

## The strongest victims in the world

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**It is clear now that the decision to focus on peace as the founding principle of our new democracy was taken at the expense of justice. This is evident everywhere in our society, not just on our campuses. Most South Africans should now be able to accept that our country has been muddling through a superficial peace: for the vast majority of South Africans, the last two decades have continued to offer daily indignities. The failure to prioritise justice has left poor black people trapped in a cycle of poverty at the very same time that it has given white South Africans the freedom to reinvent themselves.**

The violent and public beating of non-violent black protesters at the University of Free State demonstrated white Afrikaner impunity on full display. It was a reminder of the continued ways in which white people's violence in South Africa is a tool that takes direct aim at black people's bodies.

The violent racist does not bother with acts of vandalism or bother with the destruction of property: That would be a waste of time and energy. Over centuries the violence has evolved into an efficient and highly effective machine. Kick the head and wound the body. Send a clear message – no warning shots. There is nothing symbolic about the violence whites have carried out in South Africa in the past and on Tuesday we saw that it continues to be as literal as it ever was.

Most importantly, what has become clear in the UFS incident is that public and university responses to white violence and black violence continue to be marked by stark differences. Black violence must be dealt with through increased security, while white violence must be met with love and intense introspection. The #Colourblind movement that has popped up illustrates this particularly well.

Those who call for prayer and reflection are driven by the idea that whites can be coaxed out of violence through a change of heart, while blacks must be punished and controlled when they are violent. This asymmetric analysis is at the core of racist belief and ideology. Racism sees blacks as inferior, undifferentiated and lawless. Racism sees whites as distinct, individual, rational. These beliefs persist, in spite of evidence of white irrationality and anxiety, and black discipline and self control.

Because it is deep-seated and in some ways foundational, it operates both consciously and sub-consciously, it shapes the responses of even the most thoughtful university administrators. This is incredible, given how much South Africa has been internationally recognised as a shining example of conflict resolution.

The mediation experts and the leaders who lead us into the elections of 1994, are either dead, tired or discredited. Indeed, the notion of democracy itself, or rather this particular democracy that we founded twenty years ago, seems to be on its knees.

It is clear that we are at a moment of national crisis and that we do not have the leadership – particularly amongst white South Africans - to adequately address this situation. Yet even if we found the leaders, new and old, if they emerged today and began to build a road to sanity and the kind of peace this country has never known, they would need to understand how we got here.

Ironically, one of most compelling and useful assessments of how we arrived at this place was proffered on the very campus of UFS five and a half years ago. Professor Mahmood Mamdani, one of the world's foremost minds on issues of conflict and transition wrote:

Had the TRC acknowledged pass laws and forced removals as constituting the core social violence of apartheid, as the stuff of extra-economic coercion and primitive accumulation, it would have been in a position to imagine a socio-economic order beyond a liberalized post-apartheid society. It would have been able to highlight the question of justice in its fullness, as not only as criminal and political, but also as social. The step the TRC failed to take is the challenge South Africa faces today.

In the absence of a series of profound and well-resourced post-TRC interventions aimed at the question of justice, it has been left to South Africans to figure things out on their own. Instead of acting responsibly, many whites have sought to either deny that racism continues to be an organizing principle in our society, or they have taken on a victim mentality.

Many white students on South Africa's troubled campuses fall into the former category. They have had the appearance of being disorganized when in fact they have been fairly uniform and organized in their attitudes and their approaches to racism. When black students have protested, white students have generally complained about being unable to continue to study or move freely around campus. It has been easy to conclude that they are largely apolitical because they often speak in seemingly naïve terms about the need to "move on" and not talk about politics so much. They insist they don't see colour. This sort of insistence is deeply political, as are decisions to complain about being unable to park when fellow students are hungry. When events like the rugby match occur, the cluelessness of white youth is revealed for what it is. It quickly hardens. It moves with lightning speed. Suddenly women are on their feet spurring on their men. They are no longer benign, they are malevolent. Disruption must be met with violence: swift, and crushing and absolute.

The language of victimhood has gained serious traction amongst many whites in recent years. This week it was out in its crudest form, as an image did the rounds on social media using Sam Nzima's iconic June 1976 photo of Hector Pieterse being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo. Underneath them was another photo, this one with four burly white men. The comparison was breathtaking in its offensiveness. Deeply telling of the lengths to which racism will go to reinvent itself.

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failure to prioritize justice has left poor black people trapped in a cycle of poverty at the very same time that it has given white South Africans the freedom to reinvent themselves. At some point in the last two decades whites became the strongest victims in the world, and blacks – still poor, still under-represented in every area of human endeavor that marks progress – have become the oppressors.

James Baldwin writes that, “invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.”

The whites who depict themselves as latter day Hector Pieterse and who attack peaceful protesters on this basis, have invented the past. They may not yet see it yet, but at some stage violent black rage will no longer be aimed at paintings and buildings and busses. Real blood has been spilled now. As it always has in our history; the violence has been authored by whites. It is only a matter of time before there are deaths. **DM**

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