

# A PROVINCIAL CONCERN?

## Political killings in South Africa

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*Politically motivated killings have occupied a relatively marginal position as an issue of public concern in South Africa since 1994. This may reflect the provincial nature of the problem, since such killings have mainly occurred in KwaZulu-Natal, with a much smaller number occurring in Mpumalanga and even fewer recorded elsewhere. Based on a scan of documentary information, this article estimates that there have been approximately 450 political killings in KwaZulu-Natal since 1994, with most having taken place in the mid and late 1990s and just under 25% (107) since 2003. The root of the problem in KwaZulu-Natal may be the militarisation of the province during the apartheid period. Some political killings in the province continue to be linked to inter-party conflict that has roots in that time. However, political killings since the end of apartheid are mostly linked to local political rivalries and connections to criminal networks, notably in the taxi industry. Though the problem is concentrated in specific provinces it is likely to impact on political life in South Africa more broadly.*

The period since the transition to democracy has been associated with a major decline in the role played by violence in South African politics. Violence nevertheless continues to be a feature of political contestation. This is evident from the large number of community protests that have involved forms of violence, such as the burning of local council buildings or the homes of councillors. Collective violence of this kind generally does not involve fatalities, though there are exceptions to this. Action by the police in response to protests has also in some cases resulted in fatalities, such as the killing of Andries Tatane in April 2011 and that of 34 people during a strike by miners in Marikana in August 2012. Political killings are another way in which violence continues to play a role in political contestation. As will be discussed, these killings have been a sustained feature of

political life in South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, but also in Mpumalanga, through most of the post-1994 period. This article provides an overview of this phenomenon.

### CATEGORISING KILLINGS AS POLITICAL

In this article 'political killings' refer to killings related to contestation over political power. The killings that are the focus of the article, including most of those from the late 1990s onwards, are generally what appear to be deliberate killings of specific individuals, sometimes referred to as 'assassinations'. However, political killings may also occur, for instance, in clashes between groups of members of rival political parties or in other incidents such as massacres. In this article the focus is mainly on the killings of people who are affiliated to political parties. For a killing to be 'political' it must be motivated by or connected to contestation or rivalry, either regarding access to

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political power, or conflict over the way in which the individual targeted (or a group aligned with that individual), is exercising his or her political power.

Defined in this way, a killing cannot be classified as political unless one knows the motive behind it. Until this point is reached (for instance through information revealed at a trial) it would be more accurate to refer to killings of political office bearers or party members as 'suspected' or 'possible' political killings. The killing may be a random criminal attack on a person who happened to be a political office bearer. However, it is not only the political office or affiliation of an individual that may suggest that the killing is not a random crime. The timing or circumstances of the killing (for instance if the killing is not linked to a robbery) may reinforce this possibility. In this article it is assumed that where political office bearers or members are killed these are 'political killings.' However, in some of the relatively small number of cases of this kind that have resulted in a court verdict, the evidence presented has raised doubts about whether the killing was political in nature. This highlights the risks of making assumptions of this kind.

For instance, the killing of Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) councillor Mfanafuthu Elliot Maphumulo in February 2009 happened shortly before elections and it was assumed by some people to have been political in nature. However, following the sentencing of three men to terms of life imprisonment at the end of August 2012, Maphumulo's wife indicated that the evidence presented in court did not support this idea. 'From the trial it seems as if it was a retaliation murder. The suspects were paid hit-men. The man who was paying them thought my husband had something to do with another murder,'<sup>1</sup> she said. The process of a trial and conviction may also not finally resolve the question of whether the killing is political or not. Following the conviction of a 19-year-old man for the August 2011 murder of National Freedom Party (NFP) aligned Induna<sup>2</sup> Titus Mthembu, the IFP welcomed the verdict, asserting that the evidence presented showed that the killing was not political. The NFP, on the other

hand, raised questions about whether the judgment was correct, pointing out that Mthembu had been receiving threats at the time when he was killed.<sup>3</sup>

## ESTABLISHING THE FACTS ABOUT POLITICAL KILLINGS

There is no established system for collecting data on political killings in South Africa and any attempt to detail the number of political killings in the post-apartheid period must of necessity rely on a number of different information sources. Such an exercise faces challenges in assessing the accuracy of much of the information that is available. There are apparent inaccuracies in some sources of information. As reflected below, there are also inconsistencies between information from different sources. In addition, an exercise of this kind must also acknowledge the uncertainty related to questions of definition already mentioned.

### KwaZulu-Natal

In the period of roughly two years from May 1994 extending into 1996, about 220 people were killed in acts of political violence in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> More than three-quarters of these deaths (170) were in KwaZulu-Natal. There was a steady decline in the monthly rate of killings over this period in the province, with the Human Rights Committee estimating roughly 71 deaths in the last eight months of 1994, 67 deaths in 1995 and 42 deaths in 1996.<sup>5</sup> A similar trend is reflected in a list of IFP leaders killed. This records 82 deaths from May 1994 to August 1996, with 16 of these deaths occurring in 1996.<sup>6</sup>

A formal political agreement between the African National Congress (ANC) and the IFP in May 1996 seems to have led to a decisive rupture in ANC-IFP violence. For just short of 20 months from August 1996 onwards, the IFP, for instance, did not record any leaders killed. However, though there may have been a cessation in ANC-IFP violence, there was a dramatic escalation in violent conflict in the Richmond area, particularly following the April 1997 expulsion of Richmond

warlord Sifiso Nkabinde from the ANC. Nkabinde's expulsion 'marked the beginning of a two-year reign of terror in the Richmond area in which orchestrated hit squad activity was to claim more than 120 deaths.'<sup>7</sup> This culminated on 23 January 1999 in a bloody day in which first Nkabinde, and, later the same day, 11 ANC supporters were killed, the latter in an apparent revenge attack.<sup>8</sup>

These killings in Richmond were a product of conflicts within ANC-aligned structures, but killings related to ANC-IFP conflict did not take long to re-emerge. Attempts by the ANC to establish a political foothold in the IFP stronghold Nongoma led to an escalation of conflict in the area. According to one report this led to the death of more than 20 people,<sup>9</sup> with at least seven IFP leaders and six ANC leaders assassinated in the 1999-2000 period.<sup>10</sup> However, the IFP's list of leaders killed only records two killings in this period. Other violence of a seemingly political nature that is reported from this period appears to have included 'intra-IFP conflict in Lindelani (north of Durban)' that 'led to over 30 murders' from 1998 onwards. The IFP list records one death of a leader in Lindelani in 1998 and none in subsequent years.

Notwithstanding inconsistencies in the information on that period, it therefore appears that the late 1990s was a period of sustained political violence and killings in KwaZulu-Natal. In the period since then, KwaZulu-Natal has retained its status as the epicentre of political killings in post-apartheid South Africa. Indications are, however, that until quite recently there had been a substantial reduction in political killings in the province. During research for this article, for instance, an attempt was made to find details of political killings in South Africa from various publicly accessible documentary sources. One of these was a list of killings, virtually all of them dating back to 2009 or later, that was presented in the KwaZulu-Natal legislature in August 2012. From a process of scrutinising and verifying the data in this list by comparing it to press reports and other documentary sources, it has been possible to identify 47 incidents of political killings

(some involve two fatalities) in the period from January 2009 to the present (May 2013). In the period from 2006 to 2008 another seven killings were identified, bringing the total to 54 fatal incidents involving a total of 61 fatalities. The killings are widely distributed in KwaZulu-Natal, though there are specific localities such as Wembezi near Estcourt in the northern Midlands and Umlazi in eThekweni that are associated with a relatively large number of the killings.

However, the figure of 61 fatalities is unlikely to be comprehensive. For instance, in July 2012 the NFP reported that 22 NFP members had been killed since the launch of the party in February 2011.<sup>11</sup> Comparison to the list of 61 appears to indicate that this may exclude the deaths of up to ten NFP members in the period up to July 2012, and probably more in the subsequent period. Likewise, it was reported in October 2012 that an internal ANC investigation in KwaZulu-Natal had found that 38 members had been killed since 2011.<sup>12</sup> If killings of ANC-aligned persons in the relevant period from the list of 61 are excluded, this suggests that 27 other ANC members were killed in the province between 2011 and September 2012. The IFP list of leaders killed also includes nine deaths, six of them between 2003 and 2005, and three over 2008 and 2009. However, the IFP list does not include 'non-leaders' and it is likely that IFP members and supporters have also died in political killings in the period since 2000.

Combining these figures results in an estimated total of 107 deaths in political killings in the period from 2003 to 2013. It may be noted that the NFP figure of 22 killings between early 2011 and July 2012 and the ANC figure of 38 killings over 2011 and 2012 (to September) appear to imply that over 50% of this figure is accounted for by the period of 21 months from January 2011 to September 2012, suggesting that in this period political killings once again reached a rate of intensity comparable to that experienced in KwaZulu-Natal in the late 1990s. One of the factors that sparked this increase in killings was clearly the launch of the NFP, as a breakaway from the IFP, in February 2011. However, the period also seems to have involved an increase in killings of ANC members and many

of these killings are believed to have been connected to internal ANC rivalries. Interestingly, the intensification of killings related to internal rivalry within the ANC coincides with the period following the Polokwane conference in December 2008, at which leadership of the ANC shifted to Jacob Zuma, a politician from KwaZulu-Natal. Other than in the 2011-2012 period, the highest number of political killings in KwaZulu-Natal since 2003 was in 2009, with at least 12 apparent killings, seven of those being ANC members.

More generally, though, it would appear that the figure of 107 is possibly also an underestimate. It may be assumed that senior political officials such as councillors are more likely to have their deaths reported in the press and that we therefore have more comprehensive information on these killings than those of more junior members. A number of rank-and-file ANC members, or other supporters, are also likely to have been killed prior to 2011. Likewise with the IFP, whose list of political killings deals only with leaders killed.

Overall this then suggests that there have been possibly 450, and perhaps more, political killings in KwaZulu-Natal since April 1994. Close to 75% of this number appear to have died in the period culminating in 2000. Killings have not been occurring at a consistent rate. There are, for instance, periods such as the years 2001-2002 where there seem to have been few, if any, killings.

## **Mpumalanga and the killing of whistleblowers**

The other province that has been most strongly associated with political killings has been Mpumalanga. Although the problem has in some respects been fairly persistent, the total number of deaths recorded appear to represent a small fraction of those recorded in KwaZulu-Natal. It seems that in the region of 14 people have died in political killings in the province, but again there is not consistency between all sources of information. A list of 14 killings that was published in the political report presented at the September 2012 COSATU national conference includes at least one killing that is attributed by

some sources to suicide,<sup>13</sup> though it also omits another apparent political killing. There are other documents that suggest that there are names that should be added to the COSATU list.<sup>14</sup> In a press report published in February 2010, a former ANC regional leader raised suspicions that at least five additional deaths in the province might have been the result of poisoning and that 'an influential ANC leader' in the province was behind several assassinations.<sup>15</sup>

Of the 14 confirmed killings identified, two were recorded per year in 1998, 2002, 2003 and 2009, and three in 2010, but none were recorded from 1999-2001, in 2006, 2008, 2012 or (as yet) 2013. The relative prominence of a number of those killed may have fed into the belief that political killings were more of a problem in Mpumalanga than in KwaZulu-Natal. However, there is no clear indication that there have been more deaths from political killings in Mpumalanga than in KwaZulu-Natal in any single year.

Another apparent distinction between the two provinces is that killings in Mpumalanga are generally believed to include a significant number of 'whistleblowers' and other people involved in attempts to prevent corruption. It is possible to identify at least 14 killings in South Africa since 1998 that some believe fall into this category. Of these, ten, including six politicians and three senior government officials, were in Mpumalanga.<sup>16</sup> The October 2010 death of former ANC Youth League leader and member of the Congress of the People (COPE), James Nkambule, was allegedly a response to him blowing the whistle on alleged assassinations and corruption linked to the building of the Mbombela World Cup stadium. Evidence suggested that Nkambule may have been poisoned.<sup>17</sup> Though there are exceptions, relatively few of the killings in KwaZulu-Natal are believed to have been a response to whistle blowing or opposition to corruption.

## **Other political killings**

Political killings have also become a prominent issue in North West in recent years. Killings in

North West have included that of anti-corruption whistleblower and Rustenburg ANC councillor Moss Phakoe in March 2009, and that of an ANC regional secretary, Obuti Chika, in December 2012. Shortly before Chika's assassination there was also an attempt on the life of the ANC provincial secretary, Kabelo Mataboge. Violence in North West has also involved numerous fatalities from killings and confrontations involving union members in the platinum fields. These can be understood as having political dimensions, but are not directly about political parties or contestation over the use of government power. The latter killings are therefore not understood as political killings in terms of the framework used in this article.

Other than in North West there have been isolated incidents in other provinces. In the Eastern Cape there were two killings, one in 2009 and one in 2010, that were believed to be political in nature. Two men who were arrested in 2011 for conspiring to kill several prominent ANC politicians were convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to extended jail terms in July 2013.<sup>18</sup> In March 2005 a senior Free State public servant, Noby Ngobane, was killed in an incident believed by some to have been politically directed. During 2012 there was what may have been an attempted assassination in Limpopo. The violent dimension of KwaZulu-Natal politics might have been at work in the killing of an NFP member in Vosloorus in Gauteng in September 2011.<sup>19</sup>

## PROFILING THE VICTIMS OF POLITICAL KILLINGS

Focused on the period from 2003 onwards, the available information suggests that in the region of 120 political killings have taken place nationally. Close to 90% of these have been in KwaZulu-Natal, with more than 50% of the KwaZulu-Natal killings having taken place since the beginning of 2011. This number includes:

- At least 22 persons who were killed while serving as councillors, as well as one deputy mayor killed in Mpumalanga in 2007 and one mayor killed in KwaZulu-Natal in 2005. Of the

councillors 18 were in KwaZulu-Natal, three were in Mpumalanga and one was in North West.

- A slightly greater number would be people holding positions such as regional secretary, leader, organiser, branch or ward or youth formation chairperson, or who were members of political parties such as the ANC, IFP and NFP.
- Possibly 60 people who were members or supporters of political parties but who did not hold formal party positions. All but one of the deaths identified in this category were in KwaZulu-Natal. If they are assumed to be political killings these deaths appear more likely to be related to rivalry between political parties than intra-party contestation.
- A few other individuals might be included in this number, including at least one South African Communist Party (SACP) office bearer in Mpumalanga (in 2010), and two former SACP members in KwaZulu-Natal (in 2006). The deputy president of the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), an opposition group in Swaziland, was also killed in Mpumalanga in 2009. Political killings in Mpumalanga also include people whose relationship to a political or party office is prospective or retrospective. Thus one of those killed in Mpumalanga was a former ANCYL provincial leader, while another was killed ostensibly to protect him from contesting an ANC regional position. Another victim in Mpumalanga was an alleged hitman. He was believed to have been killed for threatening to expose the individuals behind one of the killings.<sup>20</sup>
- At least four politically aligned traditional leaders.
- Three individuals killed while holding senior government (non-party) positions.
- Though he was not a political party member, a recent (June 2013) killing that should arguably be added to this list is that of a community housing activist linked to the shack dwellers movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. The circumstances of the killing suggest the possibility that those who authorised it were people in positions of political power who saw him as a political threat.<sup>21</sup> It has also been

suggested that other killings in KwaZulu-Natal, targeted at activists involved in grass roots mobilisation, were authorised by locally powerful politicians. These killings apparently fit within a pattern, in terms of which activists or organisations who have attempted to mobilise poorer communities have been the targets of officially endorsed violence.<sup>22</sup> In these cases violence is apparently used by local power holders to neutralise individuals or groups who threaten their domination over poorer communities.

It may be noted that the above number does not include apparent attempted assassinations, of which roughly a dozen involving political or party office bearers, supporters or members were identified during research for this article. It also excludes a couple of other whistleblowers in government departments. Killings in conflict related to industrial strife, and killings by the police or private security guards of protesters or striking workers, are also excluded.

## COMPARISON WITH THE APARTHEID ERA

For purposes of understanding changes in political violence in South Africa it is important to understand differences in the occurrence and meaning of political killings in the apartheid period, compared to post-apartheid South Africa. During the apartheid period political violence and killings took multiple forms. The circumstances in which deaths happened included numerous open clashes between armed groups, massacres in which large numbers of people were killed, as well as demonstrations, disappearances, incidents of ‘necklacing’ and others. Violence reached its greatest levels of intensity during the period from 1990 to the final days before the April 1994 election, with 14 000 deaths in political violence during this period.<sup>23</sup>

In post-apartheid South Africa, and particularly from the late 1990s onwards, fatal political violence generally takes the form of what appears to be more targeted killings of specific individuals, often referred to as ‘assassinations’. Targeted

killings were also a significant dimension of political violence during the apartheid era, particularly during its later years. A report by the Human Rights Committee indicates that there was a steady increase in the number of such killings with a relatively limited number (5) recorded in the years 1974-1979 and the greatest number (368) being recorded in the 1990-1993 period. Initially the majority of these killings were carried out outside South Africa. From the mid-1980s onwards there was a shift, involving not only a far greater number of these killings but also a steep increase in the number inside South Africa.

**Table 1:** Assassinations in South Africa and of South Africans in exile<sup>24</sup>

	South Africa	External	Total
1974-1979	1	4	5
1980-1984	6	12	18
1985-1989	89	38	127
1990 -1993 <sup>25</sup>	213	5	218
Total	309	59	368

The killings reflected in Table 1 include some that have subsequently been linked to covert ‘hit squads’, such as the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB) that fell under the South African Defence Force, and the C10 unit of the South African Police that was based at the farm Vlakplaas. They also include a large number that might be attributed to other government and homeland security forces. However, it would appear that the list covering the 1974 to 1989 period on which some of the figures in Table 1 are based, omits targeted killing carried out by groups or individuals aligned with organisations such as the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress, and by other formations involved in violent opposition to the apartheid system.<sup>26</sup> The figures may therefore be regarded as not comprehensive and largely covering apparent ‘extra-judicial execution’ of opponents of the apartheid system.

Though there were different agencies involved and it has proved difficult to conclusively demonstrate centralised authorisation for these killings, there is a sense that many of the apartheid-era assassinations were aligned with a centrally defined common agenda. Thus, even though

senior apartheid-era government leaders have claimed that they did not authorise the CCB or C10 units to act as 'death squads' it is nevertheless clear that the activities of these units were aimed at promoting the government's agenda of suppressing resistance. However, most current-day political killings appear to emanate from local conflicts and rivalries. As far as is known they do not fit in with any more widely shared common purpose.

## POLITICAL KILLINGS AS CRIME

During the apartheid era, political killings and other political violence were often understood as distinct from 'crime'. This view tended to be of a partisan political nature, so that those on one side of the conflict tended to excuse some political violence, while others tended to excuse the actions of the state security forces and condemn political violence that was targeted at the state or its political allies. Though many of the killings and other acts of violence by people on both sides of the conflict amounted to crimes in terms of South Africa law, the idea that they were not criminal was eventually given formal endorsement by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process. The TRC could give individuals amnesty against prosecution if they confessed to their actions and the actions could be shown to have conformed to certain conditions, including that the acts for which they sought amnesty had a political objective.<sup>27</sup>

Questions about the labelling of acts of political violence continue to have pertinence in South Africa. For instance, there is evidence that many violent protests take place after community members have repeatedly attempted to have grievances addressed through non-violent means.<sup>28</sup> This may be associated with the argument that it is only when protestors resort to violence that government pays attention to their grievances. This in turn may be seen to justify the use of violence in protests.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, President Zuma and other representatives of the South African government have in recent years increasingly condemned violence during strikes and other protests.<sup>30</sup> More recently it has been announced that priority will be given to

prosecuting those who engage in violence during protests, implying that, in the eyes of the state, it is appropriate to impose criminal sanctions on violent protestors.<sup>31</sup>

But although there continues to be some ambivalence in attitudes towards violent protest (particularly where property is damaged but people are not attacked) this does not seem to be an issue in relation to political killings. In South African public life, political killings tend to be seen as a form of crime that should be dealt with by the criminal justice system, rather than acts of resistance that may be excused or justified. However, though the validity of this perspective is not disputed, this should not be taken to mean that structural or other social features of South African society are not relevant to understanding political killings.

## THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESPONSE

Table 2 (overleaf) shows that there have been at least nine convictions for apparent political killings, six for cases in KwaZulu-Natal, two for cases in Mpumalanga and one for a case in North West. Six (two in Mpumalanga, one in North West and three in KwaZulu-Natal) have involved the killings of ANC members. Two of the KwaZulu-Natal cases involve the killing of IFP members and one involves an NFP-aligned Induna. Though not included in this table, the list of successful prosecutions for political killings may also include the case mentioned above of two men, convicted in July 2013, for plotting to kill ANC leaders in the Eastern Cape.

All convictions listed in Table 2 are of elected politicians or people in other relatively prominent positions. This raises questions about whether the apparent absence of evidence in convictions of rank-and-file party members is a reflection that criminal justice agencies take less interest in these cases. It may also reflect that these cases are regarded by the media as of less interest and are therefore less likely to be reported on.

Though the list of convictions is not therefore necessarily comprehensive, it raises serious

**Table 2:** Convictions for political killings<sup>32</sup>

Date of killing	Province	Name of deceased	Position	Conviction
27 June 2007	Mpumalanga	Thandi Mtshweni (ANC)	Deputy Mayor Municipality	One accused received 20-year sentence. Fate of 3 others unclear
July 2007	KwaZulu-Natal	Reuben Magutshwa (ANC)	Councillor	Four men were convicted and sentenced (July 2012)
25 Feb 2009	KwaZulu-Natal	Mfanafuthu Elliot Maphumulo (IFP)	Councillor	Three accused each received life sentences (August 2012)
14 March 2009	North West	Moss Phakoe (ANC)	Councillor	Former Rustenburg mayor and his bodyguard have been released on bail after being granted leave to appeal. In July 2012 they received sentences of 20 years and life respectively
5 January 2011	Mpumalanga	Johan Ndlovu (ANC)	Regional Chief Whip	Three accused sentenced in October 2011 and June 2013. First accused sentenced to 20 and 15 years for murder and armed robbery. Two others sentenced to life imprisonment
3 February 2011	KwaZulu-Natal	Simon Dingindawo Shange (IFP)	Councillor	One accused received life sentence (July 2011)
1 March 2011	KwaZulu-Natal	Wiseman Mshibe (ANC)	Councillor	One accused received life sentence (March 2013)
14 August 2011	KwaZulu-Natal	Induna Titus Mthembu (NFP aligned)	Induna	A 19-year-old man sentenced to 25 years (March 2012)
9 September 2012	KwaZulu-Natal	Bheki Chiliza and Dumisani Malunga (ANC)	Branch Secretary and Chairperson	One accused received 22-year sentence (Sept 2012), two others still on trial

questions about the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in responding to these killings. If, as indicated, there have been roughly 120 political killings in South Africa since 2003, this suggests that less than 10% of these killings may have resulted in a conviction. This may indicate that the South African criminal justice system does not consistently give high priority to these cases. One feature of a number of the cases listed here has been the allegation that a senior person who had not been charged, had instigated and perhaps paid for the killing.

- In the case of Govan Mbeki municipality deputy mayor Thandi Mtshweni, the mayor himself was arrested after it was alleged that he had financed the hiring of the killers. The principal accused told the court that the mayor had contributed R30 000 towards the murder.<sup>33</sup> The chief investigator was also accused by the lawyer for one of the accused of taking a bribe for the case from the mayor.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately the court held that the initiative behind the killing

came from the principal accused after her tenders had been suspended, and charges against the mayor were not pursued.<sup>35</sup>

- In the case of Johan Ndlovu, who was said to have been a contender for the position of mayor of the Ehlanzeni District Municipality,<sup>36</sup> one of the accused also alleged that a rival for the position of mayor was behind the killing,<sup>37</sup> though he subsequently contradicted this, saying that the allegations had been made as a result of assaults and coercion by the police.
- In the case of IFP councillor Simon Shange, the convicted man implicated a rival of Shange's in the ANC as being behind the killing.<sup>38</sup> As in the other cases listed here, no charges were pursued against Shange's rival.

In the Eastern Cape case, the two men who were convicted had been the driver and bodyguard for an Eastern Cape mayor. They were found to have withdrawn money from the mayor's account in order to hire a hitman. Charges were not instituted against the mayor.

In the case of Rustenburg councillor Moss Phakoe, the alleged mastermind and paymaster, the mayor of Rustenburg, was convicted for the killings along with the bodyguard alleged to have carried out the killing (the case is currently on appeal). But in the other cases listed there are questions about whether justice has indeed been served. Without fuller information about them it is not possible to assess whether the prosecutions indeed let the 'masterminds' behind the killings off the hook while focusing on the prosecution of the 'hitmen' or other conspirators. If this were so it would imply an unwillingness or inability within the criminal justice system to pursue the presumably more complex cases against those behind the killings.

## ACCOUNTING FOR THE KILLINGS

In accounting for the phenomenon of political killings in South Africa, particularly those of councillors and political party office bearers, a key factor is the high value that is attached to political office in South Africa. In established democracies many of those who enter politics already have financial security, whether in the form of a professional career that they can return to, or in the form of accumulated assets. However, where politicians do not already have financial security of this kind, political office may have an entirely different meaning. Political office may come to be seen as the primary vehicle for acquiring financial assets and security. In a context of generalised poverty and financial insecurity, political office is also a source of broader leverage. One may be able to use one's influence to help members of one's family to secure jobs or houses. Political favours of this kind may be used more generally as a means of establishing relationships of patronage. By granting favours to people one establishes long-term relationships of obligation. This may be useful in helping to secure not only one's political office, but all that it carries with it, including the opportunity to advance one's own economic interests and those of one's associates.<sup>39</sup>

Related to the legacy of apartheid, political office in South Africa is widely seen in this way.<sup>40</sup> Racialised inequality remains an entrenched

feature of South Africa. While white South Africans have in general been able to benefit from education of a fairly high standard and have parents with independent means, members of the emergent black political class often do not have significant educational qualifications. They also generally 'do not have historical assets, and they have large nuclear and extended families to support'.<sup>41</sup> There is therefore a very high premium on political office and on acquiring positions within political parties. Since the ANC has a virtual monopoly of power in many parts of South Africa one can expect that positions of power (even relatively low-level positions) will be highly contested and will result in various forms of 'intra-elite conflict' within the ANC and structures of government.<sup>42</sup>

These dynamics are manifested in the fact that political killings, particularly in the period since 2000, take place within the context of both inter-party and intra-party rivalries. Thus in at least two of the three cases involving the killing of ANC members in KwaZulu-Natal that are reflected in Table 2, those of Wiseman Mshibe in March 2011 and the dual killing of Bheki Chiliza and Dumisani Malunga in September 2012, the information presented in court was that the killings were related to rivalries within the ANC. It was also alleged that Siphon Patrick Bhengu, an IFP mayor killed in 2005 in KwaZulu-Natal, was killed by rivals within his own party. The link between killings and the use, and misuse, of political office for personal financial gain is also reflected in the killing of whistleblowers.

The question that presents itself is why political killings continue to be so heavily concentrated in KwaZulu-Natal. Dynamics related to the high value attached to political office permeates politics in much of poorer South Africa. In more affluent parts of South Africa the politicians who are elected are often drawn from the established middle class. On the other hand, in poorer areas, politicians are often from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. KwaZulu-Natal is probably the province where questions relating to the political allegiance of poor (black) voters have been most heavily contested, with a range of parties

competing for this. However, as already indicated, political killings are often 'intra-party' rather than 'inter-party'. There has been intense intra-party rivalry within the ANC at various points in recent South African history, most recently in the build-up to the December 2012 ANC national conference in Mangaung. But political killings are not a national phenomenon and have been concentrated above all else in KwaZulu-Natal, and to a lesser degree, Mpumalanga.

Part of the explanation clearly relates to the 'increasing militarisation of the province from the mid-1980s onwards'. A 2002 report argues that 'the clearest common denominator and primary proximate cause of violence ... has been the paramilitary forces spawned by Inkatha and the ANC'.<sup>43</sup> It has also been suggested that the manner in which this has played itself out in the period since 2000 has much to do with the role played by 'sanctioned violence in the taxi industry'. Abetted by elements within the police, political role players with interests in the industry have endorsed the use of violence to advance their interests. The networks that have enabled taxi killings to flourish are now being used for political killings.<sup>44</sup>

These arguments appear to be compatible with the view that the official culture of KwaZulu-Natal is permeated by a culture of violence associated with the acceptance of the use of violence as a political, or other instrument.<sup>45</sup> This culture of violence is also evident in other aspects of official practice. KwaZulu-Natal has consistently been the province that has been characterised by the highest rates of killings by police, notwithstanding higher rates of violent crime, and, for instance, killings of police in other provinces.<sup>46</sup> KwaZulu-Natal political leaders have also been very prominent in promoting heavy-handed policing methods.<sup>47</sup> Statements inciting or condoning acts of violence have been a feature of political life in the province, and appear to bear a direct connection to some of the killings and other acts of violence directed against social movement activists.<sup>48</sup> Though there may be dynamics within the province that distinguish it from other provinces, the key difference may not

be in the nature of political animosities, but that these translate more easily into fatal violence. Furthermore, despite the occasional official condemnations of these killings, the political will to address the problem more vigorously appears to be absent. Political killings in the province continue, despite the fact that the current senior political leadership of the criminal justice system and security establishment include a disproportionately large number of politicians from KwaZulu-Natal.

Within Mpumalanga, corruption appears to have played a prominent role, but this too is not a phenomenon that is unique to one province. There may therefore also have been particular dimensions of elite culture that have sustained the relatively large number of assassinations. Whether the phenomenon will continue to manifest itself in the province is unclear. No political killings have been recorded in the province for more than two years. Though the killings in North West seem to threaten an expansion of the geographical range of political killings, it remains the case that it is above all in KwaZulu-Natal that the problem needs to be understood and addressed.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the high value that political office carries in much of poorer South Africa, localised political contestation is likely to continue to be characterised by highly charged political conflicts. This carries with it the implication that many local political environments will be characterised by manipulation and intimidation. However, it appears that these factors in themselves do not necessarily translate into political killings. Access to networks that include people who are willing to carry out such killings may be one condition that enables such violence to flourish. Another may be the belief that pursuing political objectives through violence is legitimate, even within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Though there appears to be the potential for political killings to expand their geographical range, it is not necessarily the case that this will occur.

One factor that would discourage this possibility is consistent high quality and independent police

investigations into suspected political killings. More generally, it is important that mechanisms for systematic monitoring of the phenomenon are established. As long as political killings continue, even if largely localised to specific provinces, the establishment of democracy in South Africa will continue to be partial in nature. Not only do they impact on individuals and their families, friends and political associates, but also contribute to establishing a climate of fear within political life that extends its reach to many parts, particularly within poorer constituencies. As long as political killings can take place in one province, without any substantial risk of consequences for those behind the killings, they represent a threat to those involved in political life throughout South Africa.



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## NOTES

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