

AN EXPLORATION OF THE 2016 VIOLENT PROTESTS IN VUWANI, LIMPOPO PROVINCE OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: In the recent past, South Africa have witnessed a wave of community protests which have been attributed to a number of factors. Limpopo Province of South Africa also had a fair share of violent protests in several areas. However, protests in other areas except Vuwani have received limited media coverage, which in turn resulted in scant scholarly attention. This is to say that the community protests in Vuwani and the surrounding areas have dominated the public discourse due to the scale of violence that they produced. Despite this, the causes of the 2016 community protests in Vuwani have not been uniformly understood and this unfortunate development resulted in disastrous interventions by different stakeholders including the government. Based on qualitative research, this de-colonial paper argues that the recent community protests in Vuwani can be well-understood when located within a historical perspective.

Keywords: Vuwani; coloniality; community protests; violence; tribalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The violent community protests in Vuwani and the surrounding areas (Limpopo Province) cannot be understood in isolation. A mixture of both historic and contemporary reasons offers a just account of this protests. Historical imperatives in this regard includes the legacy of colonialism, apartheid and violent culture of South Africa, *inter alia* (Shai & Mothibi 2015). In the contemporary epoch, the Vuwani community protests can be partially understood as the by-product of hang-over effects of similar occurrences in Malamulele. Prior to the violent community protests in Vuwani, the African National Congress (ANC) led government has mishandled the violent protests in Malamulele. It is worth pointing out that South Africa has witnessed the Malamulele violent service delivery protests between the years 2013-2015. During this period, the people of Malamulele violently protested against Thulamela municipality (whose administrative seat is in Thohoyandou) for allegedly giving preferential treatment to Tshivenda speaking communities, as compared to Xitsonga speaking communities. This claim must be understood within the context that Thohoyandou was the capital city of the Venda Republic during the apartheid era in South Africa. The Malamulele residents which are mostly Xitsonga speaking people, protested against the perceived retarded levels of service delivery in their communities. During this protests the people of Malamulele also demanded to be separated from the Thulamela municipality which was failing to

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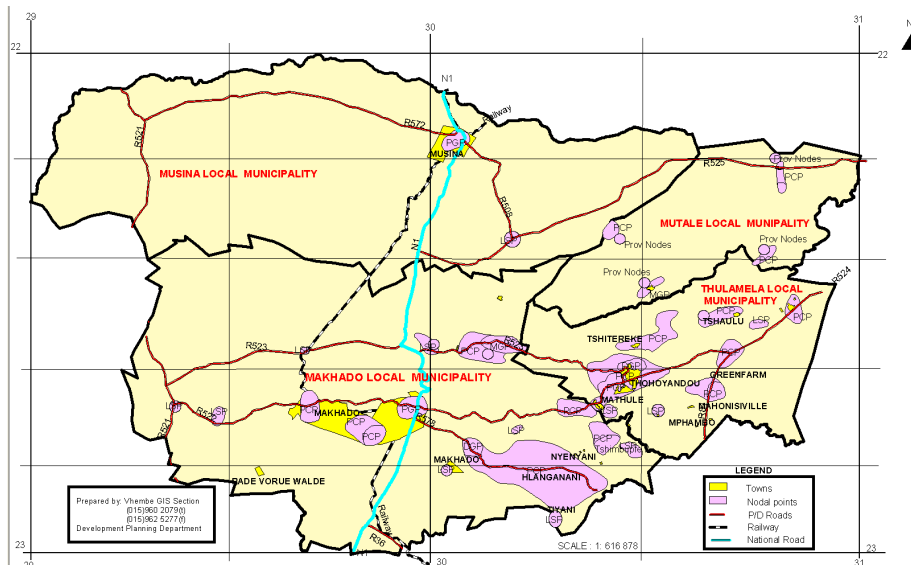
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meet their basic socio-economic needs. In other words, they opted for secession from Thulamela and for them to be granted their own municipality (whose administrative hub would be in Malamulele).

The protests in Malamulele were carried out through violent measures in anticipation of government's attention and intervention. The protests saw government schools, vehicles and offices being torched and looting of shops. It is to state the obvious to argue that the protests in Malamulele intensified the ethnic rivalry between the Tsongas and Vendas in Vhembe district (Limpopo province); a historic animosity which has been dormant since the dawn of the new democratic dispensation in the early 1990s. The government eventually intervened, on the 19th January 2015 through the joint efforts of the Municipal Demarcation Board (MDB) and then Minister of Co-operative Governance Pravin Gordhan (Tmg Digital & Maponya 2016). It is on this date that the MDB made a pronouncement for the awarding of a separate municipality to the residents of Malamulele, which will be named after the late Minister of Public service and Administration Collins Chabane.

The demarcations of the newly established Collins Chabane municipality (also known as LIM 345) included about 50 Tshivenda speaking villages, amongst them being Vuwani. Situated outside Thohoyandou town, Vuwani is a rural location found at Vhembe district of the Limpopo province of South Africa. The size of the population of Vuwani is approximately 968092 (Adrian Frith 2017).

FIGURE 1: VHEMBE DISTRICT MAP



Adapted from: Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlements and Traditional Affairs (2017).

Emerging from the above analysis, it is not farfetched to argue that the mishandling of the previous violent protests by the government has laid a fertile ground for the future outbreak of similar violent protests by the Vuwani residents. In the case of Malamulele, the government has shied away from addressing substantive issues of municipal inefficiencies and corruption by simply granting a new local municipality. After losing the court case in 29 April 2016 in Limpopo high court (Polokwane), wherein they hoped that the MDB's decision to merge Malamulele and Vuwani in the new Collins Chabane municipality and for Vuwani to remain part of Makhado Municipality to be set aside; Vuwani residents took out their grievances by torching government schools, vehicles and looting shops (Kanyane 2017). Meanwhile, there are two dominant narratives about the recent community protests in Vuwani. The first one attributes the Vuwani protests to the demarcation dispute. The second one apportions their outbreak to the 'demon of tribalism' (Tmg Digital & Maponya 2016).

This paper argues that the cause of the Vuwani protests cannot be reduced to one or two factors. Indeed, the Vuwani community protests are complex. It is the well-considered view of this paper that shortage of ethical leadership is at the centre of the crisis in Vuwani. Artificial municipal demarcation disputes are nothing, but symptoms of the deeper problem – lack of ethics imbued leadership. The historic intermarriages between the Tsonga and Venda speaking people within the Vhembe district makes it shallow for any case that seeks to purport the crisis in Vuwani as ethnic. This line of thought is not necessarily dismissive of any instances of tribalism that could have transpired in the past or the present era. However, the root causes of the protests can also be understood by looking into colonial history and the Apartheid government policies and their legacies to African [Blacks] communities in post-apartheid South Africa era. Again, one cannot ignore the role played by entrepreneurs, tenderpreneurs and traditional leaders to the causes of the protests. Against this background, this paper seeks to use a blend of interactive interviews (conversations in their broadest form), discourse and thematic analysis to explore the context, causes and realities of the year 2016 Vuwani protests. The interactive interviews conducted for this paper took a semi-structured form and the key respondents were purposively selected on the basis of convenient accessibility.

2. THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

As articulated by scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Maserumule (2015), coloniality is used as a theoretical framework of this paper. This theory was chosen as a lens through which the Vuwani protests are explored. Hence, the current discourse on this subject has overlooked the influence of the coloniality of being and power in analyzing community protests in South Africa in general and Vuwani and the surrounding areas in particular. Given the fact that this paper embraces inclusive

epistemology and the need to navigate through interdisciplinarity in the quest to generate a crispy understanding of any subject of study; it also draws heavily from conflict theory. Conflict theory looks at the non-violent and creative handling of conflict in detail. The founding fathers of Conflict theory are Machiavelli (1469), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Karl Marx (1818-1833). Conflict theory involves a critical investigation into the (i) causes of the conflict, (ii) structure and (iii) dynamics of the conflict, the actors in the conflict and the outcomes. In detail, it also involves the historical background and context of the conflict so as to understand the origin and dimension of the current events in the conflict showing the conflict as it is on the ground and giving different versions of the events as analysed (Mabunda 2015).

Conflict theory seeks to scientifically explain the general forms of conflict in society, how conflict starts and varies and the effects it brings. The central concerns of conflict theory are the unequal distribution of scarce resources and power. What these resources are might be different for each case study, but conflict theorists usually work with Weber's (1864-1920) three systems of stratification which is known as class, status, and power. Conflict theorists generally see power as the central feature of society, rather than thinking of society as held together by collective agreement concerning a cohesive set of cultural standards hence where power is located and who uses it are thus fundamental to conflict theory (Krawford 2009).

The conflicting classes can be broadly divided into a ruling capitalist class and working class, which aim to further its interests at the expense of the other group. Coser (2005) argues that conflict is instinctual for people, so it is fundamental in human society (Walters and Crook 1995). There is generally something that different agents are trying to achieve through conflict. As such, there are different possible ways of reaching a predetermined goal for any party. For example, Vuwani residents are causing conflict to express their grievances.

The existence of the possibility of different paths opens up opportunities for negotiation and different types and levels of conflict. Conflict theory can also be used to explain non-economic conflicts within a society. It can be seen on the Tsonga and Venda speaking people rivalry competing for the scarce resources in the area of Thohoyandou and Malamulele. On a less macro level, the competition between traditional leaders in the area serves as a useful example as well. In such ways, conflict theory is usefully ambiguous in its application to untold phenomena.

The theory holds that at this stage the personalities and personal perspectives of individuals will emerge and the conflict taking place will be maintained by show of interests, positions, feelings and outside pressures on the parties. It asserts that whoever is involved in the conflict needs a deeper understanding of the conflict and get a factual account to be of value. The root causes of the conflict, the parties in the conflict and their roles and interests in order to bring to an end or reduce the

conflict are investigated. To understand the dynamics contributing and stimulating conflicts in Vuwani, there is need to look into the root causes of the conflict, explore and identify the parties and their interests and understand their values with an aim to resolve the conflict and attain sustainable peace (Zartman 2005).

3. THE ROOT CAUSES OF VUWANI PROTESTS DURING THE YEAR 2016

A historic exploration of the real causes of the Vuwani community protests during the year 2016 can be hinged on the following two pertinent factors: legacy of apartheid; and ethnicity and identity issues which are discussed in detail hereunder.

3.1 Legacy Of Apartheid

After the second Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902) in South Africa the British colonisers accepted that they will never constitute the majority in South Africa's white population. As a result, they decided to grant Afrikaners in the Transvaal and Orange Free State self-governance. Moreover, in 1907-1909 white South Africans negotiated to establish a united single state. They produced a constitution that embodied the following principles (1) South Africa will become a unitary state where political power will be won by a simple majority of votes and adopt a Westminster style of government (2) parliament will be sovereign (3) English and Dutch would become official languages. In addition, Blacks will be denied voting rights (Byrnes 1996).

In May 1910 the Union of South Africa was established where Louis Botha became the first prime minister and Jan Smuts became his deputy. The Union governed about 4 million Africans, 1.2 million whites, 500 000 coloureds and 180 000 Indians. Africans despite constituting the majority in the population were denied leadership roles and voting rights. The Union of South Africa was the merging of four colonies: the Cape colony and Natal which were dominated by the British as well as Orange Free State and Transvaal which was dominated by Afrikaners (Byrnes 1996). The Union implemented racial legislative laws such as The Native Land Act (no 27) of 1913 that separated South Africa into different racially demarcated areas. The provisions of the Act gave 7.5 percent of the land to Africans, despite constituting two-thirds majority of the population. Furthermore, whites constituting one fifth of the population were given 92.5 percent of land. In disapproval, prior to the implementation of the Act (1913), educated African elites gathered in Bloemfontein 12 January 1912 to establish an organization to protest against racial discrimination and appeal for equality before the law, the organization became known as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) renamed to ANC in 1923 (Byrnes 1996).

During the 1948 election campaigns, emerged the Afrikaner politician D.F. Malan of the Herstigte National Party (HNP) with a platform aiming to separate Africans from Whites in South Africa, he termed the platform 'Apartheid'. The

platform won many hearts of white South Africans, as a result the HNP won the 1948 election. Malan renamed the HNP to National Party (NP) which governed South Africa until 1994. The NP led government introduced firmer laws of separating Blacks and Whites. The laws included the Group Areas Act (no 41) of 1950 that extended the provision of the Native Land Act of 1913. The Act gave the government authority to forcibly remove Africans from areas not designated for their particular racial group according to the act (Byrnes 1996:73). The legacy of the apartheid legislations referred to above is well captured by one of the key respondents to this research who notes that:

There were government cars around Malamulele and Venda area used to relocate people. Before the promulgation of the Group Areas Act Tsongas and Vendas were living together peacefully, however the Verwoerd government divided us. The people were living in Nthlaveni a place in Venda, however the government came up with forced removals to relocate them to Malamulele. Again, the two villages of Xigamani and Mphambo were relocated to Tshimbupfe which is in Venda. People were not fighting at that time, Vuwani was called Pfukani (a Xitsonga name that means Rise Up) it changed to Vuwani after 1994 (Benson, personal interview, 20 August 2016).

The apartheid government's forced removals of the people in the areas around Venda and Malamulele caused tensions between the tribes of Tsonga and Venda speaking people. Equally important, the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 established African homelands. The Act had abolished the National Representative Council Act of 1936, which was formed by General Hertzog with the aim to deal with issues and problems that Africans encountered in the Union of South Africa. The council constituted of qualified African members whose primary purpose was to negotiate and advice the Union on legislative matters affecting Africans (Byrnes 1996: 94).

The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 meant that Africans in the country were to be dominated by chiefs and headmen appointed by the government. The Act took form in the so called 'indirect rule', British colonial administration style. The Act divided Africans, as a result they started competing amongst themselves for the scarce resources and stimulated tribalism that is presently witnessed in Malamulele and some of the areas that fell under the Venda Republic during the heydays of the brutal and inhumane system of Apartheid. Under the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, Gazankulu homeland was established for Xitsonga speaking people led by Professor Hudson Ntsanwisi who served for 23 years and Venda homeland was established for Tshivenda speaking people. Subsequently, in 1973 the apartheid government granted Venda self-governance and it became independent in 1979, Patrick Mphephu became the President. Nevertheless, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) did not recognize Venda as a sovereign state due to the 'indirect rule' homeland policy imposed to them by apartheid South African government.

Moreover, Republic of Venda was not recognized as an independent country by the rest of world. For survival, people of Venda relied heavily on agricultural production. The Republic of Venda in 1991 applied to be reunited to South Africa during the transition to democracy and when the ANC led government came into power in 1994 they scrapped the homeland policy and Venda became part of South Africa (Byrnes 1996).

3.2 Ethnicity and Identity Issues

Identity is one of the fundamental human needs that underlie many intractable conflicts. Conflicts over identity arise when group members feel that their sense of self is threatened or denied legitimacy and respect. Identity is essential to one's self-esteem and can help a person interpret the rest of the world, any threat to identity is likely to produce a strong response (Polit 2001). Typically this response is both aggressive and defensive, and can escalate quickly into an intractable conflict. Because threats to identity are not easily put aside, such conflicts tend to persist (*Ibid.*).

Intractable conflicts are often maintained by the development of collective identities among group members. Group memberships form along the lines of nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, or whatever other categories are relevant to the conflict. Individuals identify with those in their own group and begin to organize against those in the opposing group. While collective identities may initially form around issues such as resisting oppressive social structures or staking claims to territory, they eventually take on meaning and value of their own. As the conflict escalates, the opposing groups become increasingly separated and develop hostility towards those in the out-group. A high level of in-group identification, together with a high degree of perceived threat from the other group, leads to a basic impulse to preserve oneself and destroy the opponent (Nkuna 2016).

Identity is the primary issue in most racial and ethnic conflicts. It is also a key issue in many gender and family conflicts, when men and women disagree on the proper role or place of the other, or children disagree with their parents about who is in control of their lives and how they present themselves to the outside world. These conflicts center on matters of security, fair treatment, and a sense of control over one's life, as identity-based concerns are tied to fundamental human needs, conflicts surrounding identity often threaten party's existence. Such conflicts are typically more intense than interest-based conflicts. This is because the issues in interest-based conflicts are typically more clearly defined and have greater potential for compromise. Identity conflicts, on the other hand, are based on people's psychology, culture, basic values, shared history, and beliefs. These issues tend to be more abstract and are connected to people's basic needs for survival (Posner 2004).

In addition, Posner (2004) explains that rigid collective identities may make it more difficult for groups to compromise. When they feel that another group poses

a threat to their authority or legitimacy, they may lash out. Those in the out-group may be excluded, which limits contact between identity groups and contributes to the development of negative stereotypes and intergroup violence. Parties view their adversaries as evil or even nonhuman and regard their views and feelings as unworthy of attention. Sitting down with the opponent can be seen as a threat to one's own identity, even beginning efforts at reconciliation can be extremely difficult.

Furthermore, the negation of the opposing group often becomes a fundamental aspect of one's own identity. Equally important, intractable identity conflicts typically involve a history of colonialism, ethnocentrism, or racism and emerge out of a history of domination and perceived injustice. Colonization, in particular, often has serious socio-economic and moral implications that tend to persist. Where there is a severe imbalance of power, the more powerful party may exploit or abuse the less powerful party. Minority groups may be denied effective political participation or lack opportunities for cultural expression. If their identity is denied or simply unrecognized by the majority, these oppressed groups may recognize these power hierarchies as unjust and rebel against them. This leads to intractable conflict (Kumar 2005).

Ethnicity is 'widely associated with culture, descent, group memories, histories and language' (Karner 2007: 17). Race is not naturally occurring entities, but rather 'rely upon social processes and discourses that construct and subsequently naturalize and reify group differences' (*Ibid.*). Ethnic is defined as a 'named population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture for example religion, customs, and language. It is about a frequent link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members' (Hutchinson and Smith 1996). This draws the attention to the question of names or labels, which members of an ethnic group or 'outsiders' use to define the group itself (Karner 2007).

Ethnic is the tendency for opposing groups to describe themselves using ethnic criteria like language, cultural elements, territorial claim, the myth of common ancestry, racial ties, and using this identity to claim equal status within a state or autonomy from it (Gurr 2000). However, ethnic identities are not fixed and transcendental. Ethnic identity, 'is not given; it can be chosen freely by an individual, imposed by others which have the authority and resources to do so, or socially constructed through interactions with others'. More importantly, ethnic identity is more likely to change in periods of economic and political instability, such as economic scarcity or political upheavals.

According to Stein (1996) ethnic identities are contextual, adaptable to and activated by unexpected threats and new opportunities. When the boundaries between the 'in group' and the 'out group' are hardened, identities are formed in

an antagonistic way where the other is constructed as an existential threat through successful securitization, and violence becomes more likely.

Drawing from the general perspective about conflict that has been highlighted above, it is no exaggeration that the ethnic rivalry of the Tsonga and Venda speaking people in Vuwani is so intense that traditional leaders and entrepreneurs are alleged to be the third force in fueling the Vuwani violent protests to protect their interest in that area. After Vuwani lost the court case against the MDB in April 2016, King of the Venda speaking people Toni Mphephu Ramabulana spoke out to the media that he supports and understands what Vuwani residents are demanding. He went on to state that he is planning to ask President Jacob Zuma to reverse the MDB's decision to incorporate Vuwani to the new Collins Chabane municipality (Stone 2016). This paper's central argument is that the organized nature of violent acts during the community protests in Vuwani lends credence to the theory of "hidden hand" involvement in the planning and execution of violence in this area.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF VUWANI PROTESTS

Recently about 29 schools and several schools had been torched as well as vandalized over demarcation protest (Paterson and Power 2016). As such, pupils' learning has been severely compromised, exams preparation has been spoiled and there are thousands of pupils stuck in a state of paralysis, not knowing if they will pass the Grade 12 final year examination due to the damages and negative impact the violent protests had produced. Most of the parents in Vuwani and the surrounding areas seem to care more about which language is spoken by their leaders than the future of their children. Additionally, the implications of the Vuwani protests can be well articulated under the following headings which are discussed in detail hereunder: Effects on basic education in Limpopo Province, Funds to rebuild damaged schools and Local government elections.

4.1 Effects On Basic Education In Limpopo Province

Limpopo province is residence to approximately 5.5 million people, 50 percent of whom are jobless (Statistics South Africa 2016). According to the recent study on poverty trends, Statistics South Africa (2016: 2) identified Limpopo province as having the highest poverty levels in the country. The effects of the protests will seriously be felt by the pupils across the country. The 2016 Limpopo provincial budget on education found out that there is a shortage of about 41,000 toilets and of which more than 80 percent village based schools have pit toilets. It is further acknowledged that there is a staggering shortage of classrooms, furniture and appropriate text books across the province (Paterson & Power 2016). Of the 132 schools in Limpopo province over 50 percent of them rely on pit toilets; in mostly instances they are primary schools. Many schools have missing or broken furniture

where pupils are required to share tables and sometimes sit on the floor. School infrastructure has been a common concern in Limpopo. There are incidences where pupils were forced to go home when it rains because there are safety electrical concerns on the pupils or there is no ceiling to shelter the pupils (Ibid).

The Vhembe district, is where Vuwani is located, it has 1,023 public schools that accommodates about 410,000 pupils. Vhembe has being the highest performing district in the National Senior Certificate (NCS) results in Limpopo province from 2012 to 2015. There are 31 schools in Vhembe, four of which fall under the schools affected by the Vuwani's violent protests (Nkuna 2016). The concern is that funds that the Department of Basic Education needs to urgently repair the fire damaged schools in Vuwani, must also be channeled to other long overdue services such as providing proper sanitation and addressing shortages of furniture (Paterson & Power 2016).

4.2 Funds To Rebuild Damaged Schools

In her budget speech on 10 May 2016, Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga reported that the estimated damage of the Vuwani protests during the year 2016 is worth R720 million. It is an obstacle in a province where public schools are already facing financial limitations, improper management and lack of service delivery, this poses a daunting task on the department to figure out how funds must be allocated to ensure that all those in desperate need of services are catered for (Ibid).

4.3 Local Government Elections

Last but not least, the ripple effects of the Vuwani violent protests came to light when Vuwani residents did not participate on the recent 2016 local government elections. Instead, the ring leaders of the violent protest (Pro-Makhado Task Team) made the Election Day (03 August 2016) a sport day for the community. Vuwani residents undermined the hard earned democracy by boycotting the elections. In near future they will protest about a leader that is not delivering, forgetting that they indirectly elected him/her by boycotting the elections. Elections are meant for people to elect leaders which have the society's interests at heart. In addition, the Vuwani residents amongst other reasons for boycotting the local government 2016 elections were:

Why must we vote, if the government is not taking our grievances seriously? We want to fall under Makhado municipality is that too much to ask for? We don't want to be governed by Tsongas, as they said when protesting for their own municipality they don't want anything to do with Vendas, to us voting is useless as we are not taken seriously as citizens of this country (Thavha, personal interview, 01 September 2016).

6. CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of the apartheid policies towards Africans, the post-apartheid tribalism or ethnic conflict that is growing each day across South Africa, can be therefore attributed to the imperialist and colonial policies imposed to African ethnic groups. It is within this context that the protests methods used in post-apartheid South Africa resembles those that were used during the anti-apartheid struggles as espoused by the liberation movements such as the ANC, Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) and the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). The wounds that South Africa suffered from the apartheid policies would not be healed overnight. It will take responsible, resilient and ethical leadership from both the former colonizers and former colonized to accept that South Africa is still divided ethnically or tribally. Flowing from this line of thinking, the recent developments in Malamulele and lately, Vuwani is a direct vindication of Mazrui's assertion that "Africa worked itself up into a condition of acute psychological denial. Loyalty to tribe was regarded as political pathology, in spite of the fact that such loyalties will remain for at least another century" (Mazrui, 2004: 101). In the final analysis, it is clear that the post-colonial obsession with state building in African states including Zimbabwe and South Africa has been at the expense of nation building. When dealing with the case of Vuwani and other protests of similar form and content, it is therefore critical for the government of the day in South Africa and other parts of Africa to take solace and lessons from the sobering reality that "ignoring the salience of ethnic loyalties has cost Africa 3 to 4 million lives in civil conflict since independence" (Ibid). As such, it is important for all stakeholders to tread with caution when dealing with conflicts that have tribal connotations as it was the case in Vuwani.

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