

RIGHTS AND RIOTS IN NATAL

LEO KUPER

*Dean of the Faculty of Social Science, University of Natal.
Author of "Passive Resistance in South Africa", etc.*

AFRICAN leaders face the dilemma of choice between violence and non-violence in their struggle against oppression. These alternative means of political action were debated at the Accra Conference in December 1958, and the final compromise resolution reflects the conflict of views. The South African delegation strongly advocated non-violence, and this is the policy of the leaders of the South African liberation movement.

The case for non-violence may rest on moral grounds, or tactical considerations, or both. Where there are no constitutional means of change, as in South Africa, and where non-violent techniques appear relatively ineffective, we may expect a questioning of the whole philosophy of non-violence, especially by the younger men. And their doubts are heightened by the patent successes of violent action. Who could have foretold the constitutional and social changes in Kenya, following upon Mau Mau, or the quick pace of constitutional reform in the Belgian Congo after the riots at Leopoldville? And in Durban, where the low level of African income has been acknowledged for many years, an improvement in wages, though small, followed rapidly on the recent disturbances. In making an appeal for increased wages, the Director of the Bantu Administration Department in Durban declared that this was an opportunity to speak out "which I may not readily find again, an opportunity to be heard, because minds of men have become apprehensive and responsive by recent events at Cato Manor".

The disturbances began on the 18th June at Cato Manor, in the vast straggle of shacks which house fully half the African families living in Durban, when African women voiced their dissatisfaction with the Durban Corporation in a demonstration outside the Cato Manor Beer Hall. The previous afternoon some 75 women had stormed the Beer Hall and driven out African men at drink. The following morning they again demonstrated outside the Beer Hall, their numbers mounting to thousands, and demanded to see the Director of the Durban Bantu Administration Department. Police reinforcements moved into the Beer Hall, converting it into an armed fortress. African men wanting to take part in the demonstration were

driven away by the women.

The Director arrived at about 2 p.m. and invited five women to state their grievances. The speakers were all self-selected, showing the spontaneous nature of the demonstrations. The Director heard their grievances, and replied that the matter would be discussed further; they must now go home. The women were dissatisfied with this answer. The District Commandant of Police ordered them to disperse, and when they failed to do so, they were driven by baton charge across the stream into the shack area. Stones were thrown, and shots fired, conventional gambits which we have come to recognise in South Africa as the precursors to destruction of property and loss of life. The men became involved, lawless elements took advantage of the situation, and by nightfall buildings were fired in Cato Manor and the adjoining Chesterville location. The main target was the property of the Corporation, administrative centres, community halls, trading centres, vehicles; but other property was also destroyed, church, school and welfare buildings. Four people were killed.

Earlier in the day, the demonstrations had already spread to other beer halls, and in the period that followed most of the African areas of Durban were affected. Women were the prime movers in the picketing of beer halls and the occasional stoning of municipal buses. Many were arrested, and the daily papers began to headline their trials: "43 Native Women, 6 Men Accused in Beer Hall Rumpus", "Court Told: Atmosphere in Cato Manor is Explosive". Eight beer halls closed down for a period and African welfare services were threatened, since they are subsidized by beer profits. A bizarre commentary on the whole situation was provided by the manoeuvres to get the men back into the beer halls, so that the profits might again flow into welfare services.

Now tension started to develop in the rural areas of Natal, as women began to demonstrate by the destruction of dipping tanks and deputations to government officials. The most serious disturbance was at Harding, where tribesmen marched on the town to free their women, convicted for destruction of government property. Some farmlands were burnt, and the white population armed itself against the tribesmen. About 20 miles away, large numbers of African women, some armed with shields and spears, gathered to voice their grievances. Saracen armoured cars were sent to control them; and one of the news-

papers carried a picture of an African woman, armed with a stick, threatening one of the armoured cars. At Maritzburg, meanwhile, African boys had set fire to schools in a minor reverberation of the Cato Manor disturbances. By August 21, according to a newspaper report, more than 10,000 women had been involved in the disturbances, and 624 Africans, mainly women, had been sentenced to a total of 168 years' imprisonment and/or fines totalling £7,130. The demonstrations still continue, the most recent being a peaceful deputation to the Native Commissioner at Ixopo. 'Golden City Post' (October 11, 1959) reports that about 25 white policemen arrived, armed with pickhandles, sjamboks and sten-guns: the women were ordered to disperse. When they refused, three hundred and sixty-six were arrested, convicted and sentenced, each to a fine of £35 or four months imprisonment, a total of 122 years imprisonment or a fine of £12,810.

How are these events to be interpreted? The women of Cato Manor are specific about their grievances against the Durban Corporation. The Corporation, we are told, had promised in 1949 to build a place where Africans would be given licenses to brew and sell beer. Then, when the Beer Hall was built, the Corporation decided to sell the beer itself and made huge profits. Permits are given to the residents to brew a limited amount of beer, but these proved to be traps, because relatives, even a son, with whom a resident enjoyed his drink, were arrested and charged a fine ranging from £2 to 10s. And since it is not the Zulu custom for men to drink on their own, they go to the beer halls, which take part of their very small earnings. On the way home they are picked up by the police, and what little money they are bringing back for the children goes in fines. The Corporation boasts of the great profits it makes from beer, and at the same time refuses to pay higher wages on the ground that Africans must be earning enough in order to waste so much money at the beer halls. Because the municipality has not given a lead, other employers have not raised wages. Many of the women in Cato Manor are widows, who make a living by taking in washing and brewing beer. The Corporation—the grievances continue—destroys the homes of the people without giving them other accommodation in neighbouring locations. If a man loses his employment, he may be deported from Durban. There is no employment for the young people, they get into trouble, and are sent away to the

farms.

The Director of the Bantu Administration Department in Durban felt that the crucial issue was poverty. "I wish to make bold and say that whatever reasons have been advanced are of a purely superficial nature. Even the women who started off this tragic course did not express their grievances in terms of bare, basic and intrinsic facts. They have talked about Kafir beer and illicit liquor, transport and housing, shack removals and influx control, the keeping of livestock and the keeping of husbands, gambling dens and of shebeens. They have talked about those subjects as if they mattered for their own sakes. Only here and there did the real, naked reason break to the surface—money or rather lack of it . . . The basic and ultimate reason is an economic one. The poverty of the urban Bantu; the discrepancy between his earning capacity and his cost of living; his inability to meet the demands of modern times in a city modelled on the Western way of life; his inability even to meet the barest necessity of life, to feed, clothe, educate and house himself and his family".

This is certainly the core of the matter. The sufferings of poverty are aggravated by influx control. From the European point of view, influx control is a mechanism by which Africans are "canalised" to the areas in which there is a European demand for their labour. From the point of view of Zulus living in the rural areas of Natal, influx control often denies them the opportunity to alleviate their poverty by seeking employment in the areas traditionally open to them, more particularly Durban. For many urban Africans it creates insecurity in the threat of deportation if their labour becomes redundant or if they are declared illegal residents in the city.

Added to poverty are the many oppressive laws and administrative procedures. In Maritzburg and at Cato Manor, antagonism was directed against the Bantu Education Act in the burning of community schools. In the Harding area, there was resentment over a land resettlement scheme, which would have involved the destruction of homes. Dipping tanks were a general source of grievance, and women complained that they were obliged to give their labour for the maintenance of dipping tanks without reward. There were complaints against anti-squatter laws and against increased taxation.

Yet the African people have no effective means of lightening their burdens. Deputations are of little value, save to forge

unity, and to inform the world of the disabilities of the non-whites. As Chief Luthuli, President of the African National Congress, expressed it: "a child that does not cry may die unnoticed, carried by its mother on her back". When the Director of Bantu Administration in Durban reproached the women for not having come to him with their grievances, they asked of what use deputations could be. Had the Director consulted them before demolishing their homes? The Location Advisory Boards are purely advisory, and even then, Africans complain that little attention is given to their advice.

Mr. A. W. G. Champion, Chairman of the Locations Combined Advisory Boards of Durban, commented that "the African women of Natal have demonstrated that the sufferings endured by many families cannot be described in constitutional words. It is the voice of oppressed people who have no other means of voicing their grievances before the governments of the land . . . I do not blame them. I lay the blame at the door of the multiplicity of the laws and their regulations, which are harshly administered by men who do not show sympathy. Men and women in urban areas and rural areas suffer and feel the same". One of the demonstrators expressed the point more graphically. In destroying a dipping tank, the people had written a letter which the Government would read. (Report in 'Drum').

There is nothing new in the forms of action I have described—the police baton charge and the subsequent destruction of property, the beer hall picket, the stoning of buses, the destruction of equipment in the agricultural betterment schemes, the deputation to government officials; and in the past, women have played a part in this type of demonstration. The extent of their participation is however something new, the deliberate exclusion of the men, and the determination to act and to speak for themselves. This is all the more remarkable against the background of the traditional subordination of the Zulu woman, which is reinforced by the provisions of the Natal Code. An unconscious expression of subordination emerged in an interview with one of the Cato Manor women who complained that the police had beaten them. "No one has the right to beat a woman, only her husband". In this context of the almost perpetual minority status of the Zulu woman, under the guardianship of her father or her husband or husband's relative, the militant emancipation of women in these demonstrations suggests the beginnings of a suffragette movement.

This was the viewpoint of one African who laid responsibility for it on Government and Municipal authorities. They were treating the women like men. They issued them with separate registration books. "Why not both husband and wife on one card, seeing that they are married?" The photographers had removed the women's headgear, which only husbands are entitled to do. Officials had received deputations of women and listened to their grievances. Men resent the new emancipation of the women, according to this commentator, but they are behind them, because it is all part of the big fight against the whites. Since the Government treats women like men, let them behave as such.

I also believe that we are seeing the beginning of a suffragette movement, but arising from somewhat different causes. In the insecurity of the towns, and as a result of the migrant labour system and influx control, the stable core of the family is often the mother and her children. The low wages of their husbands oblige women to take on an economic role. In nursing and teaching they often earn more than their men. One can hear the phrase—"she is a woman, but she behaves like a man", or "she is like a brother to me"—indicating the new economic role of the women. And these new economic responsibilities are reflected in a growing emancipation.

Interwoven with the suffragette stirrings is the liberation movement. The laws bear heavily on the women. They are equally affected with the men by "canalisation" under influx control. And the impact of government control has been brought directly to them by the registration book (pass) system. Most politicians would have despaired of the conservative, subordinate Zulu women. Their level of political consciousness could hardly have been higher than that of many of the women who support the Opposition United Party. Yet in a short time, economic circumstances and Government policies have combined to awaken political consciousness.

The uniformity of laws bearing equally on the urban and rural population partly accounts for the rapid imitative spread of the demonstrations. To this must be added the fact that there are not two economies in Natal, a Zulustan economy and a white economy, but a single whole. The deportation of women from Durban, on the grounds that they were not legally entitled to live there, has helped to spread resentment and political consciousness into the more remote areas. The homogeneity of

the population, predominantly Zulu, is a further factor. And finally there is the suffragette aspect, the curious telepathic contagion women seem to have for each other.

The involvement of the women has meant the deeper involvement of the men. They are embittered by baton charges against the women, by their arrest and imprisonment. They are shamed by the militant role of the women, by the imputation that they are allowing them to fight their battles because police action will be less violent against women than against men. But above all, the woman represents the home. During the Cato Manor disturbances, the women sang "You touch women, you touch grinding stones". The militancy of the women threatens the family hearth.

In consequence political consciousness has been heightened among the Zulu people, a remarkable development given the general political backwardness of the population of Natal, both white and non-white. Some attempt was made to fasten responsibility on the African National Congress. This is a conventional allegation. Any disturbance must be due to Congress or Communists or both, and the allegation has the function of deflecting analysis away from the ideologies of the Government. Congress disclaimed responsibility—I have no doubt personally that the demonstrations were largely spontaneous—and immediately sought to restrain violence. It has now set itself the task of guiding the new political consciousness in constructive non-violent action along the lines of Congress policy. The task is made all the more difficult by the introduction of the raw inexperienced cadres of the women, and the deeper emotional involvements of the men. Peaceful development toward a democratic society in Natal may depend in large measure on the ability of Congress to canalise passion, under conditions of great hardship and provocation, into disciplined and effective non-violent political action.

The conflicting ideologies and programmes of the Congress Movement and the breakaway recently-formed Pan-Africanist Congress will be dealt with in the next number, when we will publish an exchange between Mr. P. Nkutsou Raboroko, Africanist Secretary for Education, and Adv. Duma Nokwe, Secretary-General of the African National Congress.