

**Background to political violence:  
Pietermaritzburg region 1987-1988**

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From the beginning of 1987 to the early months of 1988, some 600 people were killed in an outbreak of political violence in the townships to the west of the city and in the adjoining peri-urban areas of KwaZulu. Hundreds more were maimed and injured, and thousands driven from their homes. Damage to property ran into millions of rand. In many areas round the City, organized community life broke down and education systems collapsed. Overall, the violence was the worst experienced in any one region of South Africa since the revolt of 1976-7. In the Natal Midlands, it was probably the worst since the 'Bhambatha rebellion' of 1906.

Numerous attempts were made by commentators in the Press during and after the fighting to explain its causes. The most incisive analyses were those, which were concerned to place the Pietermaritzburg violence in a broader political context. The argument put forward here is that the conflict that took place in the local townships in 1987-1988 cannot adequately be explained without reference to, firstly, the history of African politics in Natal since at least the mid-1970s; secondly, the role of the South African state; and thirdly, the role of 'big business' interests in the region.

The first political organization since the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960 to attract a mass following among African people in Natal was *Inkatha*, formed by the leaders of the new KwaZulu *bantustan* in 1975. By the later 1970s, it was emerging as essentially a political vehicle for the material aspirations of the rising KwaZulu based middle class of civil servants, small entrepreneurs, tribal chiefs and other local authority figures. The leadership successfully used appeals to a common Zulu heritage to win emotional support from large numbers of working-class Zulu people in Natal.

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focusing on the  
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<sup>1</sup>SOURCE: “Pietermaritzburg 1838-1988: a new portrait of an African city”, edited by John Laband and Robert Haswell (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press and Shuter & Shooter, 1988), pp. 221-2.

In the first few years of its existence, *Inkatha* was also able to win wider popular support outside Natal by keeping on good terms with the African National Congress, which was reviving its presence inside South Africa after the Soweto revolt of 1976-7. But as support for the more militant and nationally-rooted anti-apartheid stance of the ANC increased, so the wider appeal of local, *bantustan* based organizations like *Inkatha* began to fade. In 1979-80, the two organizations broke off relations and began to take an increasingly hostile line towards each other.

The rapid growth of independent trade unions in Natal in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983, posed a threat to *Inkatha's* hold on popular support in its home area. As an organization dominated by an emerging privileged class, with a vested interest in the comfortable jobs, protected business opportunities and patronage networks provided by the *bantustan* system, *Inkatha* was unable to act effectively in the long-term material and political interests of the mass of African working-class people in Natal. In spite of its increasingly 'Zulu-ist' rhetoric, numbers of Zulu-speaking people began to give their support to the trade unions and to anti-apartheid community organizations outside *Inkatha's* and KwaZulu's range of bureaucratic controls.

After the break with the ANC, the *Inkatha* leadership made the conscious decision to establish a wing of its youth organization on para-military lines to 'safeguard those things we erect in the national interest'. Increasingly, *Inkatha* supporters began to use strong-arm methods to suppress the growth of rival quasi-political organizations in Natal. In 1980 armed gangs of *Inkatha* supporters were active in stamping out a schools boycott in the townships round Durban. In 1983, an attack by *Inkatha* supporters on anti-*Inkatha* students at the University of Zululand left five people dead.

Towards the end of 1984 co-operation between important sections of the trade union movement and community, organizations aligned with or affiliated to the UDF began on a national basis. In response, *Inkatha* began to operate more vigorously to establish itself as the sole effective political organization in the African townships round Durban. In August 1985, a series of attacks by *Inkatha* supporters on trade unionists and members of youth organizations culminated in violent confrontations between youth groups and well-organized bands of vigilantes. Several days of fighting ended with 75 people dead and *Inkatha* in control of the major Durban townships.

In the townships round Pietermaritzburg, civic associations and youth-organizations with UDF, sympathies began to emerge in 1985. From the end of the year, they received increasing support from local branches of the newly formed COSATU group of unions. Tensions between these organizations and *Inkatha* began to mount, particularly after large numbers of workers staged a successful stay-away in July 1985 in support of strikers at the BTR-Sarmcol factory in Howick. This was followed in August-September by a consumer boycott, which was opposed by *Inkatha*, of white-owned shops in Howick and Pietermaritzburg. Another stay-away in Pietermaritzburg on May Day 1986 signalled that working-class political consciousness was rapidly increasing in a region where *Inkatha* had never been particularly strong.

Meanwhile the South African government was beginning to take increasingly forceful measures to try to stamp out the popular revolt against township administrations that had flared in many parts of the country from 1984 onwards. Under emergency regulations, thousands of UDF and COSATU activists and supporters were rounded up by the police. Individual opposition leaders were murdered, communities that were strongholds of resistance to the state were broken up, and numbers of townships were occupied by the South African army. From late 1985 there was a wave of vigilante attacks, many of them apparently connived at by the state, on community organizations all over the country.

At the same time the state was beginning to shift away publicly from its *bantustan* policies, which had patently failed to produce either economic development or political quiescence in the 'homelands', towards a policy of 'regionalization'. In terms of this the *bantustans* were to be linked with neighbouring urban and industrial centres to form 'development' regions, and *bantustan* governments could expect to have more powers devolved on them to negotiate the necessary arrangements with white local and regional authorities. In Natal, this policy converged in important respects with an initiative taken by big business and industrial interests to draw the rising and politically ambitious middle-class stratum, which dominated KwaZulu politics into an alliance against the antiapartheid and partly socialist popular movement, which was beginning to take organizational form in the region. To begin negotiating the terms of this alliance, the so-called KwaZulu-Natal Indaba was set up at the beginning of 1986. More than ever, it became important for *Inkatha* to establish undisputed control over African people in Natal in order to be able to present itself as their sole representative organization.

At the end of 1986 *Inkatha* began to go onto the offensive against the growing challenge to its political position in the townships round Pietermaritzburg. In December of that year, a group of vigilantes invaded Mpophomeni township outside Howick and killed four members and supporters of a COSATU union. Early in 1987, vigilante-gangs in Mpumalanga, near Hammarsdale, began to turn on local youth organizations, and a long series of killings followed.

In the Edendale region, conflict between *Inkatha* supporters on one-side and youth organizations and *COSATU* members on the other began to spill over into violence in the early months of 1987. It was intensified by the success in Pietermaritzburg of a national stay-away called by the *UDF* and *COSATU* for 5 and 6 May in protest against the white general election held on the 6th. By the end of August, some 80 people had been killed in the Pietermaritzburg area. The available evidence indicates that in most incidents of violence the aggressors were supporters of *Inkatha*.

In about July or August 1987 local *Inkatha* leaders seem to have begun a drive to suppress resistance to *Inkatha* in the townships round Pietermaritzburg and the neighbouring Vulindlela area of KwaZulu, and to increase the organization's local membership. A number of vigilante leaders, often men of little education, seized the opportunity to expand their personal power bases. They recruited gangs of armed followers from the large number of unemployed men and youths in the townships, and proceeded to establish their domination over territories in which

they terrorized the inhabitants into joining *Inkatha* and paying them 'fees' of various kinds.

Little effective police action seems to have been taken to check the vigilante violence, and the youth organizations which were bearing the brunt of the attacks began to step up the organization of communal self-defence committees. Retaliation against the vigilantes became more frequent. Both sides attacked 'soft' targets and forced numbers of apolitical people to support them in the mounting conflict, but again it is clear that most of the violence was provoked from the side of the vigilantes. In spite of the virtual absence of any on-the-ground UDF, structures capable of co-ordinating a response to the attacks, large numbers of people who had previously known little or nothing about the UDF came to see it as a symbol of resistance to *Inkatha* and to apartheid. Lack of evidence, due largely to state restrictions on the reporting of the violence, makes it impossible at this stage to analyze the social patterns of the conflict in any depth.

In the period from September 1987 to February 1988, some 500 people were killed in the fighting. Two-thirds of the victims whose political affiliations are known were supporters of UDF-linked organizations, and one-third of *Inkatha*. When, from late October, the vigilantes began to suffer reverses, the security forces intervened by systematically detaining hundreds of anti-*Inkatha* activists. By contrast, very few, if any, *Inkatha* supporters were detained, and in spite of a series of court injunctions against them, the vigilante leaders were allowed to remain at large and active.

At first, most white people in Pietermaritzburg took little notice of the fighting which was raging in the townships. White political and business leaders in Natal, though increasingly embarrassed by the association of numbers of *Inkatha* supporters with the violence, were generally committed to *Inkatha's* side through their support for the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba. When the escalation of violence threatened to disrupt industry and commerce in Pietermaritzburg, local business leaders attempted to arrange peace negotiations between leaders of *Inkatha*, the UDF and *COSATU*. These initiatives had little effect, and in the event they were torpedoed by the South African state when, in February 1988, it in effect proscribed the *UDF*.

By March 1988, for reasons that are not yet clear, the level of violence in the townships was diminishing. In the Edendale area and in parts of Vulindlela, unlike the main Durban townships in 1985 and Crossroads-KTC near Cape Town in 1986, state-backed vigilantes had been unable to destroy organized popular resistance. In effect the vigilantes had been fought off by the young men and boys who called themselves the 'comrades', though at horrific cost to the latter. The state of 'violent equilibrium' that followed was maintained only by the deployment of a large security force contingent. It was unlikely that real peace would return to the townships without a major realignment of political forces both in Natal and in the wider South African context.

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