a useful historical overview, but their simultaneous limitations stem from a complacent acceptance of massive violence as an inevitable social phenomenon in a time of transition.

“Unfortunately, these macro-theories concentrate on structural causes and pay little attention to the need for an urgent, practical problem-solving exercise by government and its opponents, in terms of reconciling political and socio-economic demands across a vast ideological spectrum and ending the tragic violence . . .”

Researcher Graham Howe, Indicator SA, Vol 3 No 1, 1985

. . . The absence of a respected and legitimate local leadership in the townships to assist in inculcating respect for authority.

. . . Counter-reaction by police units too thinly spread and sporadically present to deter and calm rioters down by strength of numbers.

. . . Absence of internal law enforcement agencies in the townships which can immediately recognise individuals and distinguish between leaders and followers, hence discouraging activism.

. . . Boredom-stress . . . leading to acts of aggression done for kicks . . .

. . . Encapsulation: populations or groups, forced closely together by residential circumstances, tend to have a higher propensity to collective dissidence and protest than groups which are intermingled with others in heterogeneous circumstances . . .

. . . Urban reforms and promises of reforms by the authorities which have raised expectations without providing definite information on

results and outcomes. Universally, reform has tended to operate as an accelerator of unrest and violence in societies with a high degree of relative deprivation among substantial parts of the populations . . . Urbanising populations are not necessarily inclined to unrest or violence, but the *pressure* of urbanisation can tend to incline others in urban communities to turmoil or violence. This has been a finding in regard to American urban riots and is also indicated by findings elsewhere . . .”

FATAL FACTIONALISM

“. . . In short, a lumpenproletariat, the unemployed and unemployable, seem now to be the driving force behind the unrest . . .

“The major new feature (of the unrest) has undoubtedly been the fatal display of intra-opposition factionalism.

“Pre-existing tensions between the multi-racial

United Democratic Front (UDF) and the black consciousness-orientated Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO) . . . broke out into open war in the Eastern Cape in April, leaving at least four activists dead and 21 injured (mostly AZAPO members) and 35 houses damaged (Star 19/5/85) . . .”

Indicator SA, Vol 3 No 1, 1985

Hunger, disease, strikes, boycotts, sanctions, unemployment . . . and violence

The effects of apartheid and the country's economic decline are graphically portrayed in the South African Institute of Race Relations Survey for 1987/1988.

The survey notes that South Africa's economic problems continue to be exacerbated by expenditure on segregated structures and by the Government's failure to meet black political demands.

It reports that hunger has become a more serious problem in urban areas than in rural areas while tuberculosis is rising to epidemic proportions, especially in the Western Cape. According to the South African National Tuberculosis Association, the disease kills at least 10 people a day.

The survey also points to socio-economic and political trends which emerge from an examination of politics, the economy, business, the homelands, labour, housing, education, health and welfare.

The following are excerpts of *some* of the findings:

The period 1987/88 saw the highest number of strikes in South African history, as well as unprecedented levels of violence in the labour field.

In spite of Government restrictions in February which limited the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) to trade union activities only, 1988 saw the biggest worker stay-away in the country's history when at least 1 600 000 workers stayed at home in protest against the Labour Relations Amendment Bill.

The survey recorded 1 148 strikes during 1987 — mining and the railways experiencing the biggest.

Incidents of violence in the labour field recorded in the survey include:

- Virtual destruction of the Johannesburg headquarters of the Congress of South African Trade Unions in a bomb explosion in May, 1987;
- Bombing of Cosatu's offices in the Western Cape in August, 1987.
- Eight railway union members pleaded guilty to the murder of four railways employees who had not joined the strike in April, 1987;
- A union official admitted in court that non-strikers were taken to Cosatu House and beaten;
- Three bus drivers were sentenced to death in Durban for having hired a man to kill a driver who had continued to work during a strike in November, 1986;
- At least 18 people were killed during the mine strike in August, 1987, three of them in clashes involving mine security and 15 in clashes between strikers and non-strikers.

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The survey reports an estimate by the Minister of Manpower, Mr Pietie du Plessis, that up to 6 000 000 South Africans could be unemployed by the year 2000, and it notes other estimates that the implementation of economic sanctions against South Africa could see unemployment reach nearly 10 million by the end of the century.

South Africa would have a surplus of more than 9 000 000 unskilled and semi-skilled workers, according to figures from the Institute for Futures Research at Stellenbosch University which are quoted in the survey.

The survey notes that about 5 000 jobs could become redundant over the next three years as a result of Eskom's decision to close or mothball 13 of its power stations. Its expansion programmes had been based on an annual 8% growth rate in demand for electricity, but actual growth is only 4%.

The survey reports Eskom as saying sanctions have slowed down the economy and therefore the demand for energy.

The Government is on record as saying the State is firmly committed to redistribution of income through social investment.

The survey quotes Mr Kent Durr as saying when he was the Deputy Minister of Finance that the Government aimed to use an increasing share of the national budget to meet the 'just claims' of less privileged groups.

He pointed out that the health and welfare budget had risen from 12% to 18% of the national budget over the past 10 years, while education spending had risen from 13% of the total budget to 19%. The largest growth had not been in defence.

President Botha spoke in similar vein when he said in September, 1988, that the Government was committed not only to constitutional development but also to socio-economic upliftment to wipe out backlogs and inequalities in education, health, housing and welfare services in general.

Mr Botha said sanctions and boycotts could cause the Government to have R9,5 billion less available for these programmes over the next five years.

Overall, fewer school boycotts were recorded in 1987 and 1988.

However, the survey notes that there was no effective education in at least 54 Soweto high schools during the year under review.

Some of the reasons for that, according to the Department of Education and Training were:

Lack of motivation and discipline among pupils;

Dilapidated schools;

Demotivation among teachers as a result of assaults.

Parents blamed pupils' lack of discipline but also cited detentions and the presence of security forces, the survey said.

Criticism of school boycotts by the National Council of Trade Unions and the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania are recorded in the survey.

The survey mentions a statement by the Minister of National Education, Mr F W de Klerk, that the Government's 10-year plan for greater parity in education has been stalled by the country's weak economic growth.

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The National Manpower Commission reported an enrolment explosion at all black educational institutions and said the demand for infrastructure was so extensive that special efforts would be necessary to achieve any success at all. But it is still not clear whether the Government will go ahead with plans to levy tuition fees at white Government schools in order to free spending resources for black education.

Among major political trends during 1987/88 was a renewal of Church/State tension following the imposition of restrictions on various organisations on February 24.

The Survey records a statement by Dr Allan Boesak that it is the Church's duty to step into the gap left by bannings. It points to some uneasiness about this within the churches and notes that in an address to a meeting convened by the South African Council of Churches the organisation's president,

Dr Manas Buthelezi, warned against total politicisation of the Church.

Twenty-six church leaders called on all Christians in the country to boycott the municipal elections on October 21, saying they intended to disseminate their appeal through church newsletters and news agencies and by word of mouth.

The survey notes that Pope John Paul II said during a visit to Zimbabwe in September that he opposed election boycotts and that he also rejected violence and spoke in favour of negotiation.

It also points out that the then president-elect of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the Rev Stanley Mogoba, has said that he could not subscribe 'to a school of thought that recognised that while violence was a fact at present, its continuation was inevitable'. He rejected the notion of a just or holy war and, in March, also called for negotiation.

The Institute of Race Relations Survey can be obtained from: SAIRR, Auden House, 68 De Korte Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg 2001, South Africa.