South Africa: A Wealth of Repression

Bill Gaither

From June 16 until the end of this year there will be 618 individual moments of silent protest in South Africa. That is the number of people known to have been killed during six months of low-level disruption, which exploded a hundred times into full-scale uprising. There is even a published list: alphabetized, date and cause of death, home address, age. “Hector Petersen, June 16, Gunshot wound, Soweto, age 12.” The first to die. Choose another at random: “Philadelphia Moloi, date of death unknown, Gunshot wound, Jabavu, age 17.” Despite the dispassionate, systematic listings, the eye can discover unanswered questions. Were the nine people with the last name “Tshabalala”—all from Soweto, all reported dead on the same day, December 26—from the same family? We can only guess. Was Edgar Zwane, age five, “hit by car running from police,” fleeing in fear or simply running because that’s what everyone else did when the “Blackjacks” showed up?

We might also wonder if the thousands of other blacks injured will gingerly touch their own healed wounds one full year later and thus reopen them. The exact number of casualties is unknown, but in combat the killed to wounded ratio is estimated at one to four. Perhaps the ratio was lower. After all, in combat the enemy shoots back, and both sides are concerned with personal safety. Two whites died during the whole half-year of horror.

The list and the memories do not come close to ending with any compilation of KIAs and WIsAs. As America has learned, even undeclared wars and police actions can result in large numbers who are missing in action. Johannesburg’s black newspaper, The World—“Our Own, Our Only Paper”—runs a daily column about the families who have had a relative jailed under the Terrorism Act or the Internal Security Act. Even at the rate of one interview a day, The World is still working on those detained last year. Most of the prisoners have yet to be charged with a specific crime; fewer still have been allowed a visit from their family. An attorney, a hearing, bail—all are out of the question until the government decides just why they were arrested last year. Eighty per cent of those who have had their day in court and have had legal representation have been acquitted. Unknown hundreds of others wait. Unknown because the police do not have to release names or numbers, are not required to tell families why or even if they are holding a relative. The 618 total will undoubtedly grow as some parents, having carried a missing child full term in their memory, finally begin to realize that their hope is stillborn.

South Africa was at war last year, and Soweto still contains grim, burned-out reminders—charred schools, Bantu administration offices, the hated government-owned liquor stores. A visiting reporter, smuggled through in a high-speed car tour conducted by a terrified black friend (“Keep down! If people see you, they will kill us both!”), notices the ruins because they break up the monotony of the shabby, everyday reality of the city’s poverty. Even in repose Soweto is no longer a peaceful place; the violence of last year finally disturbed its slumber.

Johannesburg, fourteen miles distant, represents the absolute opposite, an operating room next door to the slaughterhouse. Swept and scoured—store and office windows polished daily, ashtrays emptied hourly, coffee cups whisked away half-full by the quarter-million blacks whose existence depends upon forever proving their worth—the city gleams. Winter is now settling in. Johannesburg has gone officially “smokeless” in the last months, the last suburb to install clean-burning heaters. On certain days, however, an oily carbon stench, far exceeding what the streams of traffic could produce, burns the nose and eyes. “Soweto’s Revenge”: the drifting emissions of hundreds of thousands of charcoal stoves, paraffin heaters, kerosene lamps. It amuses the blacks.

Yet if the 850,000 whites can never totally forget the 1.5 million blacks, even at night, when all but the essential labor must leave, on the surface it is possible to pretend that all is well. To speak of last year’s uprising is provocative. It was a “riot.” It is also a reference point: “Before the confrontation...” “After the riots...” The English-speaking portion of the Afrikaans-English minority still clings to the heritage of Mother England and is fond of understatement. “During the difficulties....”

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One suspects there must exist whites who want change, who support an end to apartheid, who want a little relief from the tension. There are liberal, humanist, white advocates of majority rule in South Africa. There are whites who work to reduce the injustice, who faithfully serve their God and their conscience. There are whites who consciously follow a path that leads them to jail—There are truly good people whose courage and conviction were sorely needed and much appreciated by a visitor in need of comfort. They are far braver than the person who writes about them and calls them ineffectual. They affect the mainstream of white thought as much as grains of sand alter an incoming tide.

The three main liberal organizations in the country—The Black Sash, The Christian Institute, and The Institute of Race Relations—have a combined membership of less than ten thousand. For the most part they are ignored. The government endures them until, with few exceptions, the most articulate, the most active, those showing hints of the ability to penetrate the illusion that all is well, are sent to jail or banned from public life. The rest perform their tasks, knowing it counts for little. Liberal white South Africans respond to their sense of duty but know that in the end they are primarily taking care of their own souls.

To an American, South Africa in many ways presents itself as a caricature of our own past. The threat of monolithic communism is blamed for any white/black disturbance. Failure to subscribe to conventional beliefs leads to suspicion. Open renunciation is called treason. Only criminals need fear the laws, no matter how restrictive. You may disagree, but you may not dissent. Breyten Breytenbach, freely admitted to be the greatest living Afrikaans-language poet, is serving nine years under the Terrorism Act: "Dr. Beyers Naude, director of The Christian Institute, has gone to jail for refusing to testify before a government-created board of inquiry granted judicial powers; David Russell, an Anglican priest, appealing a conviction resulting from his publishing a report documenting incidents of police brutality in Cape Town last year, is now facing further charges for the crime of possessing a copy of the report after the government had banned it. Arrest without charge, jail without charge, five-year"

"As this issue of Worldview was going to press there came a new development in l’affaire Breytenbach. According to the New York Times, "A South African judge has astounded his countrymen by declaring Breyten Breytenbach...not guilty of promoting terrorism. Mr. Breytenbach was already serving a nine-year sentence given him in 1975 for violating South Africa’s Terrorism Act, when the Government raised new charges against him for allegedly attempting to convert his warden to membership in a white underground group, and enlisting him in an escape plan. But the judge saw the relationship between the two as innocent, a decision widely viewed as a setback for the Government, since Mr. Breytenbach was given little chance to beat the state’s elaborate case. [The poet continues to serve his nine-year sentence.] In another case, however, nine black members of the banned African National Congress were convicted of acts that ‘endanger the maintenance of law and order in the Republic of South Africa.’ They will be sentenced later." (July 17).—The Editors
banishments from public life: house arrest from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M. and during the weekends, prohibitions about meeting more than two people at one time, about having your conversations quoted, your writings published, about leaving a defined area without written consent, subject to relocation (as was Namzako Winnie Mandela the week before Andrew Young arrived in Johannesburg, because the minister of justice had decided that "it would be better to have Mrs. Mandela out of Soweto before Andrew Young arrived in Johannesburg, because the minister of justice had decided that "it would be better to have Mrs. Mandela out of Soweto at this time"). "Witnesses" may be held in jail isolated for 180 days for their own protection. The police do not have to state what crime has been committed. We have not even touched on pass laws that regulate the influx of blacks into "controlled areas" (white cities). If the above-mentioned laws are occasionally used against whites, the pass laws are designed to deal with blacks. Ask any urban black, "What is Section 10?" (no need to mention the specific law), and he or she will quote to you Articles a, b, and c. The three are less the requirements than the loopholes under which a black may legally remain in a township.

Short of printing verbatim the intertwining sum of South African law, there is no way of illustrating the controlled nature of the society. If holding onto the leash is better than having the other end around your neck, it is not the same as having both hands free. White South Africa is a restricted, closed society that has traded off physical liberty for physical comfort. If you are white, it is hard to live badly, to go hungry, to be poorly dressed. It is as difficult for a white to live as badly as a black as it is for a black to live as well as a white. A certain minimum affluence is part of your birthright as a white; luxury is the reward for any display of enterprise. For all the talk of national identity—and protection of the uniqueness of the white tribe is the final line of defense in any argument, the ultimate, irreducible rationalization for apartheid—it is difficult not to equate this identity with privileged position. If the unique characteristics of national identity are threatened by any mixing with those who are different, why is immigration welcomed and actively encouraged from any foreign country as long as the applicant is white?

South Africa, in fact, has a huge resident alien population. Immigration is encouraged far more strenuously than is citizenship. To be a citizen is to be able to vote, and the National Party (NP), in power since 1948, is elected and maintained without the support of the English-speaking, the Witlanders—the foreigner portion of the white population. In actuality the country is governed by a parliamentary majority elected by about 5 per cent of the total population. Just over half of the 2.2 million registered voters support the N.P. A simple majority in Parliament is sufficient to pass any piece of legislation except those affecting the status of English and Afrikaans as the dual, official languages. There is no Bill of Rights. The courts interpret legal questions only on the basis of whether or not a case is protected or prohibited by legislative act, and at present it takes the votes of only ninety members of the House of Assembly to amend or completely restructure civil and criminal law. Because many electoral districts have ten thousand or fewer voters, laws affecting the lives of 25 million people may be passed by a group of legislators intent on pleasing a voting majority of, perhaps, 700,000 potential voters.

In a political system that is sensitive to the demands of small pressure groups it might be expected that liberals would exert an influence of at least moderation. That they do not perhaps gives an indication of their numbers. A South African may be considered liberal within the context of the society and still support separation of people by color. Equal pay for equal work, an end to job restrictions, elimination of hiring practices based on ratios of white/colored/black, unregulated park benches (a source of great pride in Johannesburg, although the park toilets are still segregated)—all these measures fit the definition of "moderation," in a society in which black hotel workers must sleep on the roof because it is against the law for different races to sleep under the same roof. There is a wealth of repressive legislation one may oppose without affecting the realities of the status quo. Much space in the foreign press has been devoted to the "liberalizing" influence of the country's leading industrialists. It is all a sham, an illusion for the benefit of the Western world and its coveted investment capital.

Consider the impact of this most visible spirit of change: "All races are protected by the same wage laws." This is true. The law prescribes the legal minimum hourly wage for each industry. Whites, however, are protected by trade unions and do not work for the minimum. Blacks are not excluded from unions, but from the definition of "employee," and only employees may belong to recognized unions. Five hundred per cent is not an unusual disparity for white and black workers. There is no discrimination because the law states only that the minimum must be paid.

"Equal pay for equal work." There are, of course, job restrictions that prohibit blacks from certain occupations, but in general the law is followed. However, whites do not, in actuality, perform the same jobs as blacks. They are hired for jobs that have built-in differences. White and black doctors employed by the government, for example, receive incomes with a differential of at least 20 per cent. The law has not been violated because, by another law, black doctors may not treat white patients; their duties are actually different; they do not perform equal work.

Legally, South Africa is moving away from discrimination based on color. Given the premises, the conclusions are logically correct. In reality, in the squatter camps in Queenstown people are starving to death (no one knows or will admit to this, but there have been at least several thousand deaths in this one section of the Natal). The changes, the moderations now being offered, are directed toward mollifying world opinion and, because they are cosmetic, are directed toward changing the surface image; they have done nothing to change the desperate situation of the majority. Blacks are now worse off than before the bloodletting of last year. Many are becoming increasingly militant, but the Afrikaner will fight before he will change. The government, reflecting that consensus, has led the country on a path in which confrontation seems impossible to avoid.