

Beyond the bodycount

THE BISHO dead have now been buried, and to all intents and purposes, South Africa has returned to its troubled normality. Indeed the "South African peace process" is now so awash with violence (more people die from political violence in an 'ordinary' week than were killed at Bisho) that it has become almost a necessity to bury introspection with the bodies of the dead.

Phoenix-like, hope must perpetually arise out of the latest tragedy, for otherwise the burden of pessimism becomes too much. What may appear to outsiders as a callous indifference on the part of both black and white South Africans to the victims of this latest disaster is, in fact, a necessity. To ponder too deeply upon the horror of Bisho could be to give way to despair, and beyond that to a resignation of the collapse of the country into anarchy and civil war.

Hence it is that within a few short weeks of the massacre, attention is turning to Bisho's silver lining. In short, this interpretation argues that, for all its brutality, Bisho was just what was needed to get negotiations going again.

Transitions to democracy from authoritarian rule are everywhere characterised by uncertainty, as divided societies seek to claw their way through political timetables which are far more compressed than history ever allowed to the emergent nations of Western Europe and North America. Indeed, diversions and distractions along the road to democracy are completely normal, and Bisho needs to be located firmly in perspective; it was only a concentration of killings amidst a wave of violence which has engulfed the country since 1990 as, in essence, the various political forces compete for space and loyalty amongst a black population which is about to become enfranchised. It follows that this violence is unlikely to cease until the political race is over, and a new government, whose standing is legitimated by a democratic election, is installed in Pretoria.

What is good about the Bisho massacre, therefore, is that one way or another it has massively increased pressures upon the major political actors, notably the ANC and NP, to resume negotiations where they were previously left off at CODESA.

FOR ALL its disturbing cynicism and instrumentality, this perspective packs a considerable punch. Yet what needs to be stressed is that the government and the ANC are not now due to resume talks out of the depths of their mutual horror, but because Bisho represented a major and fundamental defeat for the former. Indeed, the massacre indicated how quickly matters are beginning to slip out of President De Klerk's control.

A first point is quite simply that the government lost in the hail of Gqozo's bullets the very considerable ground which De Klerk had gained internationally when he won his handsome referendum victory for the continuation of reform. Then it seemed to many observers that apartheid, at long last, really was dead, killed off once and for all by the convincing defeat of the white right, which subsequently registered gaping divisions. But having pronounced it dead, the international press was forced to resurrect apartheid in the killing grounds of the Ciskei.

What the government tried to do, and in this regard its efforts were echoed by a large body of the established South African press, was to shuffle responsibility for the killings off onto the shoulders of the ANC, and especially Ronnie Kasrils, not only for staging the march in the first place, but also for breaking the terms of the agreement concerning the exact limits and constraints to which this particular instance of mass action should adhere. But much to its chagrin, what the government found was that although international opinion proved quite critical of the ANC, it was as overwhelmingly condemnatory of the De Klerk government as if it had been white fingers, and not black, which had been on the CDF's triggers. The unimpressive Gqozo was seen as the satrap he is, and the South African authorities were roundly censured for not having reined him in.

Having declared at CODESA for the re-incorporation of the TBVC states, how could the government ever contemplate that the inexperienced troops of the CDF should face a massive ANC throng with live ammunition? Where was any minimal concession to modern techniques of crowd control? And hence it was that, rather than being able to pass

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off the killings as yet another species of black on black violence (as so much of the conflict between Inkatha and the ANC in Natal has been internationally portrayed), responsibility for the deaths was pinned firmly on the government; for having established the divisive homeland system in the first place, for not having previously disposed of the local tyranny of Gqozo, and for not having exercised proper restraint over the CDF via the bevy of seconded South African military and intelligence officers who command it. Meanwhile, the ANC, although not smelling to the coterie of reporters and opinion-makers of roses, recovered much of the sympathy it had previously lost internationally.

A SECOND adverse consequence of the Bisho massacre for the government has been that it has narrowed its options. Since negotiations were broken off at CODESA II, the government has been busy at work promoting an anti-ANC coalition in support of a federal constitution.

It was significant that in drawing up its original constitutional proposals, and throughout CODESA I and CODESA II, the National Party avoided commitment to 'federalism' in favour of a preference for 'regionalism', a term which was sufficiently flexible to enable it to seek a compromise — even a consensus — with the ANC (which remained wedded to the notion of a unitary constitution). As a consequence, the prospect was glimpsed of a surprisingly trouble-free transition to an interim government and even a dual NP-ANC administration, founded upon a shared commitment to a shared South African nationalism. This new South Africa would be formally unitary, yet NP reluctance to concede power to a highly centralised ANC-dominated government would be catered for by the granting of



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significant (perhaps entrenched) powers to some nine or ten regional authorities.

HOWEVER, with the collapse of CODESA, the government signalled a new assault on the ANC by now openly espousing a federalism whose explicit design would be to shift the balance of power away from the centre to the regions. Meanwhile, the NP launched a pre-electoral strategy of attempting to broaden its base of support by opening its doors to all races and by seeking to construct a conservative alliance capable of securing control of, if not the majority, then the most economically important regions.

Pik Botha made the headlines with his upbeat proclamation that the NP could win an absolute majority in a non-racial election. Just as the government so gravely miscalculated the weight of popular support which swept ZANU-PF to power in the 1980 Zimbabwe election and SWAPO to power in Namibia in 1990, it is quite possible that it is seriously deluding itself as to its potential for garnering black votes in South Africa itself. None the less, rather than gamble upon the democratic option of securing majority support and thereby maintaining control of a centralised state, the government has reverted to exploiting the electoral-coalition possibilities provided by the continued existence of the bantustans.

This has recently been convincingly portrayed as follows (Grahamstown Rural Committee Newsletter 29):

(i) In KwaZulu-Natal, the NP believes it can forge an alliance with Inkatha to share power in a regional government;

(ii) likewise, in the ethnically diverse PWV region, it reckons that an NP-Inkatha linkage would block a victory by the ANC, which it continues to view as an overwhelmingly Xhosa organisation;

(iii) in the Western Cape, it confidently expects to capture control by virtue of its appropriating the vast proportion of the Coloured vote.

In short, by exercising direct or shared power over the three economically most important regions in the country, the NP aims to inhibit severely the financial and physical capacity of an ANC-led government to rule.

MEANWHILE, the government admits that the ANC will likely sweep the Transkei, Border and Eastern Cape, wherein lies two-thirds of the latter's national membership. Indeed, the government may further concede the ANC's proposal that this area be divided into two regions. However, for its part, it may go on to argue that such a division should be based upon an expansion of the existing bantustans of Transkei and Ciskei, just as in the northern Transvaal it would like to see the powers of the present Bophuthatswana government of Lucas Mangope confirmed, extended and entrenched.

The government has for some considerable time viewed Transkei as a lost electoral cause. However, its continuing support for Gqozo in the Ciskei indicates that, at the very least, it intends to take the electoral battle into the very heart of the enemy's territory. To this end, the launch by the Brigadier of his Inkatha-like African Democratic Movement (ADM) represents an attempt to mobilise conservative sentiment based upon what remains of the headman system, against the ANC and — who knows? — snatch the Ciskei-based region from under the latter's nose.

At the national level, meanwhile, a Christian Democratic Alliance of the NP, Inkatha, ADM and Mangope's Bophuthatswana Democratic Party and other sundry elements would form a tight-knit bloc in a second, regionally-based upper house of parliament, to operate as a check upon radical initiatives by the ANC majority government.

The march on Bisho was of course intended by the ANC to counter this strategy by depriving the envisaged Christian Democratic Alliance of one its homeland stilts. The same goes for the

projected marches upon the capitals of KwaZulu and Bophuthatswana. Whether or not, in the Bisho case, the ANC seriously believed it had a chance of toppling Gqozo remains unclear, but the more salient point is that it was utilising the march as a remarkable opportunity for mobilising and rallying its support.

Consequently, when the CDF let rip, they gunned down whatever minimal chance Gqozo ever had of promoting his ADM as a respectable minority tendency; and furthermore, whereas Gqozo previously was but an undistinguished nonentity with whom the NP might have chosen to coalesce, the killings exalted him to the ranks of an international criminal with whom it can now scarcely choose to associate. Meanwhile to dismiss him — by fiat or by coup — would imply a capacity to have prevented the killings; but to allow him to remain in power implies an incautious, if not callous, disregard for international opinion.

BY THREATENING to march on Bulundi the ANC has compounded De Klerk's problem, for whilst risking accusations that it is playing a dangerous game with the lives of its supporters, it knows that the government cannot afford any prospect of a repeat massacre. Hence, we may surmise, De Klerk's rapid and major concessions of amnesty for key political prisoners, just to get negotiations back on track. For what the government also recognises, with increasing urgency, is that it is rapidly running out of time if the economy is not going to relapse into a yet more vicious spiral of decline.

There is a good cause, therefore, for proposing that whilst Bisho has propelled both the ANC and the NP back into negotiations, it has enabled the former to reassume the moral high ground at the same time as seriously compromising the development of the latter's immediate strategy for retaining a significant hold on power. But Bisho has also likely had a longer term impact which could also work against the government's interests.

There can be no doubt that the massacre has sharpened the lines of cleavage. Whereas CODESA operated (not unsuccessfully until the final breakdown) upon a basis of 'sufficient consensus', the distrust between the major actors may now have risen to such a level that the search for compromise — at



CODESA III or any other forum — may well become more difficult. Nor indeed, has the prospect of what we might call the government's other possible strategy, aiming for an NP-ANC duumvirate, in any way been enhanced.

What we may see instead is a greater determination by the ANC to push for concessions in an area the government is least disposed and perhaps least able to make them: control of the security forces. Indeed, any forthcoming battle over the federal or unitary nature of the new constitution may well pale into insignificance compared with the struggle for control of the security forces — seen as the final guarantor by the NP of white living standards and as the key instrument by the ANC for breaking the back of white minority rule. Few should doubt that the third round of the negotiation process looms as much tougher than the second; and there is no guarantee that the match will not last a full ten rounds.

Against that, there is some speculation that, in a desperate bid to rescue the economy, both the ANC and NP may decide to go for broke in an earlier than expected election in recognition of the fact that only a fully legitimated government can conceivably hope to re-establish political order and attract much needed foreign investment. And in that case, what can be argued is that the Bisho massacre will have had the major consequence of having increased the determination of the international community to despatch an army of electoral monitors.

MUCH HAS been said in recent times concerning the fact of South Africa's increasing marginalisation. With the end of the Cold War, the West can concede black rule and, if need be, allow South Africa to collapse back into its declining continent as just another chaotically run African country. But against that, what is really not in the West's interests is for South Africa to descend into civil war. It would be far more convenient if a new South Africa could be ruled by an indisputably, legitimated government. However, what the massacre has done has been to suggest that, for all Mr De Klerk's nice face, the government has scarcely changed its spots. To put it bluntly, a government so crass as to kill protesters in front of the television cameras can scarcely be

In the years between Sharpeville and Bisho many have died

ON MONDAY, 7 September 1992, at least 24 ANC demonstrators were shot dead and nearly 200 wounded when Ciskei soldiers in Bisho opened fire on a 40 000 strong crowd protesting against the homeland's military rule. The permission had been granted by Ciskei authorities for the march and a rally to be held in the Bisho Stadium.

trusted to hold a free and fair election. To put it equally bluntly, what the outside world now wants to see is the election of an at least ANC-led government, so that the issue of apartheid finally goes away.

ALL THIS implies bad news for the NP's projected Christian Alliance. Quite how an election will be conducted in this country whilst violence is so rife remains a question which neither the ANC nor NP have as yet given adequate attention. However, what the idea of the Christian Alliance rests upon is the ability of its various ethnically-defined constituents to deliver their ethnic votes. And behind this lies the long experience of controlled and rigged elections in the bantustans.

But what would happen if in Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu and Ciskei there were to be a truly free vote? What would happen if in the secrecy of the polling booth and the integrity of the vote counting process the ethnic construct fell apart? The answer is self-evident: the Christian Alliance could well be blown apart.

In the final analysis, what the Bisho massacre has done has been to reinforce the international community's determination to push for a viable settlement in South Africa. It has had enough of its Somalias and its Yugoslavias, and if nothing else, it would prefer South Africa to hang together.

That requires a genuinely democratic election. That has to be good news for the country as a whole; but it is a far more ambiguous message for Mr De Klerk and the National Party.

● Professor Southall's article was written immediately after the Bisho massacre.

According to journalists who were on the scene, the shooting took place after some protesters stormed through an open rear entrance to the stadium, while another group of demonstrators removed a section of razor wire adjoining the stadium. It is reported that the Ciskeian troops opened fire on ANC marchers without any warning. Brigadier Gqozo insists that his soldiers had received orders to shoot in self-defence

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after shots were fired and hand grenades were flung at them from within the ANC crowd. The ANC says that the shooting was unprovoked and that the Ciskeian soldiers had at no time been in danger.

Other ANC supporters were stopped by Ciskeians shortly before reaching the border on their way to the march. They were thoroughly searched and the troops swore at them and said they were fooled by Chris Hani into believing they could topple Gqozo. The troops were also reported to have said that in Ciskei they did not use teargas and they did not have bullets to waste by firing warning shots.

Surely, soldiers are taught the circumstances justifying the use of different types of equipment, the handling of various weapons, and how to assess whether a crowd is aggressive and threatening, or merely excited.

Emphasis should always be placed on the need for minimum force and its gradual escalation. The first step should be to speak to the crowd. If this did not result in its dispersal, a warning should be given that, following a specified time,

