WHEN ONLY SILENCE REIGNS

NOMAVENDA MATHIANE *looks back on the days when black journalists surrendered editorial integrity in the face of threats from political factions and suggests this form of intimidation is still rife*

AS in most townships on the Reef, Saturdays in Soweto tend to be hectic. The streets are a hive of activity and one would be right in assuming the houses are empty and everybody is out on the streets.

It was on just such a Saturday, a summer's day back in 1987 when, in the middle of the hustle and bustle, I noticed a group of men wielding an assortment of weapons.

This was long before the days of the now much-dreaded Inkatha impis. Those were still the days when it did not matter if you came across a group of Zulus wielding kierries and assegais because you knew they had no hostile intentions and you also knew they harboured no ill feelings towards anyone in the community. They would merely be on their way to a rally at Jabulani Ampitheatre, traditional weapons in hand, as was their wont. Nor was it a problem back then to have an Inkatha member for a neighbour. It would be like a Catholic living next to a member of the Lutheran Church – a non-issue.

Taking a closer look at the crowd that Saturday back in 1987, however, I noticed I knew some of the men. They were all upright and respectable members of their community, fathers and husbands, all decent human beings. Most were also well-known supporters of Azapo.

What was the immediate cause of all this tension in the township? What was it that made ordinary fathers and husbands walk the streets of their own neighbourhood brandishing dangerous weapons like a bunch of armed bodyguards?

So I asked around and was told they made up the funeral procession for an elderly woman, herself an active Azapo supporter, who had recently collapsed and died. This woman had suffered considerable State harassment, but had also suffered at the hands of a rival political group in the township.

She was not the only member of the community to be hounded by activists from rival political factions.

The previous year a young supporter of Black Consciousness had skipped the country because he was wanted for murder. The story was that for some time this man had been living under threats from youths from a rival group who wanted him to leave the area. When he refused to leave, four youths are alleged to have burnt down the house he was renting. In

PLEASE TURN OVER ☛

retaliation he allegedly caught up with them and bundled them into his car. He then allegedly killed them and dumped their bodies in the open veld. He was arrested, skipped bail, and left the country.

So people were constantly looking over their shoulders. This was open war. It was a war for the hearts and minds of township residents, an ideological war in which to be a black journalist was also to be a target of the attentions of the warring factions on the ground.

A reporter's choice was really quite simple. Did you serve your readers and report what you saw and knew to be happening and thus invoke the attentions of the hard men and women who were conducting the war, or did you serve your own self interest and remain silent in the face of the growing atrocities?

This was no simple choice because in an atmosphere of intense struggle against the system, it was a choice which could have life-threatening consequences for working journalists who had the temerity to stick their necks out and report abuses in the liberation movements' own activities.

On the ground it was all-out factional war, in our hearts it was a war of conscience. To report or to keep silent, that was the question.

I remember too that it was during this period that commuters had to duck for cover at the taxi rank next to the Esso garage on the old Potchefstroom road leading into Johannesburg when youngsters from the nearby Ibhongo School decided to shoot it out in broad daylight in support of different political groups.

Claims made were that the student wing of Azapo were chasing members of an ANC student body out of the school.

These and many other incidents were happening in front of black journalists in the townships every day. Most of the journalists living in Soweto knew that one side of the old Potchefstroom road was UDF territory and the other side was Azapo turf. They also knew that the ordinary people in the township did not understand what was going on. Quite often adults would say, "we see comrades are fighting among themselves" – they did not understand the bitter ideological battles these youngsters were fighting.

The children's education was in ruins and we could not even stand up and say, 'We told you so' because we had failed to alert the community to what was going on. If we had reported the true picture, parents probably could have done something.

This was the background to the group of Soweto neighbours carrying weapons to an old friend's funeral. This was the poisoned atmosphere in which upright citizens were turning into armed vigilantes.

Black journalists were fully aware of this situation. They too were living in these communities. They too were caught in the vicious crossfire, victims of the ideological war raging in the townships.

The case of the young Black Consciousness supporter who allegedly murdered four members of a rival political group is a good case in point.

Once again journalists were caught in the crossfire. They knew this man was being harassed and victimised for his political beliefs. And, they watched him being burned out by his political rivals.

Many journalists were scandalised by the fact that a group of high school students were harassing somebody from the community and forcing him to leave town just because they disagreed with his politics. But they were afraid to bring these things to light and opted, instead, to remain silent out of fear for their own safety.

They also remained silent when, in what was clearly a reprisal killing, the young man's father was abducted, murdered and his body thrown into a ditch.

Journalists knew full well which political group was responsible for this murder, but still they remained silent.

Fear of being necklaced for criticising those responsible for the killing immobilised journalists and rendered the community ignorant of what was going on around them.

If the truth be told, many a night have black journalists stayed awake agonising over what to do.

In January 1988, after parents and community activists had met and decided that the children should go back to school, I met a colleague while doing township rounds and for hours we discussed what we should do about the schools crisis.

We were both appalled at the lackadaisical response to the 'back-to-school' calls. We had to make a decision whether to report the truth – that children were not returning to school despite claims to the contrary – or to keep quiet about it.

We chose to remain silent. We made that choice out of fear. And, of course, the developing tragedy in black education unfolded in that silence. When the end of the school year came, the exam results were unprecedentedly and understandably bad. The children's education was in ruin and we could not even stand up and say, "We told you so" because we had failed to alert the community to what was going on. If we had reported the true picture, parents probably could have done something about it.

At the time we were hoping the schoolchildren would see reason and start taking their lessons seriously. We argued that having been through almost five years of disrupted education, they had

come to realise that they could not become perpetual students.

But events proved us wrong. The disruption of education continued and far from creating a reaction in students, they began to take the disruption as the norm.

In retrospect we should have told the black community the truth about their children, that unlike those in Coloured, white and Indian schools who were in the schoolyard at 8am, black children were hanging around the bus stops or walking the streets long after school opened.

While other children were diligently preparing for examinations and their destinies in a new society yet to come, black children were contending with education as a site of struggle. And struggle translated into "stay-aways", and teachers being accused of being "stubborn"; or being stabbed or having their motorcar tyres slashed. Black school children, in a very real sense, became double victims and, as their future prospects were liquidated in 'struggle', most journalists stayed silent out of fear of their own liquidation.

Instead of being mirrors of the society, which is what our calling is all about, we thought it wiser to sit on the stories and leave the community in ignorance of what was going on all around them and of what was happening to their children.

In mitigation, being a black person in that poisoned atmosphere was difficult, but being a black journalist was doubly difficult. For at the back of our minds we always knew things did not just happen in isolation and that the atrocities were there because of apartheid. Knowing the root cause of the problems in the community, it became even more difficult to come out and condemn actions taken.

This has not changed to the present day. Unless one wants to earn the label of being a Pretoria apologist, one must not condemn actions of students and one must not question personalities who make statements of behalf of legitimate political leaders.

At a recent debate an Inkatha Freedom Party spokesman asked a member of CAST (the umbrella body of local civic associations in the Transvaal) why CAST, which claims to have a following in Indian and Coloured townships, does not pressurise its management councils to resign. "Why is it that it is only blacks who necklace and petrol bomb their mayors and counsellors?" was the question.

Is it perhaps an African disease that writers are heroes only when they expose white abuses and become enemies of 'the people' when they expose abuses eroding the fabric of their own societies?

And yet while we were ducking and diving what was going on in the townships, we did not hesitate to expose what the police and the SADF were doing there.

We were quite prepared to be thrown into jail rather than face the necklace. We were prepared to write about exploitation of maids by their white madams and yet black madams can pay slave wages to their illiterate cousins and grannies whom they import from the homelands to come and look after their township homes while they are at work.

Is it perhaps an African disease that writers are heroes only when they expose white abuses and become enemies of "the people" when they expose abuses eroding the fabric of their own societies?

Is it merely coincidence that so many African writers lead nomadic lives in Europe because they are not tolerated by the very people they put into government back home?

While it is not the task of journalists to bring governments down, I would like to live to see the day when we have black journalists of the calibre of Bernstein and Woodward. I would like to see someone like Hugo Young who will come up with a critical book on some of our leaders and live to hear those same leaders prescribe the book for others to read.

That does not mean there are no black journalists who could write such books. The problem lies not with our pens but with our society. The crusading investigative journalists I mention above come from communities where they not only write about the various freedoms but also fight for those freedoms to be realised and not tampered with. And therein lies the real problem.

Our problem as black journalists is not in the way we write, but in what certain people want to see us write. Our problem lies in that we are subjected to hidden hands which demand there shall be praise and no criticism.

Black journalists are expected to be accountable, but political players who demand accountability from journalists remain unaccountable themselves. This selective accountability can never be the handmaiden of liberty.

At a time when there are any number of good, honest and solid black journalists to chronicle history, it is sad to find that we are unable freely to pursue the profession of our choice for lack of freedom of expression.

Blacks are once more silent and sitting on the fence, dependent on their white journalist colleagues to expose abuses of power. And the liberation movements turn around and accuse black journalists of being inefficient and lazy. Now that's a strange irony if ever there was one. ●

Nomavanda Mathiane works for ***The Sunday Star.*** *Her first book,* ***South Africa: A Diary of Troubled Times,*** *is published by Freedom House in New York. Her second book,* ***Beyond The Headlines*** *is published by Southern Books.*