THE TWO FACES OF TERROR

Ever since the Nationalists seized power in 1948, South Africa has been in a state of suspended terror. The mechanism of tyranny has been developed with patience and care—in the self-perpetuation of Nationalist rule through electoral delimitation and disfranchisement, in the punishments with which the law is loaded against any effective forms of opposition, in the functions and powers with which an obsequious parliament has dressed officialdom and, particularly, the police. Political opponents are banned and banished without trial; the security police pry everywhere, listening and scribbling, pursuing and interrogating, with all the bland insolence of their inviolable dossiers; passports and permits are seized or refused without reason or appeal. Yet the engine has remained, for all that, securely locked in second gear.

On the crudest comparison with consummate terrors, like Nazi Germany or contemporary Portugal, the courts in South Africa have protected the law from persistent outrage. Political antagonists have not just disappeared, while their families endured exemplary victimization; trial in public court has remained the prerequisite of imprisonment and execution. The law may have been defaced beyond recognition, but it is still standing. Whatever one’s judgment of the treason trial, its interminable proceedings and the vagrancy of the prosecution, the accused were not simply rounded up and shot, or shovelled secretly into concentration camps. Quite the reverse. Their trial has been conducted with a blare of publicity, and the Crown is attempting to prove its contentions before an increasingly restive bench at home and overseas.

Above all, the press has been left fundamentally free. Though vulnerable to persecution under a number of ‘public safety’ laws and consequently compelled to mince fine much of its comment, it remains in practice secure from seizure and censorship. It is a precarious freedom, of course, and one that may be enjoyed only at constant editorial risk. The Minister of Justice, pressed to give reasons for his five-year ban on the Editor of ‘Africa South’, cited for the most part various quotations from articles that have appeared in the magazine. Yet it has been, all the same, by the measure of the press under absolute terrors, freedom of a very precious sort, capable, for all its limitations, of having kept reason alive in a race-deranged society.
It is inevitable, of course, that press and judiciary together should be suffocated by the sack-cloth of white supremacy. The Nationalists have only needed time, to condition the country to its ultimate submission. Democracy is never destroyed in a day; it is undermined, gradually, carefully, till it is ready at last to cave in with one sure cut of the spade. For eleven years the Nationalists have been tuning up the engine. And now the time has come to push the pedal down flat to the floor.

Some of the recent appointments to both the provincial and appellate divisions of the judiciary are explicable only in terms of political packaging. Promotions have ridden roughshod over reputation and seniority; and lurking in the shadows of Government policy, legislation stirs to ease the retirement of recalcitrant judges. The South African judiciary has long enjoyed a reputation for administering the law uncorrupted by promises of power or fear of place. That it has deserved this reputation so well must be provocation enough to a government whose pursuit of power increasingly collides with the rule of law. No country can contain a free judiciary and the political and economic violence of apartheid peacefully together; the one must by its very nature consume the other in the course of its career. And so the Nationalists must serve notice on South Africa that independence of judgment is to be as tolerable on the bench as it is in parliament. Trial by political opinion stands ready to tie on the blind-fold.

How should the press escape? The Deputy-Minister of the Interior has already announced that a bill to provide for internal censorship is being framed in accordance with the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Undesirable Publications* and is to be introduced by the Government at the coming parliamentary session. It is not yet certain whether newspapers will be covered; but that is not of much moment. If they escape, it will only be for separate execution straight afterwards. It is upon the whole world of free comment that the guns of the Government are now trained.

It is not easy to be serious about the recommendations in the 1957 Report. Where it is not almost pathological, as in its thick-lensed strictures on underwear advertisements, it is grotesque in its bigotry, defining the politically undesirable with so obvious and profound a contempt for the right of men to hold any conflicting opinions at all that editors will be serving five years

*For a detailed analysis of the Report, see 'Africa South', Vol II No. 2—'The Final Stroke'. 
in jail for publishing articles on the development of democracy in Ancient Greece.

For what are we to expect of a government that banned "Black Beauty" from entry into South Africa because the title apparently did not make it clear enough to the censors that the chief character is a horse? The recent banning of Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian" possesses at least the excuse that the book was read first and irritated the spiritual conjunctivitis of Afrikanerdome. With the same degree of discretion employed by the Board of Internal Censors as has been consistently exercised by the Board controlling what we read from abroad, we may expect bibles to be published with the Book of Exodus excised and government gazettes filling up the fiction shelves in all the bookshops.

How can the Nationalists hope to survive the very silence that they compel? While men may dispute, they may yet resolve in peace; with all argument forbidden, the future rides on the bullet and the knife. During the past six months, African despair has erupted into flaming sugar-plantations and wattle-groves, in outbursts of violence that have racked the rural areas of Natal. The Congress leadership appeals ceaselessly for calm; but how can it expect its calls to be obeyed? Black terror has accomplished what black protest and black petition have failed so formidably to achieve—the quick concessions of the afraid. Within days of the Cato Manor riots, the Durban City Council was considering a general increase in African wages; while arson scorches Natal, cries for black-white consultation scurry in the wake. How can it be otherwise? There are two faces to terror; and a country that shows the one must be prepared to bear the retribution of the other.

The Government would do well to consider the implications of all that it is doing and plans still to do. By shackling the judiciary and suffocating the press, it will accomplish the outward political conformity that its ever-growing greed for power coerces it to want. But the starch will only stick to the surface. And too deep for the eyes of censors to scrutinize or the courts to convict, the antagonism of men who have been deprived of any real reason for living will surge to the breach, drowning all that is worth saving in South Africa together with what is not. Surely, it is not only the sugar-plantations of Natal that South Africa is setting on fire with the frenzy of apartheid. It is itself.