

South Africa: Shaheed Omar's murder and political intimidation under Zuma's rule

On 10 August 2017, Shaheed Omar, 43, was driving with his mother Zubeida Omar in Cape Town, South Africa when his car was hijacked. The men who then shot and killed the nephew of former minister of justice and African National Congress (ANC) veteran Dullah Omar had no intention of robbing him.¹

The killing has occurred amidst increased political intimidation between factions of the ruling ANC. The deceased's aunt and younger sister of the former ANC minister of justice, Mariam Omar, stated yesterday: "We are trying to come to grips with the situation but it is very difficult. It's absolutely senseless. They didn't take anything [and] he offered them the car and whatever they wanted, but they didn't take anything. They just shot him and then left. Fortunately his mother was unharmed."²

Last week, the Omar family released a statement distancing the late stalwart from the current ANC leadership under the scandal-ridden president Jacob Zuma. Their statement came before an important parliamentary no-confidence motion brought by opposition parties against Zuma, which could have pushed him from power.³

Between 28 and 45 ANC MPs and most opposition party MPs eventually voted for the motion during a secret ballot on 8 August. However, Zuma, with the support of about 80% of the ANC MPs, survived the no-confidence motion. His allies in the ANC Youth League and military veterans organization have promised to unveil those who supported the motion and to kick them out of the ANC.⁴

University of Cape Town criminologist Mark Shaw has recently published a book about the use of hitmen in South Africa called *Hitmen for Hire*, exposing South Africa's underworld. He believes the number of assassinations has increased, particularly over the last year. "Our most recent data suggests that the increase is because of greater political tensions." More professional hits, according to Shaw, are more difficult to identify as they can be disguised as accidents or the by-product of crime. It is to be hoped that the killers of Omar will be brought to court and convicted.

Risky to oppose Zuma's faction

It has become risky for many ANC leaders to openly oppose Zuma's faction. In July 2017, ANC MP Makhosi Khoza announced that she had received a series of death threats after

1. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2017-08-11-dullah-omars-nephew-killed-in-a-possible-hit/>

2. <http://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/1607700/dullah-omars-nephew-confirmed-shot-dead/>;
<https://therep.co.za/2017/08/11/questions-murder-dullah-omars-nephew/>

3. <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21726070-faced-choice-between-right-and-wrong-anc-chose-wrong-why-keeping-jacob-zuma>

4. <http://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/1606176/zumas-backers-on-a-witch-hunt-to-identify-anc-sell-outs-report/>

publically pushing for Parliament to hold a no-confidence vote against President Zuma. On her Facebook account she posted screen grabs of the death threats, warning her against pushing for the secret ballot.⁵

The Zuma faction in the ANC hopes that his former wife Nkosana Dlamini-Zuma will succeed him as ANC leader during the ANC's leadership conference in December 2017.⁶ Major opportunities for patronage and self-enrichment are at stake. In July 2017, ANC presidential hopeful Mathews Phosa also warned that the vote of no confidence against Zuma had the potential to endanger the lives of some members of parliament who are suspected to be preparing to vote against party wishes.⁷

Phosa said there were already ANC corpses due to the power struggles and political killings in areas such as KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, North West and, more recently, the Eastern Cape. He said people were killed in some provinces before elections or often when they occupied leadership positions.

"The killing fields are expanding. In North West, [Wandile Bozwana] was killed. For what? So these four provinces have become the killing fields of South Africa; where different views are not tolerated."

Phosa was in the province to attend the funeral of councillor Thozama Njobe, the speaker of Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality in Fort Beaufort, Eastern Cape province. On 17 July 2017, Njobe was shot dead in Fort Beaufort in a political assassination.⁸ Njobe's death comes just four days after former ANC Youth League secretary-general Sindiso Magaga and two other councillors survived a shooting after being ambushed at a local shop. Three ANC councillors were shot dead between April and May this year in the same region.

Institutionalised killings

Before, during and after the August 2016 local elections in South Africa, at least 20 political candidates had been assassinated. Analyst David Bruce has estimated that there have been more than 450 politically motivated murders since 1994, a claim repeated by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA).⁹ The trend seems at present to be largely concentrated in northern provinces, especially KwaZulu Natal, but also Northwest, Mpumalanga and Eastern Cape. Political killings have also occurred in Gauteng and in the Western Cape provinces.

5. <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-40796691/makhosi-khoza-jacob-zuma-critic-on-death-threats>;
<http://www.fr.de/politik/anc-in-suedafrika-makhosi-khoza-fordert-jacob-zuma-heraus-a-1323412>

6. <http://www.biznews.com/global-citizen/2017/08/09/world-sees-sa-zuma-faction-will-win-anc-succession-race/>

7. <http://m.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/zuma-is-sas-worst-president-since-democracy-20170729>

8. <http://ewn.co.za/2017/07/18/murdered-ec-municipality-speaker-was-aware-of-assassination-plot>

9. *Legal Briefs*, 12 July 2016.

Already in August 2013, Raymond Suttner, a lawyer and honorary professor at Witwatersrand University, as well as a former ANC activist, stated: *(W)holesale assassinations have become a regularised way of deciding on leadership and access to wealth within the ANC and its allies.*¹⁰

According to the Institute of Security Studies, motives for political killings have included the silencing of whistleblowers revealing corruption in the ANC or civil service, the targeting of political opponents, or competition for positions in the ANC or civil service that provide access to public funds and cash from firms eager to buy political influence. The ANC's political factions seen at national level are also mirrored in provinces where councillors kill each other for positions.¹¹

A few provincial cabinet members and senior ANC officials have been suspected of or involved in such killings in Northwest Province, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State and Mpumalanga. Corrupt policemen and private security people, as well as assassins from neighbouring countries like Mozambique and Zimbabwe are used.¹²

An atmosphere of fear

Violence monitor Mary de Haas points out that in the past police had done little to investigate possible assassinations. In fact evidence, she said, pointed to police involvement. She added that police often did not investigate these murders properly, even when the killers were caught on CCTV footage.¹³

In 2016, the then Police Minister Nathi Nhleko established a political violence task team to deal with recurring murders, attacks and threats. However, it has had negligible success. More than 90% of the hitmen or those who ordered them are still walking around free, which reinforces the degree of fear, paranoia and compliance within the ANC at all levels.

In 2016, Neo Moepi, previously the spokesperson for Thandi Modise, the chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, said that he had to watch his back. "It's not just me; everyone in this province is scared."¹⁴ David Mabuza, Mpumalanga province's premier, survived an alleged poisoning attempt in 2015.¹⁵

10. <http://raymondsuttner.com/2013/08/18/raymond-suttner-government-and-tripartite-alliance-no-pitch-at-marikana-memorial/>

11. <http://www.issafrika.org/crimehub/policy-brief/political-killings-in-south-africa-the-ultimate-intimidation>;
<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-03-03-sa-whistleblowers-assassinations-victimisation-marginalisation-for-doing-the-right-thing/#.VPfYzJUcTIU>

12. <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/where-politicians-shop-for-hitmen-20170722>

13. <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/killers-for-hire-on-the-rise-in-sa-10415076>

14. <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-05-31-mpumalanga-anc-politician-spoke-of-hit-list-before-being-killed>

15. <http://city-press.news24.com/News/david-mabuza-a-portrait-of-power-20160527>

Political intimidation and killings to continue

Political analyst Gareth van Onselen commented:

In response to one apparent assassination, ANC general secretary Gwede Mantashe said: “The reality is that selection of candidates for council is always a life-and-death issue.” That is a stunning admission. For all the pretence the ANC regularly offers up of South Africa as a modern, progressive constitutional democracy, it is in truth a far more crude and violent affair. The ANC, which is neither a revolutionary movement nor a traditional political party, remains caught between the world of armed struggle and formal democracy. A culture of assassination has inculcated itself into its internal political dynamics. At local government level, democratic choice and death often sit side by side. That is not a picture well-illustrated by the media. It is remarkable how little sustained and meaningful attention this aspect of South African politics receives.¹⁶

To date, political assassinations have largely affected local politicians, even if there may have been involvement by politicians at a higher level. However, in 2016, there were reports of provincial and national politicians fearing attacks. Reports emerged of one of President Zuma’s four wives being implicated in a plot to poison him in June 2014. She is still treated as a suspect in the case.¹⁷

Political competition, tensions and factionalism over positions and resources, sometimes involving intimidation and political assassinations, will intensify in the run-up to the ANC's leadership succession in 2017, during factional struggles in various provinces, and in the run-up to the national elections in 2019.

In order to get the support from key provinces, any successor to president Jacob Zuma will have to transact with provincial leaders who are corrupt, perhaps even implicated in political killings in their areas. The same dilemma will be faced by international companies trying to conclude major deals in South Africa.

As political intimidation and offers of patronage continue to play a role, the Zuma faction may still produce the new ANC president in December 2017. This would ensure the continuation of Zuma’s semi-democratic hybrid regime in which political intimidation and violence have apparently become part of the rules of the game.¹⁸

About the author: Dr Heinrich Matthee is a political analyst for companies and a guest researcher at the University of Amsterdam.

16. Gareth van Onselen, “Corpses pile up in ANC power struggle”, *Business Day*, 29 February 2016.

17. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/sundaytimes/stnews/2016/11/13/Dramatic-sequel-to-Zuma-poison-plot-as-Abrahams-warns-MaNtuli-Youre-still-a-suspect>

18. <http://sa-monitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/SAM-7-Year-End-2016.pdf>