

# THE WILD WEST

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*Sinister reports of Western Cape gangs working for political parties, of politically motivated taxi violence and gun-running, prompted Independent Electoral Commission workers to fear disruption of April elections. That did not happen, but political conflict remains a threat in the one major metropolitan area in South Africa that had begun to believe it was immune.*

**P**olitical violence does not actually have to take place for it to be an important phenomenon. Sometimes, merely the threat of violence can shape political processes and planning in significant ways.

This article looks at the political impact of the potential for violence in the Western Cape, through the eyes of the information analysis department of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), for whom I worked during the April election.

The function of information analysis, attached to the IEC's monitoring directorate, was primarily to assemble and digest information with a view to identifying trends which might threaten the freeness and fairness of the election.

## **Election threat**

Beside our normal duties monitoring campaign rallies and gatherings, newspaper accounts in the weeks preceding the election sparked our interest in the possible electoral effects of three, what appeared at the time discrete, issues: increases in gang activity, resurgences in taxi violence, and gun-running.

Our explorations into these matters eventually unearthed enough links among all three issues to devote a great deal of attention to what appeared to us to be a very real threat to peaceful elections in the Western Cape, a threat which seemed to emanate from 'external' sources in the political community.

In any event, these threats turned out to be few. Ironically, the major threat to the election was organizational and logistical, and was 'internal' to the IEC. Mounting concerns about political violence meant that

the IEC failed to focus on and monitor what turned out to be a completely different but very real threat to the elections.

This is the picture of events that emerged quickly in the weeks preceding the election.

## **Gang politics**

IEC monitors had been reporting that gangs were causing problems at large, open-air campaign rallies throughout the Cape Flats. Reports from election field researchers for the Institute of Multi Party Democracy (MPD) also indicated that gang leaders were publicly advertising their services to political parties, as well as claiming they were receiving feelers from parties.

Initial enquiries with the police as well as IEC monitors led us to believe that gang presence at campaign rallies was purely a function of criminal activities - large crowds were tempting targets - and that claims of partisan links were only so much bravado.

But deeper probes uncovered a widespread and consistent body of information, allegation and rumor that there was indeed an effort by political parties to use gangs to intimidate and harass political opponents.

Cape Flats gangs had a definite interest in politics: offering their services was a way to earn income, as well as a way to test their status against political parties who posed challenges in terms of community control and status.

One gang reportedly claimed that they had been preparing for elections since November 1993, spending approximately R100 000 acquiring guns in anticipation of demand from the parties.

*Three issues - increases in gang activity, taxi violence and gun-running - appeared to threaten peaceful Western Cape elections*

*Gang leaders were advertising their services to political parties and claiming they were receiving feelers from parties*

*Gangs had loosely aligned themselves with the NP and the ANC, and were used to harass political opponents*

*Gang links with the police were also suggested*

*Gang-party alignments could replicate themselves in the taxi industry, where there was a resurgence of violence*

*Youths were being trained by people with admitted connections to the intelligence community*

It was also reported to researchers that the two largest gang confederations had loosely aligned themselves with the National Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC), though configurations seemed to change in specific circumstances.

MPD interviews with local party organizers revealed that gangs were indeed being used to harass political opponents. Canvassers from both parties reported actual or feared harassment. In many areas the ANC was forced to resort to large billboards in order to establish a presence since their posters were habitually destroyed.

And in sworn affidavits one NP Member of Parliament was even accused of being directly involved in recruiting and paying gang members in Bonteheuvel for various political services, such as attacking ANC members' houses, distributing the NP's infamous 'comic book' and destroying ANC posters.

Mounting information from a number of different sources, including a BBC documentary, also suggested possible gang links with the police ranging from hesitance and resistance to gang crack downs, all the way to supplying weapons.

It is interesting to note that while township youths and self defence units almost always use AK-47s, Cape Flats gangs use police and defence force issue weapons such as R1s, R4s, R5s and pump-action shotguns. It also emerged that arms flows to gangs had increased significantly over the previous six months. All of this raised the possibility that parties were using gangs to create 'no go' areas for rival political parties.

## **Taxi wars**

Gangs were also important because of their close association with the taxi industry. In the Cape Flats, gangs both collect rent from taxis to run in their areas and provide muscle to keep competing or non aligned operators off these routes. This close association meant that any general pattern of gang-party alignments would be replicated in the taxi industry.

We observed all of this against a backdrop of a resurgence in taxi violence, stemming at least partially from conflict between the ANC aligned taxi association Codeta and non-aligned operators, as well as from renewed tension 'within' Codeta. Both were related to longstanding disputes between factions.

According to local unrest monitors, supposed

recent taxi 'hits' appeared to be evenly divided between township gangs aligned with traditional leaders and armed units working for the leadership of ANC aligned taxi associations.

## **Gun running**

All of this sat uncomfortably with surfacing information about partisan alignments associated with our third concern, gun running operations from the Ciskei into black townships in the Western Cape.

Goldstone investigations had reportedly confirmed the involvement of elements from or associated with the intelligence community. More importantly, available information seemed to point to a possible NP link to these operations.

We had a very good indication that, as recently as two months before the election, about 150 youths were being trained in weapons use in Khayelitsha squatter areas by people with admitted connections to the intelligence community.

These people were part of a small group of traditional squatter camp leaders with connections to the Ciskei, the security and intelligence community, and another organization called the Western Cape Civics Association (Wecco).

This group of leaders had long standing conflicts with township and squatter camp gangs and self defence units generally aligned to the South African Civic Organization (Sanco) and the ANC.

## **Party links**

The arms training camp appears to have been intended to provide self defence capabilities to Wecco and traditionalist groupings. Wecco had been started as an alternative civic front to Sanco and, according to Press reports, was funded by white businessmen closely linked to the NP.

Over the previous six months, Khayelitsha had been wracked by violent territorial conflict between people aligned with Sanco and Wecco, including a running battle in November 1993 between supporters of the ANC Youth League and a breakaway unit being wooed by some traditional leaders, that left two people dead and 65 shacks burnt to the ground.

These same broad alignments, interestingly, reappeared once we reviewed the history of taxi violence in the area. Of greater concern

for the IEC was that the alignments seemed to replicate themselves once we examined the composition of various party's candidate lists for the provincial parliament.

Perhaps the most serious signal were publicly leaked police documents which revealed that some people publicly implicated in ongoing gun-running and arms training activities, had held talks with Western Cape NP officials in party offices as recently as November 1993.

They allegedly talked about forming a broad anti-ANC political front. Moreover, Press reports and other informed sources indicated that people involved in recent smuggling and training had long histories of involvement with traditional leaders who appeared on the NP provincial candidate list.

Concerned sources monitoring regional developments painted to us a possible nightmare scenario in which gun-running operations may have been intended, among other things, to put arms into the hands of a loose anti-ANC front for the purpose of fanning taxi violence during the election, with the presumed intention of keeping black voters away from the polls.

This potential resembled what Judge Goldstone called the 'horrible network of criminal activity' in which arms were stored, smuggled and then given to people with the motives to use them.

## Third force

These possibilities sounded ominously similar to the type of 'third force' activities recently publicized by Goldstone elsewhere in the country, but which had always seemed to avoid the Western Cape.

We asked ourselves whether the Western Cape was as immune to these activities as previously imagined. We were not comforted by our awareness of two ongoing Goldstone investigations, one looking into taxi violence and another four month old investigation into gun-running aimed at destabilizing Western Cape communities.

We were also interested in ANC charges that an NP controlled provincial government and NP appointed police commissioner could provide a safe haven for security officials implicated in third force activities.

This could have provided a powerful incentive for those concerned to do everything in their power to ensure that the NP emerged not only as the largest party in a government of provincial unity but with a clear majority.

All of this led to increased IEC fears about drive-by shootings at key taxi ranks, especially those located near voting booths. These fears mounted further once we matched our information to IEC lists of polling locations.

Astonishingly, we found that at least two voting sites were within hundreds of meters of reported weapons caches and arms training sites, as well as areas with recent histories of armed conflict.

Still other polling sites had been placed very close to taxi ranks with a history of being 'hot spots' in the taxi wars of 1990 and 1991. Understandably, IEC officials had done so to facilitate voter access to polling booths.

The final straw seemed to come when, just prior to the election, we received increasing reports of contacts between local party officials and taxi operators reaching individual agreements to transport supporters, as well as more far reaching negotiations between regional bus and taxi associations and political parties to book large numbers of vehicles to drive party faithfuls to the polls on election day.

The ANC reportedly reserved hundreds of busses and thousands of taxis. This brought fears of large scale movements of voters in vehicles clearly identifiable as 'ANC' or 'NP' taxis or busses. If violence was in the offing, these vehicles would be tempting targets.

This nightmare seemed about to become reality when, early in the morning of the special voting day on 26 April, the IEC received confirmation of deaths during an attack by party supporters on a taxi perceived to be carrying only supporters of a rival party, near a voting station earlier identified as a hot spot.

Fortunately, this proved to be the first and last such incident during the election. Later joint operations centre reports indicated that no one had actually died in the shooting, but the incident did trigger a series of emergency meetings between the IEC, the Regional Peace Committee, political parties and taxi associations, which resulted in taxi associations publicly pledging to carry supporters from any party to the polls.

While the issues of gang and taxi violence and gun-running never combined into the particular scenario we feared the most, they were all real concerns. More importantly, they have not gone away and are now emerging as important post-election issues which demand immediate attention by the new national and provincial governments. **IPJA**

*Some leaders of territorial and taxi groups involved in conflict appeared on party candidate lists*

*Gun-running operations may have been intended to fan taxi violence during the election*

*The gang, taxi and gun-running issues have not gone away, and need urgent attention*

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