

# Political killings in South Africa

## The ultimate intimidation

David Bruce

### Recommendations

There remains a need for better understanding of the problem of political killings in South Africa, which could be enhanced by:

- 1** A comprehensive analysis of the criminal justice response to the problem.
- 2** Standardised data collection on all possible political killings and ongoing monitoring of the criminal justice response to them.
- 3** In-depth studies of specific localities such as the Umtshezi (Estcourt), Ulundi and KwaMashu hostel areas in order to understand the factors contributing to the continuing status of these areas as hotspots for political killings.
- 4** More in-depth analysis into the political culture of KZN and how this differs from other provinces. This might also provide insight into why the province makes such a disproportionate contribution to the problem of political killings in South Africa.

### Summary

This policy brief provides a summary of current information on the nature and extent of the problem of political killings in South Africa. The province of KwaZulu-Natal accounts for the overwhelming majority of these killings and in recent years these have been increasingly localised to specific areas, such as the Umtshezi (Estcourt) municipal area, Ulundi and KwaMashu. Though Mpumalanga was also associated with these killings, there appear not to have been any in the province since early 2011. Whereas during the apartheid period political killings took place in a diversity of circumstances, they now tend to be targeted 'assassinations', though some also occur in other circumstances. Available information suggests that less than 10% of these killings have resulted in convictions. There is a need for in-depth research and a better understanding both of the obstacles to a more effective criminal justice response, as well as why the problem continues.

POLITICAL KILLINGS CONTINUE to be a feature of political life in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> In the post-apartheid period these killings have been concentrated in specific provinces, notably KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), and to a lesser extent Mpumalanga. Though these killings seem to have declined in Mpumalanga since 2010, there was a pronounced increase in the number of these killings in KZN over 2011 and 2012. Political killings in the province have continued to be reported in 2013 and 2014.

Related to this there is ongoing concern about these killings and why they still continue in South Africa.

### Comparison with political killings during apartheid

During the apartheid period political violence and killings took multiple forms. The circumstances in which deaths took place included numerous open clashes between armed groups, massacres in which large numbers of people were killed, as well as killings during

demonstrations, disappearances (where people were killed after being abducted and no trace of them could be found), incidents of ‘necklacing’ and others. Violence reached its greatest levels of intensity during the period from 1990 to the final days before the April 1994 election, with 14 000 deaths in political violence during this period.<sup>2</sup>

senior apartheid era government leaders have claimed that they did not authorise the CCB or Vlakplaas units to act as ‘death squads’ it is clear that these units aimed to promote the government’s agenda of suppressing resistance. However, most current day political killings appear to emanate from local conflicts and rivalries.

## Most current-day political killings appear to emanate from local conflicts and rivalries

In post-apartheid South Africa, particularly from the late 1990s onwards, fatal political violence generally takes the form of what appears to be targeted killings of specific individuals, often referred to as ‘assassinations’. It may also include incidents where supporters of a political party are killed not because of any position that they hold but as a way of intimidating members of that party in general. Targeted killings were also one dimension of political violence during the apartheid era with the full number believed to run to nearly 400<sup>3</sup>, more than 90% of which took place between 1985 and 1994. At that time they included killings outside South Africa and internally<sup>4</sup> and included killings by members of government security forces and by armed groups aligned with the South African government.

Some of the units that were involved in these assassinations, notably the South African Defence Force’s Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB) and a police unit based at the farm Vlakplaas, were exposed in the early 1990s. Dulcie September, Rick Turner, Griffiths and Victoria Mxenge, Matthew Goniwe, Dr Fabian and Florence Ribeiro, and David Webster were some of the more well known victims of these killings. Forces linked to the liberation movements were also involved in killings of this kind.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the apartheid era assassinations were aligned with a centrally defined common agenda. Thus, even though

There is no evidence that they fit in with a more widely shared agenda.

### Defining killings as political

For a killing to be ‘political’ it must be motivated by or connected to contestation or rivalry, either regarding access to political power, or conflict over the way in which the individual targeted (or a group aligned with that individual), is exercising his or her political power. In terms of a broad understanding of conflict, such as that between unions or even between gangs, may be political even if it is not linked to political parties. Politicians themselves may also be behind the killings of civilians who they perceive to threaten their power. However in this policy brief the focus is on killings of people who are associated with political parties.

In some killings of political office bearers, or others who are linked to political parties, it later emerges that the motive for the killing was not political in nature. Ultimately a killing cannot be classified as political unless one knows the motive behind it. Unless the motive become clear (for instance through information revealed at a trial) it would be more accurate to refer to killings of political office bearers or party members as ‘suspected’ or ‘possible’ political killings.

However the available evidence suggests that many of the killings of political office bearers and individuals associated

14 000

THE NUMBER OF DEATHS THAT OCCURRED AS A RESULT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE BETWEEN 1990 AND THE ELECTIONS IN APRIL 1994

with political parties are indeed political in nature and are not merely random criminal acts that coincidentally resulted in the death of a politically connected person. There is therefore a substantial and continuing problem of political killings in South Africa though every 'possible' political killing is not necessarily a political killing.

The phenomenon of political killings overlaps with, but is not synonymous with that of the killing of anti-corruption whistle-blowers. Some political killings may target politicians who are involved in attempts to expose corruption perhaps authorised by other politicians who are threatened by these efforts. However, other killings of whistle-blowers do not target people connected to political parties.

### **Distribution of political killings in post-apartheid South Africa**

During much of the post-apartheid period there has been no sustained monitoring of this phenomenon of political killings. As a result there is no comprehensive information on the problem. The picture of political killings that is presented in this policy brief is based on recent research into the phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

#### **KwaZulu-Natal**

More than 90% of political killings in post-apartheid South Africa have been in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). In KZN these killings have possibly numbered 450 or more since 1994. The majority of these killings occurred in the mid- and late 1990s. From roughly 2000 onwards the rate at which these killings occurred appears to have declined substantially. But even at the lowest levels at which they were occurring there is no year in which more political killings were recorded in any other province. The rate of political killings increased once again in KZN in 2009 and particularly over the years 2011-2012.

From a process of scrutinising and verifying publicly available data on political killings in press reports and other documentary sources it has been possible to identify 54 incidents of political killings (some involve two fatalities) in the period from January 2009 to May 2014 in KZN. In the period from 2006 to 2008 another seven killings were identified, bringing the total to 61 fatal incidents involving a total of 70 fatalities. Though the killings are widely distributed in KZN, there are specific localities such as Wembezi near Estcourt in the northern Midlands that are associated with a relatively large number of the killings. The Ulundi and KwaMashu Hostel areas have accounted for seven of the 12 fatal incidents (resulting in 14 deaths) in KwaZulu-Natal between January 2013 and May 2014.

However information from political parties suggests that this total is not comprehensive and that the total number of deaths in political killings in the period from 2003 to 2013 numbers over 100 with over 50% of this number having occurred over 2011 and 2012. One of the factors that sparked the increase in killings was clearly the launch of the

Other than during 2011 and 2012, the highest number of political killings in KwaZulu-Natal since 2003 was in 2009

National Freedom Party (NFP), as a breakaway from the Inkatha Freedom Party in February 2011. However, the period also seems to have involved an increase in killings of ANC members and many of these killings are believed to have been connected to internal ANC rivalries. Other than during 2011 and 2012, the highest number of political killings in KwaZulu-Natal since 2003 was in 2009, with at least 12 apparent killings, seven of those being ANC members.

#### **Mpumalanga**

The other province that has been most strongly associated with political killings has been Mpumalanga. Approximately 14 people have died in political killings in the province since 1998. Although the problem has in some respects been fairly persistent, the total number of deaths recorded represents a small fraction of those recorded in KwaZulu-Natal. Three of these killings took place in 2010. This was the highest number recorded in any one year. One killing was recorded in 2011 and none have occurred, or at least have received public attention, since then.

#### **Other provinces**

Political killings have also become a prominent issue in North West in recent years. Killings in North West have included that of anti-corruption whistleblower and Rustenburg ANC councillor Moss Phakoe in March 2009, and that of an ANC regional secretary, Obuti Chika, in December 2012. Shortly before Chika's assassination there was also an attempt on the life of the ANC provincial secretary. In June 2014, there was an apparent attempt on the life of a member of the

provincial legislature. Other than in North West there have been isolated incidents in other provinces. In the Eastern Cape there were two killings, one in 2009 and one in 2010, that were believed to be political in nature. In July 2013 two men were convicted for conspiring to kill several prominent ANC politicians in the province. Other provinces which have experienced apparent political killings or attempted killings, have included Limpopo, Gauteng and the Free State.

This may indicate that the South African criminal justice system does not consistently give high priority to these cases

### Victims of political killings

Those killed include at least 22 who were serving as councillors, as well as one deputy mayor killed in Mpumalanga in 2007 and one mayor killed in KwaZulu-Natal in 2005. Of the councillors 18 were in KwaZulu-Natal, three were in Mpumalanga and one was in North West. Some of those killed were people holding positions such as regional secretary, leader, organiser, branch or ward or youth formation chairperson, or were members or supporters of political parties such as the ANC, IFP and NFP. In addition to these some of the deaths which may be regarded as political have been those of politically aligned traditional leaders or grass-roots activists who may have been killed because they appeared to threaten the established political interests.<sup>6</sup> It would appear that killings in the latter category have also most frequently occurred in KwaZulu-Natal, notably in areas surrounding Durban, with a number of victims having come from the shack dwellers movement Abahlali baseMjondolo.<sup>7</sup>

### The criminal justice response

There have been at least 10 convictions for apparent political killings, seven for cases in KwaZulu-Natal, two for cases in Mpumalanga and one for a case in North West. Six of these cases (two in Mpumalanga, one in North West and three in KwaZulu-Natal) have involved the killings of ANC members. Three of the KwaZulu-Natal cases involve the killing of IFP members or supporters and one involves an NFP aligned Induna. The convictions are for killings over the years 2007-2012. If it is estimated that there have been roughly 120 political killings in the various provinces since 2003, this

suggests that less than 10% of these killings may have resulted in a conviction.

### Reasons for the killings

Related to the legacy of apartheid, a key factor in understanding political killings is the high value that is attached to political office in South Africa.<sup>8</sup> Members of the emergent political class often do not have significant educational qualifications. They also generally 'do not have historical assets, and they have large nuclear and extended families to support'.<sup>9</sup> There is therefore a very high premium on political office and on acquiring positions within political parties. Since the ANC has a virtual monopoly of power in many parts of South Africa one can expect that positions of power (even relatively low-level positions) will be highly contested and will result in various forms of 'intra-elite conflict' within the ANC and structures of government.<sup>10</sup> These dynamics are manifested in the fact that political killings, particularly in the period since 2000, take place within the context of both inter-party and intra-party rivalries.

However the high value attached to political office is a national phenomenon but political killings have consistently been concentrated in specific provinces, notably KwaZulu-Natal and to a lesser degree Mpumalanga. Part of the explanation for the persistence of this phenomenon in KwaZulu-Natal clearly relates to the growth of paramilitary forces in the province from the mid-1980s onwards<sup>11</sup> and the way in which they were used for establishing and maintaining territorial control.<sup>12</sup>

This in turn has fed into an assassination industry within the province, notably within the taxi industry. This in turn sometimes may enjoy protection from elements within

---

MORE THAN  
**90%**  
OF POLITICAL KILLINGS  
IN POST-APARTHEID  
SOUTH AFRICA HAVE TAKEN  
PLACE IN KWAZULU-NATAL

---

the police service.<sup>13</sup> It may also be that specific aspects of the political culture in Mpumalanga fed into the phenomenon in that province with a high proportion of killings believed to have involved anti-corruption whistleblowers.

## Policy implications

Due to the fact that political killings have been concentrated in specific provinces, notably KZN, the main responses to them have been provincially based. However the problem is one that directly undermines South Africa's democratic institutions and status as a democratic state. The continuation of the problem indicates that there is a need for a more systematic and comprehensive response. In order to develop such a response it would be necessary for there to be:

- A comprehensive analysis of the criminal justice response to the problem.
- Standardised data collection on all possibly political killings and ongoing monitoring of the criminal justice response to them.

There would also be value in conducting in-depth studies of specific localities such as the Umtshezi (Estcourt), Ulundi and KwaMashu hostel areas in order to understand the factors contributing to the continuing status of these areas as hotspots for political killings.

More in depth analysis into the political culture of KZN and how this differs from other provinces might also provide insight into why the province makes such a disproportionate contribution to the problem of political killings in South Africa.

## Notes

- 1 This policy brief is based in part on a 2013 article by the author titled 'A provincial concern? Political killings in South Africa'. The article is published in *South African Crime Quarterly* No 45 (September 2013) available at [http://www.issafrica.org/uploads/SACQ45\\_Bruce.pdf](http://www.issafrica.org/uploads/SACQ45_Bruce.pdf). For more information on the calculations involved and more detailed references please consult this article
- 2 Max Coleman (ed), *A crime against humanity – analysing the repression of the apartheid state*, Johannesburg: Human Rights Committee, 1998, 226.
- 3 *Ibid*, 247-258.
- 4 *Ibid*
- 5 See for instance Peter Harris, *In a different time*, Cape Town: Umuzi, 2008.
- 6 With one or two exceptions, data provided generally excludes attempted assassinations of which roughly a dozen involving political or party office bearers, supporters or members, were identified during this research. It also excludes a couple of other whistleblowers in government departments. Killings in conflict related to industrial strife, and killings by the police or private security guards of protesters or striking workers are also excluded.
- 7 See for instance Richard Pithouse, *The assassination surge on those fighting corruption*, Mail & Guardian online, 3 October 2014, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-10-03-the-assassination-surge-on-those-fighting-corruption/> (accessed 16 October 2014).
- 8 See for instance Moeletsi Mbeki as quoted in Jonny Steinberg, *South Africa's xenophobic eruption*, Institute for Security Studies, 2008, 9, <http://www.issafrica.org/uploads/PAPER169.PDF> (accessed 29 August 2013).
- 9 Joel Netshitenze, *Competing identities of a national liberation movement versus electoral party politics: challenges of incumbency*, Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, 2012, 4, <http://www.mistra.org.za/MediaDocs/Competing%20Identities.pdf> (accessed 28 June 2013).
- 10 Karl von Holdt, *South Africa: the transition to violent democracy*, unpublished paper, 2013.
- 11 Rupert Taylor, *Justice denied: political violence in KwaZulu-Natal after 1994*, Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2002, 14. <http://www.csvr.org.za/docs/politicalviolence/justicedenied.pdf> (accessed 28 June 2013).
- 12 Maria Schuld, *Voting and violence in KwaZulu-Natal's no-go areas: Coercive mobilisation and territorial control in post-conflict elections*, *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 13(1), (2013), 101-123. <http://www.accord.org.za/images/downloads/ajcr/ACCORD-ajcr-2013-1.pdf> (accessed 23 September 2013).
- 13 Niren Tolsi, *Sanctioned taxi violence poisons KwaZulu-Natal*, Mail & Guardian, 19 October 2012, <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-10-18-sanctioned-taxi-violence-poisons-kwazulu-natal> (accessed 28 June 2013).

### About the author

David Bruce is a Johannesburg-based independent researcher and writer working in the fields of policing, crime and violence. From 1996 to 2011 he worked at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR). He has a master's degree in management (public and development management) from the School of Public and Development Management at the University of the Witwatersrand (2000).

### About the ISS

The Institute for Security Studies is an African organisation that aims to enhance human security on the continent. It does independent and authoritative research, provides expert policy analysis and advice, and delivers practical training and technical assistance.

### Acknowledgements

The ISS is grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

### ISS Pretoria

Block C, Brooklyn Court  
361 Veale Street  
New Muckleneuk  
Pretoria, South Africa  
Tel: +27 12 346 9500  
Fax: +27 12 460 0998  
pretoria@issafrica.org

### ISS Addis Ababa

5th Floor, Get House  
Building, Africa Avenue  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
Tel: +251 11 515 6320  
Fax: +251 11 515 6449  
addisababa@issafrica.org

### ISS Dakar

4th Floor, Immeuble Atryum  
Route de Ouakam  
Dakar, Senegal  
Tel: +221 33 860 3304/42  
Fax: +221 33 860 3343  
dakar@issafrica.org

### ISS Nairobi

Braeside Gardens  
off Muthangari Road  
Lavington, Nairobi, Kenya  
Tel: +254 20 266 7208  
Fax: +254 20 266 7198  
nairobi@issafrica.org

[www.issafrica.org](http://www.issafrica.org)