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# ***The role of non-violent action in the downfall of apartheid***

Stephen Zunes\*

## ABSTRACT

Against enormous odds, non-violent action proved to be a major factor in the downfall of apartheid in South Africa, and the establishment of a democratic black majority government, despite predictions that the transition could come only through a violent revolutionary cataclysm. This was largely the result of conditions working against a successful armed overthrow of the system, combined with the ability of the anti-apartheid opposition to take advantage of the system's economic dependence on a cooperative black labour force. This article traces the history of nonviolent resistance to apartheid, its initial failures, and the return in the 1980s to a largely non-violent strategy which, together with international sanctions, forced the government to negotiate a peaceful transfer to majority rule.

## INTRODUCTION

Against enormous odds, non-violent action proved to be a major factor in the downfall of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic black majority government. This came despite the fact that movements working for fundamental change in South Africa faced unprecedented obstacles. Never had such a powerful and highly industrialised state been overthrown from within. Opponents of apartheid faced a complex web of regulations which produced a rigid stratification system which severely limited dissent by the oppressed majority. Apartheid South Africa defied most traditional political analyses, due to its unique social, political, economic and strategic position. It practised one of history's most elaborate systems of internal colonialism, with a white minority composed of less than one-fifth of the population in absolute control. The ruling party was led by racialsists who also possessed an unusual level of political sophistication. They controlled some of the world's richest mineral deposits, including one-third of the earth's known gold reserves. A modern military machine stood ready in an area which lacked any other large conventional force. Its internal

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security system was elaborate and repressive. As a modern industrialised state in an undeveloped region, South Africa's rulers created a degree of economic hegemony, despite almost universal non-recognition of their legitimacy. It was a pariah of international diplomacy, yet economically, and to a lesser extent strategically, was well integrated into the Western system.

It was this paradoxical situation, of being both extraordinarily powerful and highly vulnerable, that gave non-violent resistance its power. Despite great mineral wealth and an increasing industrial capacity, South Africa's white minority regime found itself dependent on its black majority, its southern African neighbours, and the industrialised West, to maintain its repressive political system and its high level of modernisation. Indeed, the resistance movement in South Africa has been referred to as 'probably the largest grassroots eruption of diverse non-violent strategies in a single struggle in human history' (Wink 1987:4). This non-violent movement, which consisted in both internal resistance and solidarity work outside the country, was largely successful in its strategy, which avoided challenging the South African state where it was strong, and concentrated its attacks on where it was weak. This article will examine how unarmed methods of resistance faced these challenges, as well as comparing the history of both violent and non-violent strategies in South Africa.

Non-violent action can be defined as a conflict behaviour consisting of unconventional acts implemented for purposive change without intentional damage to persons or property. Non-violent action includes strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, occupations, demonstrations, refusal to pay taxes, creation of alternative and parallel institutions, and other forms of civil disobedience.<sup>1</sup>

The basic political assumption implicit in non-violent action is that governments are ultimately dependent on the fearful obedience and compliance of the people. The power of the apartheid regime was fundamentally vulnerable, in that it depended upon the submission of the 80 per cent non-white majority to reinforce its power sources. Punishment of those who disobey a given command does not in itself satisfy the objective, should others still refuse to give in. Thus, according to Gene Sharp (1973: 28), even the South African regime, despite all of its repressive machinery, was still a government based upon a form of 'consent'. Other theorists of non-violent action, such as Souad Dajani (1994: 100-1), argue that such an individualistic and voluntaristic conceptualisation of power cannot apply in situations like apartheid South Africa, since social power is deeply rooted in social

relationships and patterns of social behaviour that are institutionalised over time and pervasive throughout society. Yet she also noted that, should the opposition be effectively educated, empowered and mobilised, non-violence could work in South Africa, as indeed proved to be the case.

Virtually no campaign for national liberation has consisted exclusively in violent or non-violent tactics. Indeed, rioting, sabotage, murder of suspected collaborators and other violent tactics were very much part of the anti-apartheid resistance movement. Yet, as will be argued below, these were not as important as the ongoing and potentially greater non-cooperation with the apartheid regime and the economic system that sustained it. While the armed struggle never reached a level which threatened the survival of the regime, the threat of such an armed uprising may have played a role in forcing it to compromise. Yet, as will also be demonstrated below, the regime clearly had the means to forestall a successful uprising for many years to come, whereas the largely non-violent resistance was already causing enormous disruption to the existing order.

#### THE PROBLEMS OF ARMED STRUGGLE

From its inception in 1912, the African National Congress (ANC) was the primary organisational vehicle through which black South Africans pursued their rights. After using largely legal tactics during its first forty years, the militant youth wing ascended to the leadership in the early 1950s, with an orientation towards non-violent direct action. The rival Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), founded in 1959, also pursued this strategy until both organisations were banned in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. Subsequently, they advocated various forms of armed resistance until the ANC agreed to a cease-fire during the final stages of talks with the government in 1991. The PAC had largely disintegrated by this point, as a result of government suppression, internal factionalisation and lack of internal and external support. The armed struggle was largely limited to an occasional bombing and intercepted border crossing, which gradually increased in the late 1980s to a rate of three or four attacks every month.

Evidence suggests that the armed struggle may have actually harmed the anti-apartheid movement: the bombing campaign by the ANC's armed wing, Umkonto We Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), in the early 1960s seriously weakened simultaneous non-violent campaigns,

since the government was able to link them in the eyes of the public and justify their repression. Not only were most of those involved in the bombing campaign captured, but the turn to violence was used to justify the rounding up of many other suspected dissidents as well. Although the ANC explicitly directed their campaign towards property, a number of their trained attackers used their explosives on the homes of pro-government blacks, killing several people, including children. This not only invited further government repression, but resulted in a loss of support by some Africans as well. Given the tendency for those in authority to treat opposition movements by reference to their most violent components, the armed struggle in its early stages probably did more harm than good to the movement against apartheid.

However, given the level of repression against non-violent activists within the country, and the successes of outgunned armed liberation movements elsewhere, there was the widespread belief for most of the 1960s and 1970s that the armed struggle would play a major role in the downfall of apartheid. The problem was that those who dreamed of liberating their country through force of arms faced enormous obstacles.

White South Africa possessed by far the most powerful military machine on the continent. By the early 1980s, it had a rigorously trained operational force of 180,000 men and, with a reserve force constantly replenished through universal white male conscription, it could mobilise nearly half a million troops within a few hours (Leonard 1981: 13). In addition, a cadet programme of military training for secondary students would grow to 300,000 within the next few years (*ibid.*), and every white man and woman was required from adolescence to learn marksmanship. The number of guns per capita for the white population was among the highest in the world, while apart from the 10,000 blacks in special military units and some police, no blacks were allowed to carry firearms under any circumstances.<sup>2</sup> The estimated combined forces of all black African states and liberation movements south of the equator came to less than half that of South Africa. In terms of military equipment, South Africa had an even greater advantage. The South African air force possessed over 875 aircraft, including over 500 combat aircraft and more than 200 helicopters; the army owned over 260 tanks, 1,300 armoured cars, over 110 armoured personnel carriers, and a large number of self-propelled medium and heavy artillery guns (Leonard 1981: 20). The material of the liberation movements and black African states was limited to small, outdated Western arms and a limited supply of modest-grade Soviet hardware.

Only Angola had major military equipment within its borders, and this was largely in the hands of Cuban forces defending the government from US and South African-backed UNITA rebels.

There was little promise of an organised force of African nations launching a successful invasion of South Africa. The Organisation of African Unity lacked any coordinated military organisation, leadership or general staff, training techniques or doctrine. Zaire, Ethiopia and Nigeria, the sub-Saharan states with the largest standing armies, required their armed forces for internal control. Nor could Cuba, or other states allied with the black South African cause, be expected to redirect substantial numbers of their troops away from their own national defence needs. Opposition by the United States and other Western states would have prevented any kind of United Nations or other multinational force from being deployed.

Until November 1977, when the mandatory United Nations embargo went into effect, South Africa was the recipient of highly sophisticated weaponry from Israel, France and other countries. The embargo did not significantly alter the strategic balance, since a large amount of outside arms were getting into the country anyway, and, more importantly, South Africa had by that time become almost self-sufficient militarily. The government was manufacturing its own tanks, mine-clearing vehicles, missiles and even napalm and nerve gas.<sup>3</sup> No guerrilla movement could hope to combat such a powerful armed force on its own territory effectively, especially when South Africa's preparedness for such an attack was considered. South African forces were being trained by the highly effective Israeli counter-insurgency units (Southern African Committee 1978: 14). In addition, an investigation at that time noted how (Adam 1971: 125-6):

Five special 'anti-terrorist' training camps have been strategically established for training in camouflage and disguise, the establishment of bases, tracking, field shooting, convoy and ambush drill. The Defense Minister told Parliament that the men were kept informed of counter-measures against the latest terrorist tactics throughout the world. The Air Force has been reorganized for greater mobility and is being integrated with the anti-guerrilla combat forces. An underground air defense radar station has been constructed at Devon in the eastern Transvaal as the nerve center of the northern area's early warning system. Information is fed into computers from radar heads above ground and from various remote satellite stations. Three thousand miles of South Africa's northern borders are reported being patrolled night and day...An underground radio communications center is [located] at Westlake near Cape Town. Its computer produces on demand a map of the shipping in any selected portion of the ocean.

In addition, South Africa had (Friedland 1983):

augmented its internal production of armaments, established new military bases in the northeastern Transvaal, created a special anti-terrorist police unit and counter-insurgency division within the army, and initiated plans to remove Africans from the border areas and transfer them to villages under military supervision.

The border with Mozambique, the only frontier with sufficient vegetation for cover, had been cleared for a depth of at least one mile, was heavily mined, and was under constant patrol with the assistance of bright floodlights (Gann & Duignan 1978: 53).

Another important factor was the consolidation of the security and intelligence forces under the centralised command of the South African president. This was but one part of the increasing militarisation of South African society, in preparation for what many saw as an inevitable armed conflict with black guerrilla movements. There was little question that they would be ready to meet any military challenge in the foreseeable future. The most frightening obstacle to a military victory by armed liberation forces was South Africa's nuclear capability, demonstrated by the apparent nuclear test in September 1979.

Proponents of armed struggle in South Africa pointed to Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe as examples of how an outgunned guerrilla movement need not win the war to achieve liberation: that a war of attrition would be enough to result in the capitulation of the white minority regime. Indeed, the victorious armed struggle in the former Portuguese colonies was the major inspiration for many black South Africans to look favourably on the prospects of a successful armed revolutionary struggle in their own country.

However, several key differences were often overlooked. The white populace in those territories was less than 5 per cent of the population, and in each case under a quarter million people. South African whites, by contrast, totalled 2.8 million, over 15 per cent of the population. There was strong pressure from the colonial power for a settlement with the black majority in their colonies, once they realised that they could not win an unpopular colonial war, which made further resistance by the white minority impossible. White South Africans did not have to yield to the priorities of a 'mother country'.

White South African troops would have been fighting, not for the protection of colonial interests, but for their own livelihood, reducing the chances of the class divisions and low morale which plagued the Portuguese and others fighting colonial wars. In addition, many

Portuguese and white Rhodesians willingly moved to South Africa or returned to their European homelands after liberation. White South Africans, however, had lived in their land for many generations – most Afrikaners traced their ancestry back at least two and a half centuries – and would have nowhere to go. In the face of a violent liberation movement, they would probably have fought to the bitter end. It is likely that the full military might of the South African state would have been unleashed against whole communities, with enormous destructive potential. Many whites on the far right began stockpiling arms for what they saw as an inevitable race war, which they had an almost messianic commitment to resist to the last Afrikaner.

Also, unlike these former colonies, South Africa was a modern, industrialised state. It was the major industrial power of the continent, if not the southern hemisphere. It was the only country in Africa with major iron and steel industries, advanced engineering facilities and petrochemical plants. The industrial infrastructure, through its then quasi-governmental administration, was intrinsically linked to the military establishment.

The black townships outside South African cities were designed so that they could be easily cordoned off and subjected to air strikes, making it easy for the military to suppress any armed uprising. While some ANC leaders began to advocate a ‘people’s war’ of massive armed resistance within the townships in the mid-1980s, such a scenario was never realistic. Unlike Algiers, or other locations of successful urban guerrilla warfare, there was no maze of alleys in which guerrillas could lose those in pursuit. The black townships were built as grids, with wide thoroughfares, making it difficult for a guerrilla to find shelter. In addition, the record of urban guerrilla warfare in the preceding years, as in Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, did not offer a very hopeful precedent.

The Bantustans – the small, non-contiguous, remote rural areas set aside by the apartheid system for the black majority – presented basically the same situation on a larger scale. Because of their geographical fragmentation and tight rule by hand-picked elites, they could hardly be ideal bases for guerrilla warfare. There were strong pressures, both internally and externally, on the leadership of the homelands to work with the South African military, and several were cooperating quite closely (Karis 1983–4). In addition, less than 42 per cent of the population was male, the majority of these being under 15 or over 65, limiting the number of potential recruits (Johnson 1977: 300). Meanwhile, the 4 million blacks in white rural areas,

labouring primarily as farm hands, were so utterly dependent on their white overlords and geographically separated, that there was little reason to think that they would shift dramatically away from their traditional conservatism and non-involvement in popular resistance movements, so as to be able to contribute to an armed revolution.

Another problem was that the terrain in South Africa was totally unsuitable for guerrilla warfare. The South African countryside consists mostly of open areas of desert and savanna, especially in the strategically important Transvaal, and there were virtually no sanctuaries, such as mountains and jungles, in which to retreat or establish bases of operation. In addition, unlike other countries that experienced successful guerrilla warfare, South Africa was a highly urbanised society, with modern communications and transport facilities, so there would be little opportunity to avoid detection and attack.

Guerrilla raids from neighbouring independent states would also have been problematic, since they would have been susceptible to offensive military actions by South African forces. South Africa made frequent attacks in Angola against SWAPO bases and refugee camps during their occupation of Namibia, as well as numerous minor incursions. There were three major attacks deep inside Mozambique during the 1980s, attacking alleged ANC homes and offices. There were also raids during this period into Zambia, Lesotho and Botswana. It was unlikely that a newly independent Namibia would take the risk of provoking conflict with its giant neighbour, on which it was still dependent. Even the tiny Rhodesian army had been capable of making devastating raids against its neighbours, and the prospects made these black states, already in desperate economic shape from previous wars and dependent on South Africa economically, extremely wary about harbouring guerrillas. South Africa was financing anti-government guerrillas in Mozambique and Angola, and there was increasing South African military activity along the borders. Mozambique was forced to sign a peace treaty with South Africa in 1984, as were Swaziland and Lesotho, which severely limited ANC activities. According to Robert M. Price (1991: 94-5):

through the use of military and economic power, Pretoria sought to create a 'neutral' cordon of African states to its north. Under a regime of South African regional hegemony southern African states would be expected to... prevent their territory from being used in any manner by the ANC [among others].

No armed guerrilla struggle has ever succeeded without sanctuaries

for rest from combat, the provision of food, rearmament and military training. No sanctuaries existed at this time within easy striking distance of South Africa, and there was little likelihood that any would become available. Even were a neighbouring country willing to take the enormous risks necessary to provide sanctuary, there was still the problem of penetrating the heavily guarded border regions, a barrier that the ANC was never fully able to overcome, even before the introduction of highly sophisticated monitoring devices.

Despite increasing numbers of South African blacks leaving the country for military training with the ANC in the late 1970s, the numbers of potential guerrillas was still very small, especially when considering the strength of the South African military and the size of the ANC's objectives. Estimates of ANC military personnel in the early 1980s were never higher than 14,000 (Karis 1983-84). The ANC refused to make a public estimate, presumably because of its embarrassment at the paucity of men under arms. Even taking into account the high ratio of military personnel over insurgents needed to suppress a guerrilla movement, the ANC could hardly have been considered a formidable military threat for many years to come.

Despite twenty-five years of armed resistance, and large amounts of military aid and training from the Soviet Bloc, the ANC was able to show 'little serious military capability' (Uhlig 1986: 170), and, militarily speaking was referred to as 'one of the world's least successful "liberation movements"' (Lelyveld 1983).

Random terror, as attempted in the *poqo* campaign of the early 1960s, or even on a larger and better-coordinated scale, would not have been helpful. Terrorism has traditionally united the opposition, often making them more entrenched, while dividing the aggrieved population – in effect, the opposite of non-violent action. The traditional justification for terrorism, that it would allow the state to reveal its truly repressive nature, certainly did not apply to apartheid South Africa: not only was the repressive nature of the state obvious to any black South African, but their largely non-violent resistance brought out the repressive apparatus without providing the needed rationalisation of curbing terrorism.

It was under these circumstances that the ANC and other resistance organisations in the early 1980s began to seriously question whether armed struggle would be successful. The Soviet Union, the chief military backer of the ANC, which had long since joined Western countries in doubting the military capability of the ANC armed wing, supported a negotiated settlement, and saw continued armed struggle

as counter-productive (Price 1991: 9). Many South Africans also questioned whether they were willing to subject their country to the mass murder, ecocide and rampant devastation that occurred in Vietnam. Unlike the Vietnamese, the South African revolutionaries would not have had a terrain favourable for guerrilla warfare, or available sanctuaries; nor would their opponent have been in unfamiliar territory, far from supply lines, be proxies for a corrupt regime with little popular support or have a large anti-war movement with which to contend.

A violent strategy would have led inevitably to spiralling escalation, with the state having the strategic edge at every turn in the foreseeable future. Even had the blacks eventually won, it would have probably have left millions dead and a ravaged country. Many skilled whites needed to maintain specialised positions during the interim period before a sufficient number of blacks (denied advancement under apartheid) could take these positions, would be killed or driven into exile. Armed resistance in South Africa would probably have attracted many of the least disciplined elements from African society under apartheid, thus blurring the distinction between revolutionary action and hooliganism. This would have resulted in a widespread amoral effect on an entire younger generation of South Africans needed to rebuild their country, a problem which has proved to be difficult enough, even with the relatively limited revolutionary violence that did occur.

There has been a tendency for non-violent movements to maintain a more democratic and inclusive character than armed movements (Sharp 1980), a factor that many black South Africans undoubtedly considered after years of living under a most undemocratic and exclusivist system. In addition, since a violent struggle would have tended to be directed more against people than a non-violent struggle, which tends to aim at institutional and systemic targets, there would have been a greater chance of the revolutionary struggle taking on a more destructive racialist orientation. In addition, as Liddell Hart (1967: 204) observes:

The habit of violence takes deeper root in irregular warfare than it does in regular warfare. In the latter it is counteracted by the habit of obedience to constituted authority, whereas the former makes a virtue of denying authority and violating rules. It becomes very difficult to rebuild a country and a stable state on such an undermined foundation.

By contrast (*ibid.*):

While the practice of non-violent resistance is not entirely devoid of such after-

effects, they are less damaging, materially and morally. The practice may foster a continuing habit of evasion, but it does not sow the seeds of civil war nor breed terrorists.

In addressing the question of what kind of strategy a South African movement for majority rule should consider to maximise its chances of success, Sharp (1980: 163) outlined three major criteria:

(1) How to achieve the maximum strength and involvement in the struggle by the non-whites, mainly the Africans.

(2) How to split some of the whites from support for the Afrikaner Nationalists and white domination, and move them towards action in support of the non-whites.

(3) How to bring the maximum international pressures to bear on the South African government towards change compatible with the self-determination of the South African people as a whole and their future development.

Non-violent action proved to be the most effective means of achieving those criteria.

While maintaining their commitment to pursue armed struggle, both on principle as well as a strategy of disrupting normal operations of the repressive state, the South African opposition reached a clear consensus by the early 1980s that liberation had to be pursued through largely non-violent methods. Despite the romantic rhetoric of international solidarity groups in the US and elsewhere of a victorious ANC army marching to Pretoria,<sup>4</sup> the ANC never saw armed struggle as the sole or even primary means for bringing down the apartheid regime (Price 1991: 9). Strategic analyst Thomas Karis, writing in 1986 (134), noted that 'despite a commitment to "armed struggle", the ANC has considered sabotage and guerrilla attacks to be only a minor strand in a multifaceted strategy consisting mainly of politically inspired demonstrations, strikes and defiance'. By the 1980s, the ANC saw strikes and boycotts as 'a main element in the organization's strategy for liberation' (Uhlig 1986: 169), emphasising that the armed struggle was only 'one strand' in the fabric of resistance strategies which included civil disobedience (*ibid.*: 170). The ANC even acknowledged that most of its acts of sabotage and small-scale guerrilla attacks were no more than 'armed propaganda' (Karis 1986: 112). Indeed, during the anti-Republic Day campaign of 1981, when hundreds of thousands of people took part in protest rallies all around the country, and a successful general strike demonstrated the level at which the opposition could mount a successful mobilisation, the ANC launched about half a dozen attacks against strategic targets

across the country 'as a well-coordinated demonstration of support for a popular campaign of mass resistance' (Frederickse 1987: 39).

It had become apparent by this point that the armed struggle was a means of providing moral support for the unarmed resistance, rather than what many had anticipated as an unarmed resistance being used primarily to support the armed struggle. According to journalist Julie Frederikse (*ibid.*: 178).

While the African National Congress is known for its anti-government guerilla attacks, its leaders also seem wary about any over-emphasis on military rather than political activity. The ANC President's first public statement of 1984 exhorted all South Africans to 'create conditions in which the country will become increasingly ungovernable'.

In effect, the ANC recognised that the non-cooperation of the people was critical, and that it was the ungovernability of the country by the apartheid regime, and not its physical overthrow, which would end apartheid. Thus, while never formally renouncing armed struggle until the peace process was well under way, there was a growing recognition through the 1980s by the ANC that the largely non-violent forms of resistance would be the decisive means of overcoming apartheid. Anti-apartheid leader Desmond Tutu, the Anglican archbishop, who openly declared on several occasions that he was not a pacifist and was open to sanctioning armed resistance if necessary, publicly called upon the ANC to suspend the armed struggle in 1988 (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 135).

The shift to a largely non-violent strategy, which was concomitant with the decentralisation and democratisation of the resistance movements, was not the result of an ethical transformation, but was born out of necessity. American theologian Walter Wink, writing in 1987 (80-1), observed:

Since armed resistance is largely futile, people have taken recourse in non-violent means. Non-violence has even become the preferred method of people who have never contemplated absolute pacifism. Because anti-Apartheid leaders are arrested almost as soon as they emerge, resistance groups have invented non-hierarchical and democratic organizational forms. Means and ends coalesce as people create for themselves social instruments for change that already embody the better life they seek ahead.

#### NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

The apartheid system went well beyond segregated public amenities to include the system of grand apartheid, maintained through a policy of influx control, which kept surplus labour and undesirables in the

barren Bantustans many miles from the white cities and industrial areas. Squatter settlement by migrants in South Africa, deemed 'illegal' by the white minority government, was not just the common Third World phenomenon of rural poor desperately seeking work in the cities, but an act of civil disobedience against the one of the fundamental pillars of apartheid. When such settlements were threatened by government bulldozers in the 1980s, multiracial groups would often lie down in front of them, courting arrest (Wink 1987: 93). This resistance against efforts at government repression became both a symbolic and structural defiance against the system. The Urban Institute of South Africa estimated in 1988 that there were as many as 7 million illegal squatters in urban areas (*ibid.*: 125), more than the government could reasonably hope to control.

In Cape Town, District Six, a coloured neighbourhood where 30,000 people whose families had lived there for generations were evicted in 1966 to shantytowns in a distant area, became a no-go zone for prospective white tenants and landowners in the decades that followed due to local opposition (*ibid.* 1987: 92). Campaigns against evictions of Indian families from the white Johannesburg suburb of Pageview in 1979, and of rural blacks from the Ventersdorp area in 1983-4, became national campaigns of resistance (*ibid.*: 115-17). In 1987, migrant mineworkers began bringing their wives into single-sex compounds in defiance of mine management and government regulations (*ibid.*: 94).

In addition, the non-violent resistance by workers and commuters in the Ciskei bantustan in 1983, centred on a bus fare increase and poor working conditions in factories, which was met by brutal repression by a joint effort of the homeland regime, the South African government and big business, marked a turning point in delegitimising the whole grand apartheid scheme, by demonstrating to white South Africans that the homelands policy was based on fear and force, not on a benign mutually beneficial programme of 'separate development' (Frederickse 1987: 111-12).

The centrality of the townships became apparent to both the South African government and the ANC following the Soweto uprisings. The whites had to acknowledge that a black urban population was a permanent fixture in South African society and its economy. The white paper which accompanied the Riekert Commission Report emphasised that 'black labour represents by far the largest proportion of the total labour force...in the so-called "White area"'. Furthermore, it projected a far greater increase in the black population than for the whites (RSA 1979). This acknowledged the vulnerability of the

government and the entire South African economy to strikes and other forms of non-violent disruption by the black majority. According to Price (1991: 101):

The black worker, whose increasing militancy since the Durban strikes of 1973 threatened to undermine South Africa as a haven for multinational investors, and who during the Soweto uprising showed a growing willingness to support radical youth with political strikes, was a township resident. Townships represented both a source of skilled workers, and an enormous untapped domestic market for South Africa's manufactured goods. And the townships, easily accessible to journalists, offered the international media vivid material to reveal the reality of black deprivation in South Africa.

Non-violent resistance against white minority rule has a long history in South Africa, going back as far as Mohandas Gandhi's non-violent campaigns in Natal at the turn of the century. A half century later, the 1950s Defiance Campaign, despite its demise, demonstrated the potential of non-violent action based in the townships in resisting apartheid (Benson 1966: 159).

Of the 10,000 volunteers called for, more than 8500 had gone voluntarily to jail despite the intimidating effect of police action, of dismissal by employers, and the propaganda of the bulk of the press and the radio; some teachers who had done little before had thrown up their jobs to defy; the United Nations had been inspired to discuss apartheid and the press of the world had taken the nonwhite challenge to oppression more seriously than ever before.

As Benson (*ibid.*: 151) observed:

October was the peak of the Campaign. For the first time in the history of modern South Africa, the Africans' militant achievement had kept the initiative hard-won through discipline and self-sacrifice. Only one thing could rob them of such initiative: violence.

Violence did indeed break out, and the Campaign was crippled (Sharp 1973: 599).

At the peak of the civil disobedience movement, after it had been in motion for about six months, a series of African riots broke out between October 18 and November 9. Six whites were killed and thirty-three Africans. The white dead included a nun who had been missionary doctor of the Africans: her body was spoliated. This contributed to the sensationalism and to feelings that repression was 'justified'. The precise causes of the riots are not clear. The resistance leaders demanded an enquiry, which the government refused. There was no evidence that the resistance movement was responsible, and there were suggestions that *agents provocateurs* may have been involved. In any case, the effects of the riots were to damp down the spirit of resistance'.

Zulu Chief and anti-apartheid leader Albert Luthuli (1962: 127-8) added:

The Defiance Campaign was far too orderly and successful for the Government's liking, and it was growing. ... The challenge of nonviolence was more than they could meet. It robbed them of the initiative. On the other hand, violence by Africans would restore this initiative to them – they then would be able to bring out the guns and the other techniques of intimidation and present themselves as restorers of order.

It can not be denied that this is exactly what happened, and at the moment most convenient for the Government. The infiltration of *agents provocateurs* in both Port Elizabeth and Kimberly is well attested. They kept well clear of the volunteers and the Congress.... They did their work among irresponsible youngsters. ...

It was all the government needed. The riots and the Defiance Campaign were immediately identified with each other in the white South African imagination. The initiative was with the Government.

It is well known that the Government used its recovered initiative harshly and to the full. ... The activities of rioters provided the pretext for crushing nonviolent demonstrators.

The number of those committing the civil disobedience dropped from 2,354 in October to only 280 in November (Kuper 1958: 143). The resistance campaign, for all practical purposes, was at an end. There were a number of factors leading to this, including the arrests of certain leaders, harsh new penalties against civil disobedience, and the impending general elections, but (*ibid.*: 145):

clearly the riots played a decisive role. Quite apart from their effect on the resisters, the riots provided the opportunity for the Government to take over the initiative and to assume far-reaching powers with some measure of justification.

It appears that the campaign's successes were limited not because it was non-violent, but in large part because of the limited violence that did occur. The government refused demands by the resisters that a Judicial Commission of Inquiry be appointed to investigate the causes of the riots, strengthening the belief that the violence was indeed government inspired. The use of *agents provocateurs* throughout the history of the resistance movement demonstrated that the white minority government strongly preferred the black resistance movement not to use non-violence. The government felt threatened by the use of massive, disciplined non-violent resistance, as demonstrated by its harsh counteractions during the Defiance Campaign and other times when similarly challenged.

A major factor in the revitalisation of the South African resistance was the Black Consciousness movement, which was launched in the early 1970s, stressing self-reliance and non-violent resistance. Though

inspired in part by Frantz Fanon's ideas of empowerment and conscientisation, the Black Consciousness Movement stressed that black pride need not come only through violence. Sam Nolutshungu (1982: 183-4) observed:

Although Fanon's writings were widely read and his ideas of alienation in colonial society had much influence on many of the theorists of black consciousness, there is little evidence that his ideas on violence were much discussed, and none that they were widely shared. It is nowhere seen as being in itself a mentally liberating process; rather its instrumental role properly comes only when consciousness has been achieved by other means.

Similarly, Gail Gerhart (1978: 285-6), writing about the internal resistance movement of the 1970s, adds:

The aim of Black Consciousness as an ideology was not to trigger a spontaneous Fanonesque eruption of the masses into violent action, but rather to rebuild and recondition the mind of the oppressed in such a way that eventually they would be ready forcefully to demand what was rightfully theirs.

The late Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko and other internal resistance leaders stressed the need for non-violence, at least at the early stage of the struggle, and criticised the PAC's 'reckless rush to confrontation when circumstance did not favor a black victory' (Gerhart 1978: 285); they similarly criticised armed ANC raids as premature and counterproductive to their work within the country.<sup>5</sup>

Some activists saw the public espousal of non-violence as a tactical recognition of the need to postpone government repression of the anti-apartheid group's public activities, to be followed by a 'second phase' after conscientisation, that of armed struggle. Preliminary clandestine committees were set up by black consciousness leaders to explore that possibility, but these were set aside as advances in the internal and largely non-violent resistance became apparent. There was some pressure from militants both in the leadership and at the grassroots about moving to active armed resistance, but the tactical advantages of non-violent resistance, regardless of the sincerity of its initial advocates, had meanwhile won widespread support.

By the 1980s, the ANC and the more traditional nationalist leadership within the country had accepted many aspects of the participatory orientation from the Black Consciousness Movement, and, through their mutual support of the United Democratic Front and trade union federations, maintained a degree of resilience and unity in the face of the worst repression in South Africa's history. It was during this period that they committed themselves to non-violent

resistance. A mass democratic movement was formed, which included the informal alliance of the ANC, COSATU, UDF and UDF affiliates, calling for non-racial democracy under the leadership of the ANC. The formation of the UDF in 1983 was significant, in that it was a loose coalition of nearly 700 organisations, including civil associations, trade unions, student groups, youth groups, churches, women's organisations, religious groups and sports clubs, committed to a 'united, democratic South Africa based on the will of the people' and 'an end to economic and other forms of exploitation' (Karis 1986: 128). They were able to help coordinate non-violent resistance campaigns, such as boycotts, strike support and other issues from local arenas to national support.

The rise of labour militancy was perhaps the most important trend towards successful utilisation of non-violent action. The 1973 strikes in the Durban area demonstrated the vulnerability of crucial sectors of the South African economy to militant actions by black workers. The strike wave spread throughout Natal and beyond; between January and March 1973, approximately 150 firms were struck. Increasing trade union militancy on economic demands, demonstrating (as in the Durban strikes) that they could win, paved the way towards empowering the population to a degree that massive political strikes could succeed. Black working-class support for the 1976 student-led Soweto uprising could be attributed in part to the increasingly precarious position of black workers in the country (Price 1991: 53).

Lodge (1983: 327) observed in 1983 the significance of the wave of strikes in the preceding years:

Their scale, spontaneous character and degree of success made these strikes unique in South Africa's labor history. They had several distinctive features. The strikers refused to elect a leadership, thus immunizing themselves from the effects of victimization and cooption. They avoided all formally constituted representative bodies (there were in any case very few of these). They relied principally on the sharp demonstrative shock of a short withdrawal of labor to gain concessions from employers rather than entering negotiations or protracted confrontations. The workers stayed in the vicinity of their factories which may have afforded them some protection against police reprisals. The conscious aim of the strikers in almost all cases was to gain better wages.

In addition, according to Johnson (1977: 187):

The [1973] strike wave... had more than just economic effects. If anything, indeed, the short-term and partial satisfaction of economic demands merely lifted the threshold of workers' resentment to focus on their wider condition of life.

There was a steady increase in strike activities following 1971, despite

occasional downturns in individual years. In 1979, the government allowed Africans to join unions and permitted recognition of both black and multiracial unions. There were still major restrictions on political activities, penalties for illegal strikes were toughened, and government controls were increased. Yet, unions were able to force businesses to enter into negotiations, membership soared, and they began organising in key sectors of the economy. Over 1,000 black workers were on strike every day by 1982, a number which grew in subsequent years (Frederickse 1987: 22). A half-hour general strike in which 100,000 workers put down their tools in 1982, in protest at the torture and death of a white trade union activist at the hands of government security agents, marked the first such action in over two decades (*ibid.*: 166). The strikes tended to increase in duration, and while the vast majority were on immediate economic issues, a trend emerged by the 1980s towards work stoppages in solidarity with labour struggles elsewhere. The unification of 500,000 workers in 1985 into one union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and its commitment to address concerns beyond the standard bread-and-butter issues, marked a turning point in the struggle. Unlike the small isolated black unions that had existed previously, this strong trade union movement helped bring apartheid to its knees.

Another significant development was the increasing community support for striking workers, first made apparent during the 1979–80 strike wave in the Western Cape. The use of consumer boycotts forced major concessions by employers during that period. While boycotts in South Africa go back as far as the successful 1959 ANC-led potato boycott in solidarity with farmworkers in the eastern Transvaal (Frederickse 1987: 186), the boycotts of the 1980s were subsequently instigated with increasing frequency. The boycott of red meat resulting from a 1980 strike by meat workers in the Western Cape, the 1981 boycott of Rowntree chocolates during the strike there, and the boycott of National Co-operative Dairies in protest at the dismissal of black workers in 1987 at Clover Dairies in Durban, demonstrated the power of community solidarity (*ibid.*: 27; Smuts & Westcott 1991: 110–11). Thus strikes by vulnerable independent trade unions, whose workers were mostly unskilled, often migrants, and constantly threatened with unemployment, demonstrated their power through strike support and boycotts from the community. More significantly, these evolved into ‘long-term, mass-based structures for change in both the workplace and the community’ (Frederickse 1987: 27). A particularly good example of this phenomenon was the Sarmcol strike in Natal in 1985,

where, following the firing of striking rubber factory workers, the entire region mobilised on their behalf to raise funds, protest, engage in a one-day stayaway and boycott white businesses (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 128–9).

It is noteworthy that the October 1985 ban of media coverage of ‘unrest’ specifically included strikes and boycotts. Yet such labour action escalated still further: in 1987, over 20,000 railway workers struck for over two months, and 340,000 mineworkers struck the Chamber of Mines for three weeks (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 128). In 1989 alone, over 3 million person-days were lost from labour disputes in South Africa (*ibid.*: 129).

The nationwide two-day general strike in 1984, the largest of its kind in South African history up to that point, terrified the government, and many observers see it, along with the government crackdown which followed, as the starting point of the final wave of unrest which brought the regime to the negotiating table (Frederickse 1987: 180):

As many as 800,000 people refused to go to work and 400,000 students boycotted classes. The strike was more than 80 per cent effective among workers from the besieged Vaal townships, and in the east Rand, where heavy industry and organised labour is concentrated. The SASOL (oil-from-coal) and ISCOR (iron and steel) para-statal ground to a halt, despite threats to fire workers who joined the strike. The transport system designed to carry workers to the Transvaal’s industrial centre was abandoned....

The trade union’s foray into the political arena, bolstered by the communities and students, was a stunning success: the stay-away strike had been the most successful in South Africa’s history. The combined force of the muscle of organised labour and the back-up of the UDF’s affiliated organisations had dealt the government a body blow that sent the politicians, the policy and the army reeling.

To try to halt these challenges, the government imposed a state of emergency in 1985 to curb the dissent. Since violent acts were already illegal, the state of emergency was aimed primarily at curbing the unarmed resistance. According to Wink (1987: 79), ‘In an eloquent tribute to the power of nonviolence the government had decided, in effect, to treat nonviolence as the equivalent of violence.’ Initially, the restrictions were so comprehensive and the penalties so severe, that this hampered the non-violent resistance efforts. For example, merely stating an opposition to military conscription, participating in a non-violent demonstration, criticising the government or any government official or advocating a boycott, could land one in prison for up to ten years (*ibid.*: 79–80). Yet the state of emergency did not halt the non-violent movement. Charges of high treason against UDF leaders were

dropped in December (Karis 1986: 128). Indeed, 'The imposition of the July 1985 state of emergency was not only a disastrously unsuccessful effort to control the mass uprising, it also galvanized European and American elites into pushing for economic sanctions' (Price 1991: 250). The UDF and the unions had demonstrated the power of non-violent resistance. Karis (1983: 405), writing in 1983, correctly concluded that 'black leaders will continue to calculate that mass pressures, including strikes and boycotts, will be more efficacious than violence'.

A three-day general strike in June 1988 included more than 3 million workers and pupils, paralysing industry. More than 1 million participated in a similar stayaway in May 1987, and an August 1989 general strike proved to be the largest in the series, essentially shutting down commerce in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban and East London, and severely crippling industry in the Western Cape (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 125-7).

The rent boycott, based on objections to the poor living conditions and higher utility rates for black than for white homes, began in the Vaal triangle in August 1984, and spread to 50 townships over the next two years. By September 1986, an estimated 60 per cent of the black population was not paying rent. By 1989, the official governments of Soweto and other townships were forced to negotiate (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 26). School boycotts were widespread in the seventeen years prior to majority rule, forcing some needed reforms, though the costs of denying much of a generation of blacks their education may have outweighed what was gained (*ibid.*: 30).

In addition to demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, occupations and other activities, there was an impressive development of alternative institutions, effectively creating a situation of dual power in South Africa, where institutions affecting the daily lives of black South Africans came increasingly to be managed by black South Africans themselves. Civic organisations based in the townships (Frederickse 1986: 27):

discovered the value of long-term projects in mobilizing community support, such as health and education centres, creches and pre-schools, advice offices, culture clubs, and perhaps most importantly, news media. Newspapers, newsletters and pamphlets [became] a valuable means of consolidating organization, educating the community, and ensuring two-way communication.

Cooperatives, community clinics, legal resource centres and similar offices offered places for people to go when existing institutions were

clearly inadequate. For example, a group known as OASSA (the Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa), founded in the Transvaal in 1983, later spreading to Cape Town, Durban and Pietermaritzburg, offered medical and psychological help to those released from detention and others victimised by state repression (Frederickse 1986: 18). The South African government recognised the power of these young community organisations, or 'civics'. President P. W. Botha, in justifying a law restricting international financial assistance to community based organisations, stated (Price 1991: 236): 'I say it's subversive to create alternative organisations in South Africa for the education of people, for local government, for proper economic development.' The Kasigo Trust, the country's largest anti-apartheid foundation and a major backer of such alternative institutions, when ordered by the government to disclose all its funding sources, simply refused, on the grounds that it would be used by the government for intelligence-gathering purposes (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 36-7). The trust was supported by the European Community and hundreds of other foreign and domestic funding sources.

These alternative institutions prospered because official institutions were no longer recognised as legitimate. Only 6 per cent of the voters cast their ballots in council elections for black townships in the late 1970s after their establishment, well below previous advisory bodies in the 1960s (Price 1991: 132). By the mid-1980s, scores of officially sanctioned local governments in the Black townships collapsed due to massive non-cooperation, and the mayors and town councils, in most of these cases, either resigned or were simply ignored. Pro-ANC/UDF alternative governments were established in face of virtual military occupation.

One of the most striking examples of this was in the Alexandra Township near Johannesburg, which had a population well over 100,000. The alternative government started at the level of the 'yard', where three to five houses, each containing four to five families, shared a courtyard. About six of these yard committees, representing up to twenty-five families, made up a block committee, which then sent representatives to street committees. All of the street committees formed the Alexandra Action Committee, which became the township's *de facto* government. With the assistance of a white lawyer, they drew up a local constitution based on participatory democracy and formed their own 'people's courts', which dealt with matters such as petty theft, family violence and inter-family disputes.<sup>6</sup> When the Action Committee successfully led a rent strike, the official government cut off

water supplies and the cleaning of the communal pit toilets. The Action Committee then simply formed their own committees which took up these and other jobs themselves (National Public Radio 1987). The rent strikes constituted an overt rejection of the authority of the township councils, making them a major target of state repression (Price 1991: 257).

Not all street and area committees were as democratic and well-functioning as those in Alexandra. Some were composed primarily of self-appointed vigilantes who engaged in undemocratic, violent and arbitrary forms of control. Yet, in most cases, they did constitute a model of democratic self-governance, where none had ever existed previously, and became a powerful tool of non-violent resistance to the official government.

Meanwhile, the first general elections based upon the new constitution of 1984, which created a tricameral legislature granting the coloured and Indian populations their own parliament alongside (though clearly unequal to) the white parliament, but ignoring the black African majority altogether, resulted in an 80 per cent boycott by those communities; those who did run were so reviled by their respective constituencies that they were essentially unable to campaign (Frederickse 1987: 147). Dr Van Zyl Slabbert, leader of the official opposition Progressive Federal Party (PFP) in the white parliament, resigned from parliament in protest at the disenfranchisement of the majority of South Africans. The result was that the façade of legitimacy of the new constitution was a non-starter.

It was also in the early 1980s that the churches became increasingly outspoken, not just in speaking out against apartheid as a sin, but in organising protests in open defiance of apartheid and engaging in non-violent resistance. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who won the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize for his anti-apartheid activism, led the South African Council of Churches (SACC), representing twenty-two of the nation's leading denominations in ongoing resistance. Having largely failed to support the Defiance Campaign for the 1950s, the church leadership was frequently in the forefront of non-violent action campaigns in the 1980s. The SACC adopted a resolution in July 1987 which openly questioned the legitimacy of the white minority government, and called on member churches to question their moral obligation to obey apartheid laws. The SACC openly supported the rent boycott, tax resistance, conscientious objection to military service and registering births outside the official race-based system (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 35–6). In addition, individual churches became

sanctuaries for squatters whose homes had been demolished and for those sought by the authorities (*ibid.*: 120–1), as well as becoming centres for meetings and offices for anti-apartheid groups.

By the mid to late 1980s, defiance had reached a point where the government had clearly lost control. At political funerals and elsewhere, the green, black and gold flag of the ANC was unfurled widely despite the ban on such displays (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 55). Schools and other public facilities were renamed by young men with paint brushes after jailed and exiled heroes of the resistance (*ibid.*: 91). Government officials were met by school children who refused to entertain them as a show of opposition (*ibid.*: 123). Universities were faced with sit-ins in support of black students (*ibid.*: 124). Clergy began to marry mixed-raced couples in defiance of the Prevention of Mixed Marriages Act (*ibid.*: 67), which was finally abolished in 1985. Church pre-schools and even some state elementary schools began admitting non-white students in violation of segregation laws (*ibid.*: 67; Wink 1987: 62). White liberals started boycotting stores which refused to serve all races (Wink 1987: 82).

In February 1989, 300 anti-apartheid activists jailed without charge went on a hunger strike which resulted in the release of hundreds of detainees, and led to substantial limitations on the practice of detention without trial (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 64). Two years earlier, a 40-day public fast by a Buddhist nun from Britain resulted in the release of 250 children from detention (*ibid.*: 66).

The growth in non-violent resistance culminated in the new Defiance Campaign of 1989, with wave upon wave of illegal multiracial peace marches. These started in Cape Town in September, and spread to Johannesburg, Durban, East London, Grahamstown, Oudsthoorn, Kimberley, King William's Town, Bothshabelo and Uitenhage, collectively encompassing hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, and effectively neutralising the state of emergency (*ibid.* 1991: 66). By November, the government allowed an ANC rally of 70,000 to take place in a soccer stadium, to welcome seven released political prisoners (*ibid.*: 111).

There were four major goals of the 1989 campaign: (1) open defiance of the state of emergency to render it ineffective; (2) challenging petty apartheid laws; (3) supporting the rights of black workers by defying anti-labour legislation; and (4) demonstrating the illegitimacy of the tricameral legislative system. The campaign was largely successful, both in making those laws unenforceable, and in rebuilding opposition organisations which had been seriously damaged by the 1986 state of

emergency. The alliance between the UDF and COSATU was strengthened and members of the white establishment, ranging from the mayor of Cape Town and business leaders, to leaders of the opposition Democratic Party, joined in the movement (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 45–6).

Actions of this kind, far more than the sporadic armed attacks by the ANC, forced the South African government to recognise that its days were numbered. Price (1991: 45–6) predicted that:

the precondition for negotiations leading to fundamental political change in South Africa is an extended period of economic decline and political unrest. Over time a situation of economic, physical and psychological deterioration is likely to impact on strategically important constituencies. Support for the political status quo will consequently erode among elements considered vital by the ruling elite, including segments of its security forces. The government's capacity to control will deteriorate as the costs of security escalates beyond the financial capabilities of a deteriorating economy and its self confidence will collapse as the resources and policy options to turn the situation around are perceived as exhausted. This process of decline and disaffection will lead to a gradual shift, over time, toward a position where negotiations for some form of fundamental political change, such as majority rule, is deemed acceptable.

According to anti-apartheid activist Dene Smuts (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 9):

The two historic strands of struggle, violent and nonviolent, were operating simultaneously at the time of the Defiance Campaign of 1989. When nonviolent action coexists with a declared policy of armed struggle, it cannot approach Gandhian refinement and control. But, with violence on the ground and with the ambiguous goals of negotiation or takeover, nonviolent action in South Africa in the late 1980s – the hunger strikes that ended the mass use of the system of detention without trial, the beach protests that showed up the injustice of segregation and outrageousness of police action – operated on the same premises Martin Luther King described in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*... [that] 'direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront this issue'.

Rather than ungovernability of the townships by the white authorities creating liberated zones which would become a beachhead for an armed assault against white South Africa, as many predicted, it was their ungovernability in itself, combined with effective alternative institutions, that helped force the government to recognise the need for negotiations.

Meanwhile, the largely unarmed resistance and the repressive countermeasures against the movement prompted the non-violent resistance in the industrialised countries to force sanctions. The existing

cultural, academic and sports boycotts were broadened to include economic sanctions which made a real impact. The British Commonwealth enacted restricted measures in 1986; the US, Japan, Canada and several European countries enacted a series of sanctions that same year, while international bankers refused to roll over new loans. Several major corporations disinvested and, while their shares were often just bought up by South African firms, it restricted the amount of capital available to promote economic growth. This, combined with the strikes and other forms of economic resistance by the black majority and the increasing costs of internal security from both the armed and the far more significant unarmed resistance, led South Africa into the economic crisis which forced many of the country's elites to advocate change.

#### REASONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE NON-VIOLENT EMPHASIS

The non-violent struggle in South Africa ultimately proved successful when sufficient numbers were empowered, mobilised and willing to take the personal risks to challenge the existing order. One complicating factor in the South African struggle had been the use of 'bannings', a form of house arrest, and suspended sentences with limits on political activity, against leaders in the resistance movement. In most cases, the leaders abided by these restrictions rather than face years of imprisonment; most of those who did not fled into exile. The political consequence of this submission was quite negative. Sharp (1980: 171) noted that:

One of the objective results of the leaders' choice of accepting these limitations, instead of refusing to comply and going to prison, has been to set an example harmful to future resistance. The ordinary opponent of apartheid is not likely to risk a greater punishment than the leaders are seen to be suffering. Yet willingness to undergo imprisonment and other suffering is a primary requirement of change.

The increased willingness to defy banning orders in the late 1980s, as evidenced by Winnie Mandela and others, encouraged greater numbers to openly defy the authorities, and created a climate of resistance in the face of government repression. In August 1989, the UDF and other restricted organisations, along with scores of restricted activities, openly 'unbanned' themselves in a public march in Cape Town (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 49). As one activist at the time described it (*ibid.*: 45):

A remarkable aspect of the 1989 campaign was that many of the organisations and people taking part 'unbanned' themselves in order to do so. And not only

did the 1989 campaign, unlike that of 1952, take place against the background of a state of emergency – it effectively ended it.

An editorial in the *Weekly Argus* during that year noted (*ibid.*: 37):

the intimidatory powers of the state have waned; the veneration of the law has diminished with the erosion of the rule of law. Inevitably that meek acquiescence of yesteryear has evaporated and SA is now witnessing an open, deliberate and organised campaign of defiance.

Though it is easy to think of apartheid South African society in terms of radical polarisation, a model that would tend to support armed struggle as a means of change, the high degree of interdependence, albeit on unfair terms imposed by the ruling white minority, allowed greater latitude for manipulation through non-violent means than is possible in classically polarised societies.

About half of the country's Africans lived in areas allocated to South Africa's whites, including all the ports, major cities, industry, mines and optimal agricultural land, as did virtually all of the Coloureds and Asians. The white minority existed from day to day with a high level of dependence on the black majority, not just for their high standard of living, but for their very survival. Non-violent action constituted a more direct challenge to the system of apartheid than did violence.

The black South Africans' overwhelming numerical majority made the use of non-violent action particularly effective when they started to mobilise in large numbers in the mid-1980s. Non-violent action, despite its requirements of discipline and bravery in the face of repression, allowed participation by a far greater percentage of the population than would a guerrilla army, thus optimising the black majority. Sustained non-violent action created a great deal of unity and militancy among previously non-committed Africans, as was witnessed in earlier non-violent campaigns. The late Zulu chief and ANC leader Albert Luthuli (1962: 64) noted how the 1953 Defiance Campaign 'had succeeded in *creating* among a very large number of Africans the spirit of militant defiance. The Campaign itself came to an untimely end, but it left a new climate, and it embraced people far beyond our range of vision'. ANC membership jumped from approximately 7,000 at the start of the campaign to over 100,000 towards the end. Another ANC leader, Walter Sisulu, observed that another non-violent campaign, the successful 1957 Alexandra township bus boycott, 'raised the political consciousness of the people and has brought about a great solidarity and unity among them' (Sharp: 1973: 795).<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, violence often alienates support within the grievance group. This has been apparent in South African history, where the

essentially conservative and religious Africans tended to respond negatively or not at all to revolutionary violence. Heribert Adam (1971: 116) reported that Operation *Mayebuye*, an ANC bombing campaign in the early 1960s, 'which aimed at frightening whites into making concessions, instead resulted in a strengthening of the repressive machinery and general discouragement of African militancy closer to general resignative despair that determination to actively resist white domination'.

The shift to a largely non-violent orientation lured white popular opinion away from those seeking continued white domination. Non-violent action threw the regime off-balance politically. A related factor was that the largely non-violent struggle of the 1980s made the prospects of living under black majority rule less frightening. Though the prospects of giving up their privileges was not particularly welcomed by most whites, the use of non-violence by the black majority against their white oppressors was seen as indicative of a tolerant attitude not likely to result in the previously anticipated reprisals upon seizing power. The use of armed struggle as the primary means of resistance, even if white civilian casualties were kept at a minimum, would have led many whites to fear for the worst.

One consequence of the divisions created within the white community was the End Conscription Campaign, which began in the 1970s with white youth opposing South Africa's occupation of Namibia and invasion of Angola, but grew dramatically in the mid-1980s, when the regular armed forces moved into the black townships. As many as 1,000 new open resisters surfaced in 1989 alone, and thousands more evaded the draft in less public ways. Through the 1980s, an average of 4,000 men failed to report every year for military service (Frederikse 1987: 82). Resistance included voluntary exile, going underground or voluntarily submitting oneself to arrest and imprisonment for refusal to be drafted into the army. While some were religious pacifists, most resisted on political grounds.

The phenomenon of clearly non-violent demonstrators being subjected to cruelty and brutality, creating strong dissent within the white minority, had also occurred in earlier non-violent campaigns. In the 1957 Alexandra township boycott (Sharp 1973: 669-70):

Despite official threats, many European automobile drivers gave rides to the walking African boycotters. On the route the Africans had been systematically intimidated and persecuted by the police. Also, after Sharpeville, unprovoked attacks – including whippings – by police against Africans in the Capetown area during an African strike led to so many European bystanders phoning to

report the attacks to Capetown newspapers that the switchboards were jammed; the President of the Cape Chamber of Commerce of Industries, C. F. Regnier, personally pleaded with the Chief of Police, Col. I. P. S. Terblanche, to stop the assaults.

The shooting deaths of non-violent Coloured students on strike in Cape Town in May 1980 produced an outpouring of sympathy for the strikers. Even the second largest white political party, the Progressive Federal Party, complained about the excessive force by the police. By contrast, the PFP strongly supported the January 1981 raid into Mozambique and other incursions by the South African armed forces against alleged armed guerrilla units.

Previously unsympathetic whites actively supported the non-violent defence of a number of squatter settlements, such as the Crossroads community near Cape Town, threatened with destruction by the authorities. Such episodes created a climate of divisiveness within the ruling order which was then exploited by the black resistance. Unfortunately, the slight escalation in armed attacks by the ANC in the early 1980s inhibited this shift. Journalist Julie Frederikse (1987: 174) observed:

When the ANC's attacks were largely confined to the sabotage of township railway lines and raids on black police stations, most whites had been able to dismiss the guerrillas as a few poorly-trained radicals 'hurting their own people'. But when nineteen whites and blacks were killed by a bomb in the streets of Pretoria in 1983, many white South Africans then readily accepted the government's argument that the ANC was committed to naked terrorism, aimed at civilians... The fact that the blast was aimed at the Defence Force Headquarters and half those killed were military personnel was obscured by the media fixation on 'the car bomb outrage'.

By contrast, disciplined non-violence created morale problems within the police and military, rendering them less effective (Sharp 1973: 585-6).

In an effort to crush a strike by Africans which began on March 22, 1960 (the day after the shooting at Sharpeville), police invaded the Nyanga location near Capetown on April 4; for four days they unleashed a reign of terror including extensive whippings of men, use of batons and some shootings and killings. (This was after extensive unprovoked police brutality against Africans elsewhere, which had produced important white protests against the police.) Norman Phillips of the *Toronto Star* reports the inhibiting effects of nonretaliation even in this situation: 'For sheer sadism, the closest comparison to what happened at Nyanga was when the Gestapo sealed off the Warsaw ghetto and began to annihilate it. Had Nyanga fought back, it, too, would have been wiped out; but the Africans employed nonaggressive tactics that puzzled the police.'

Armed revolution, in the eyes of the white minority, would have confirmed their worst stereotypes of the Africans as 'violent savages', would have reinforced the *laager* mentality, and encouraged whites to resist bitterly and engage in extraordinarily brutal repression. On the other hand, non-violent action not only challenged the popular image of the 'black terrorist', but also that of the 'subservient house boy', creating significant attitudinal changes among whites, similar to those which occurred in the American South in the 1960s. Non-violent action allowed far greater potential for creating cleavages among the privileged white minority, such as how to respond to the resistance, how long to resist the inevitable changes demanded by the revolutionaries, and at what cost.

The importance of maintaining a non-violent discipline was not lost on leaders of the anti-apartheid movement. Bishop Tutu, in reaction to black attacks against suspected collaborators in 1985, deplored this kind of violence and threatened to leave the country if such tactics were not ended, insisting that 'You cannot use methods to gain the goal of liberation that our enemy will use against us' (Smuts & Westcott 1991: 68). When Winnie Mandela, the once-revered wife of imprisoned ANC leader Nelson Mandela, and a prominent anti-apartheid activist in her own right, was found to be sanctioning violent activities, she found herself ostracised by the mass democratic movement (*ibid.*: 96).

The advantages of non-violence in winning allies went far beyond the potentially enlightened sectors of South Africa's white minority, in that they also extended to the world community. World opinion was of crucial importance. Despite verbal condemnation of its racial policies, the Western industrialised world gave South Africa consistent support over the years in the form of trade, industrial development, technological assistance, infusion of capital and arms. South Africa would not have become the economic and military power it was without the massive aid it received from the West over forty years of apartheid rule.

Prior to the imposition of sanctions in the mid-1980s, there was over \$13 billion worth of annual trade between South Africa and the West, which combined with \$30 billion in foreign investment, supplied the country with the vast majority of such basic commodities as transportation equipment, electrical equipment and machinery, nuclear technology, telecommunications facilities and services, computer technology, chemicals and related products, paper and manufactures, and other goods essential to the maintenance of South Africa as a modern industrialised state. In addition, the West supported the South

African regime through outstanding bank loans and credits totalling \$6.5 billion, much of which went to government entities with no restrictions.

When the United Nations Security Council threatened sanctions and other punitive measures against South Africa, the United States, Great Britain and France, due to their important economic and political interests, cast vetoes. By the mid to late 1980s, however, thanks to massive non-violent protests in those countries and others by anti-apartheid activists, most industrialised nations imposed sanctions on the apartheid regime. Labour unions, church groups, students and leftist organisations made business as usual with the apartheid government impossible. This upsurge in solidarity work came as a result of the largely non-violent resistance in South Africa during the 1980s, and the government repression which resulted. In contrast, had the primary mode of resistance been armed struggle, it is unlikely that the same level of sympathy and the resulting mass mobilisation would have been enough to make the sanctions movement so successful.

While some attribute the rioting, such as the Soweto uprising of 1976 and subsequent outbursts of violent township protests in the 1980s, as a key factor in the end of apartheid, these were probably not decisive. Even as the riots and the repression escalated following the declaration of a state of emergency in 1985, heavy government censorship successfully limited media coverage, and interest in the situation waned. Unlike the concomitant non-violent campaigns, the rioters were in large part suppressed. Like the youth rebellions in advanced capitalist countries in the 1960s and early 1970s, young militants certainly had a disruptive effect, may have inspired some reforms, and further exposed the repressive machinery of the state; but they did not have the power in themselves to force major structural change. Only when the youthful rebels were able to effectively build an alliance with the black working class was real change possible. The Soweto uprisings of 1976 illustrate this in both ways. Some Zulu migrant workers were used to brutally suppress the student strikes and other actions in August. However, after careful organising among the workers by striking students, they became largely supportive in the general strike the following month, which led to the most dramatic crisis for the government during that turbulent period. In short, the rioting Soweto youths only began to seriously challenge the white authorities when they stopped rioting, built alliances with workers in the townships, and organised a non-violent movement.

A resurgence of the student boycotts and protests sprang up among

coloured students in early 1980 in the Western Cape. By keeping their protest primarily non-violent, and linking their educational demands to national political grievances, this led to the two-day general strike in June, when 70 per cent of the workers stayed at home. Police repression was severe – over sixty people were killed in the following week – but it resulted in unprecedented support for the resistance among people of all races (Frederickse 1987: 18–19). When tens of thousands of black students walked out of the classroom in early 1984, they were met by repression similar to that in the Soweto uprising. Yet not only was the violence more controlled, they were able to involve workers and their communities in their support, and draw up specific demands for educational improvements (*ibid.*: 168).

The wave of violent unrest in the mid-1980s was largely insulated from the white minority community; there was actually less publicity in the white South African media on the unrest than there was in other countries. Often the targets of the rioters were public facilities for Africans, which created rifts within the black populations at a time when unity was of crucial importance. Far more significant, in terms both of building a popular resistance movement and of challenging the state, were the boycotts, strikes, creation of alternative institutions and other forms of largely non-violent resistance. A 1981 study by the American Friends Service Committee (1982: 112) concluded:

The South African government presents a classic example of bureaucracy, musclebound with arms and ideologically ill-equipped to meet the challenge of massive, nonviolent noncooperation. The government has already demonstrated an inability to use its bludgeoning techniques to foreclose strikes involving even a relatively small geographic area and a relatively small number of workers. What would happen if the black workers, servants, and farm labourers withdrew cooperation on a massive scale in a well-organized nonviolent campaign!

Is it possible that at a certain point, as [Zambian president Kenneth] Kaunda puts it, the oppressor will realize that ‘he is powerless, in the last resort, to prevent the inevitable because he is trying to fight not an army but an idea, and short of exterminating a whole population he cannot bomb or blast it out of their minds?’ The truth of the idea – the releasing of thirty million people to be human – is better served by nonviolent actions which do not deny the basic humanity of the oppressor.

This is exactly what happened in South Africa. And while the struggle was more protracted, more complex and not as exclusively non-violent as some similar struggles during this era, it was one of the most significant. It demonstrated that even where so many had given up on non-violence, key elements of the resistance movement would

recognise its power, and utilise unarmed resistance in the successful liberation of their people.

#### NOTES

1. In one sense, to characterise any form of resistance in South Africa as 'nonviolent' is a misnomer, since the South African government often responded with very violent repression to any form of challenge to its authority. There is little question, however, that there would be far fewer casualties in a nonviolent revolution than from a violent one.

2. By the mid-1980s, the number of armed blacks working for the South African government had grown dramatically, both through uniformed forces as well as through vigilantes affiliated with the Inkhatha Freedom Party.

3. The embargo did make it impossible for the South African air force to replace its lost jets, thus raising long-term questions regarding its command of the air, and the armed forces of Zimbabwe and some other African states were improving somewhat. However, while such changes could, in the long term, have limited South Africa's regional military hegemony, it would not pose a challenge to the apartheid regime itself.

4. Part of the scepticism towards those downplaying the armed struggle came from the fact that many of those who argued against the successful outcome of armed resistance were Western analysts who pushed an equally unrealistic scenario that reform would come through the liberalising influence of foreign investment and economic development. There was also a problem of romanticising armed struggle within certain leftist circles outside South Africa. For example, this author was purged from an anti-apartheid group at Oberlin College in 1978 because I refused to endorse the principle that military victory by the ANC and PAC was the means of liberation. Similarly strident attitudes towards armed struggle often plagued white radicals in North America and Europe, who supported the anti-apartheid struggle but were unfamiliar with the actual situation on the ground.

5. Lekele chastised those who talked of armed struggle and ignored the crucial differences between the successful liberation struggles in neighbouring countries and the situation in South Africa. At the same time, while he felt armed struggle might be necessary at a later stage, he emphasised that this could only be so in conjunction with massive nonviolent resistance: the 'difference between armed struggle in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa [is] the development of the mass strike and massive political action growing into armed insurrection.' (Marx 1980: 15).

6. These peoples' courts are not to be confused with the vigilante actions which periodically resulted in the lynching of suspected collaborators which took place in other black townships. These peoples' courts were highly regarded, not only because they were more trusted than the corrupt local magistrates, but because they were often able to actually return stolen property rather than simply punishing the suspect.

A 1987 attack by police on an Alexandra peoples' court left eight people dead. A South African court decision soon thereafter, however, limited the ability of government authorities to suppress these popular administrative committees.

7. It is noteworthy that the Alexandra boycott was not organised primarily by the ANC, but by a number of local groups, and the boycotters rejected efforts by the ANC to force a compromise.

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