

SA is in a state of ‘psychic emergency’

By Carilee Osborne

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The recent wave of protests throughout South Africa against an apparent spike in femicide actually reflects an every-day reality experienced by most citizens. Our traumatised nation requires active and steadfast leadership to create the New Dawn we were promised.

I don’t think the leadership fully appreciates where we are right now. The past two weeks have been the worst psychological moment the country has experienced post-democracy. It really is a new low.”

This was reportedly said on 12 September by the President of the International Union of Psychological Science, Dr Saths Cooper, as quoted in *Business Day*. He argues, are living through a state of *psychic emergency* characterised by “deep social insecurity”.

His assessment was made after a week of protest following the news that a man had confessed to the murder and rape of a missing 1st year University of Cape Town student, Uyinene Mrwetyana.

While her story shocked the country and galvanised many to take to the streets in protest, it was in no way unique. In the same week, we heard of the murders of multiple other women, including another student, Jesse Hess of the University of the Western Cape, and South African boxer Leighandre “Baby Lee” Jegels. Those are the ones we hear of. There were countless others whose names most of us will not know

but whose loss contributes to the bleak picture of the state of gender-based violence in the country.

According to the World Health Organisation, out of the 183 countries listed, South Africa had the 4th highest female interpersonal violence death rate in 2016. The government’s response continues to be inadequate and the use of water cannons to disperse peaceful protesters outside the World Economic Forum was a harsh indicator of the priorities of the post-apartheid government, which is more concerned with protecting its international image than with dealing with the crisis.

In the same week, the country was once again the site of brutal xenophobic violence resulting in a number of deaths and extreme fear amongst foreign nationals living in the country. Again, the government’s response has done little to quell this. Many of the statements from senior officials have been ambivalent at best. Images of hundreds of Nigerians lining up at the airport to leave the country should make us all feel a collective shame especially, as many commentators repeatedly point out, when we consider the solidarity and support that African governments gave to the liberation movement.

While the week felt particularly stark, these incidents actually bring to the forefront the fact that for many in South Africa, violence is a constituting principle for how they experience life in this country. In this context, it is then no surprise that many of the responses call for further violence. The return to the death penalty was once again championed by many as the way

to deal with the situation, despite the fact that nowhere in the world is there any evidence of its efficacy in reducing violent crime. and the fact that it goes against the foundational values of our Constitution.

In arguing for the return to capital punishment, some pointed to the supposedly lower levels of crime under apartheid when the death penalty was still in place. This betrays ignorance on many levels: the fact that the apartheid system itself was a crime against humanity in which black South Africans faced violence daily at the hands of the apartheid government, the fact that white South Africans were insulated from this by the existence of a militarised state to protect their interests, as well as the fact that the death penalty was often used against anti-apartheid activists. It is clear that the answers do not lie in regressing to the tactics of apartheid.

Rather, this moment should remind us how fragile our democracy is and spur us to recognise the deep trauma upon which it was built, a trauma which we have clearly not reckoned with. It is also indicative of how we have failed to fully consolidate the gains of the transition and adequately deal with the structural inequalities of our economy which remain largely unchanged.

If we are to move beyond the current situation, we need to demand leadership from those in government with the power to make changes and we need to work even harder to strengthen civil society to pressure for and support the actions that are needed. **NA**