

# Horrible image is now a scandalous part of our national 'family album'

SUREN PILLAY

IT'S HARD to discern a photograph, as much as I try to do so, looking at the image that stared out at us this past Monday morning in the Cape Times. It is of weakness displaying itself in the false guise of strength. An image of African dignity as South Africans attack foreign African refugees on the eve of Africa Day celebrations.

In the picture, an outline of a human form is visible, engulfed in raging flames. A lone black police woman attempts to save the victim. Behind the mirage, the policeman's two black male colleagues look on at the scene. It's not clear if one of them is smiling. A man at the shop in Cape Town where I purchased my paper thinks so, as he shows the image to white clientele in horror, as if to further underscore, without the need to even whisper, the barbarism unfolding in the centre.

At this point I don't know the fate of the figure in the fire. The caption

and the accompanying story are silent on what happened after. A reporter recalls a panicked resident warning police that "Shangans are being attacked". She tells us that "one plump woman... could not contain her laughter... and regaled her audience with details of the event. Will it be possible to make collective meaning of this divisive event, which brings laughter to some and horror to others?"

The still photograph has the capacity to arrest time like no other medium. We flip through our family albums, recalling the poignant moments of our lives. From the moment the camera took a portable form, it quickly allowed for the democratisation of the image. The photograph has become intimate with the ways we mark our private life, as families, in our rituals of birth, and celebrations of marriages, for example.

Photography has also acted as a marker of our shared public history. But those moments which enter into

history—the authored, fought over, revised truth of our past which values us as humanity, or nations—can simultaneously bring us to shame.

The image of Nelson Mandela, emerging from prison, fist clenched, white at his side, marches barely holding order, is perhaps one such photograph. It captures in full joy and tragedy the maxim of Walter Benjamin, the German cultural critic, that "every document of barbarism is also a document of civilisation." Barbarism and civilisation, and the futile violence of its civilising mission, become transparent that day to many sceptical South Africans, as the "enemy", Mandela, took a few steps from prison, and blurred before their eyes into dignity, elegance and grace.

The ubiquity of the technology to capture still images has transformed the relationship between the spectacular and the banal. Its Trojan Horse power is that it has made the "scandal" more possible. The US

army banned images of weakness: the rows of coffins of soldiers' bodies coming home from Iraq draped in the stars and stripes in its hubris, it forgot to control images of the way it gloats. Abu Ghraib symbolised the gloating of an occupation at a loss. Otherwise, denim-strewn young footsloggers now had control over the "enemy" in an invisible prison regulated only by the determined will of an executive power at war with the world, convinced that any means was necessary. The private images of gloating became scandalous, which in turn scandalised behaviour that appears to have been normal in the prison.

I have not seen an image arrest attention like this in a while. Not that we have not had pictures of dead bodies on our front pages. And every that a human being set alight and burning is another marker. The struggle for life, battling the presence of death being cheered on, is something we recoil from and can-

not turn away from. And we have these lines, turning where you came from into a political matter.

In his reflections on violence after colonial rule, written in 1963, Frantz Fanon observed with prescient foreboding clarity: "The colonised man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people... the colonised man is an envious man."

Without a meaningful deconstruction of the society which benefits all, Fanon warned, this envy in the post-independence period turns on outsiders: "From nationalism, we have passed to chauvinism, and finally to racism. These foreigners are called on to leave, their shops are burned, their steel stalks wrecked..."

On the eve of Africa Day, the challenge of decolonisation, it seems, remains.

Philly is senior researcher in the department of democracy and governance at the Human Sciences Research Council.

## UNMET EXPECTATIONS FEED SIMMERING ANGER

# Violence springs from government failures

FRANS CRONJE

THE wave of violence that has gripped Johannesburg and surrounding areas for the past week is a response to policy failures on the part of President Thabo Mbeki's government.

Poor and ineffective governance has created a tinderbox of unmet expectations which exploded in Alexandra and has now spread to several other areas—similar to many of the factors that contributed to apartheid-era unrest. Essentially, these failures contributed to a perfect storm of lawlessness, poverty, and unfulfilled expectations which has now erupted into violence.

The government's repeated failures to bring levels of violent crime under control contributed to an environment where people have resorted to violence without fear of arrest or successful prosecution. Incompetence in the Ministry of Safety and Security, failing stan-

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and inflation, together with rising fuel costs, have hit poor households and must have forced them to cut down on staples. That alone may have been sufficient to spark much of the anger visible in and around Johannesburg.

An analysis of economic policy failures would not be complete without examining the role of empowerment policy in establishing a very small and often politically connected black middle class. Government has seen fit to celebrate this limited success even as the majority of black South Africans have continued to live in relative squalor and poverty.

Particularly in the case of Zimbabwe, foreign policy has been wholly inappropriate and inappropriate. The failure to condemn initial violence and electoral fraud in Zimbabwe contributed directly to the massive inflow of foreign immigrants. Such quiet diplomacy stands in strong contrast to the unambiguous condemnation from the government of the

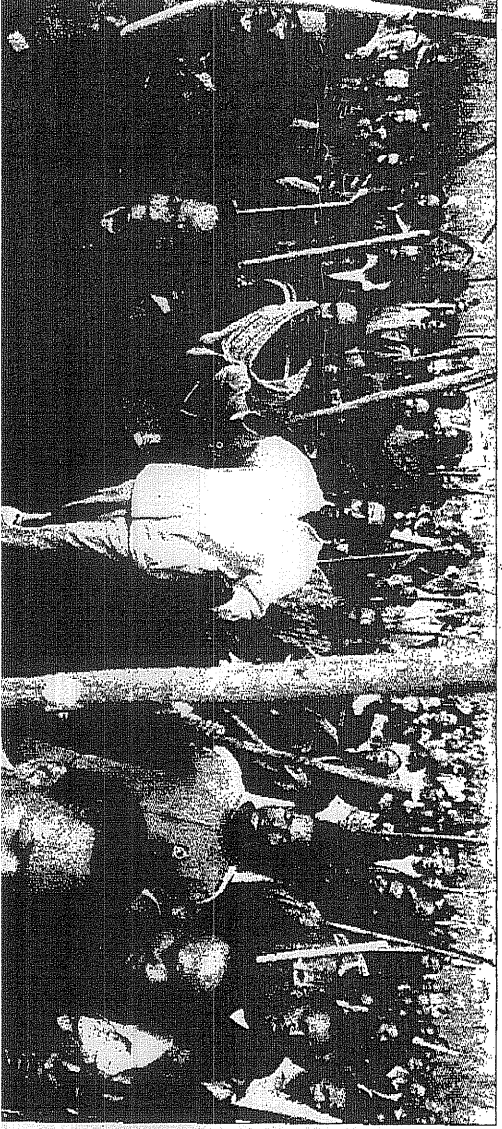
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insist that it was on the right track and dismissed criticism as alarmist or aimed at threatening the national democratic revolution.

The government effectively miscalculated that continuing strong voter support for the ANC translated directly into support for its delivery efforts. This has proven to be a tragic miscalculation.

Mbeki's efforts to re-realise South Africa and the numerous pieces of race-based policy and legislation that have accompanied this time in office have undone much of the progress in improving race relations accomplished under Nelson Mandela. Mbeki's tenure has reinforced differences and assigned values based on race. It is not surprising, therefore, that racial conflict could be an end result of his government's numerous policy failures. That that conflict is black on black and not black on white is unsurprising considering levels of latest ethnic tension revealed in

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