


Violent protest actions during COVID-19 in South Africa: A practical theological response

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South Africa is rated as one of the highest in violent crimes that result in murder, standing at number four in the world. In 2023, there were 27 000 people reported murdered, which amounts to 45 people per 100 000. Violent protest actions are also a contributor to the number of deaths. One particular protest in July 2021 claimed more than 300 lives during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has been met with strikes, violence, and protests despite policies against such crowd gatherings. The study argues that violent protests are a result of the corruption system, mismanagement, and poor service delivery in the post-apartheid government. The study seeks to investigate the phenomenon of violent protest action during the intense COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the study argues that political instability, social injustices, economic stress, societal uncertainty, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing toxic social norms and inequalities in South Africa. Therefore, this study affirms that violent protest is a forceful demonstration of an underprivileged group protesting for 'salvation' and 'liberation' from economic struggles. Furthermore, this study proceeds to a transversal interdisciplinary approach where practical theology and psychology as sciences can share their critical concern and voices through a literature review. In this situation, contextually, practical theology must contribute constructively to listening to people's needs and respond to violence cautiously by presenting hope and reconciliation to the devastated communities.

Contribution: This study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse of theology and psychology on violence among the underprivileged of South Africa, who through their protest action, demonstrate that *indlala nomsindo zinamanyala* [hunger and anger are obscene], and they know no boundaries. This study is relevant for practical theology and psychology because both disciplines are concerned with the social welfare and well-being of the people.

Keywords: violence; protests; COVID-19 pandemic; practical theology; psychology; corruption; anger; *amanyala*; *indlala*; *umsindo*.

Introduction

It is not wrong to protest according to the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa (The Bill of Rights [RSA] 1996:17) which states 'everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions'. As per the statement on the Bill of Rights, all protests must be peaceful and without weapons. However, South Africa has been shaken by protests, which led to looting and other violent actions. The looting and protests have taken a toll on South Africa's economy; protesters do not bother to understand what is lawful and what the law requires of them; they tend to engage in criminal activities at times. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic came at a difficult time for South Africa's highly unequal economy and society. South Africa had experienced:

[T]hree-quarters of continuous contractions to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between third quarter 2019 and first quarter 2020, the level of unemployment was at 30.1 per cent as of first quarter 2020. (Strauss et al. 2020:2)

South Africa was already in recession before the arrival of COVID-19. The majority of people live below the poverty line. Strauss et al. (2020) argue that:

[T]he employed, 6 60.5 per cent earn below the working poverty line of R5 086 per month, while 13 per cent earn below the Upper Bound Poverty Line (UBPL) of R1 183 per month; employment (including waged and self-employment) is crucial means of tackling poverty. (p. 2)

As a result, the virus risks exacerbating the already incredibly high levels of inequality and working poverty in South Africa's labour market. The goal of economic growth 'can rightly be

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described as total development, which encompasses the social, political, cultural, economic, environmental and spiritual well-being of the human person and society' (Karakunnel 2005:80). According to Karakunnel (2005):

[T]he basis for arguing for an economy that fosters human solidarity is that over the earth, human being is given dominion or lordship, which is to be understood in terms of stewardship and protection of the human habitat – in the Christian view, no human activity can be rightly understood if the human capability or capacity for God is denied or overlooked. (p. 83)

South African law enforcement has exercised violence towards the underprivileged and working-class communities via its authoritarian COVID-19 response. In response, citizens reacted negatively.

For example, 'in the Western Cape Province, the state-mandated demolition of an informal settlement in the Makhaza area of Khayelitsha township destroyed homes, personal property and livelihoods amid the pandemic' (Lali 2020:2). In response, residents of this area protested violently. Subsequently, they destroyed public goods, demonstrating their anger; indeed, *indlala inamanyala*. South African citizens have realised that to get the state's attention and receive justice, one must react violently. Another example: in the rural area of Ntsimbakazi village in Willowvale kuGatyana, the community needed electricity and followed all formal processes and procedures, but that did not yield fruitful results. When the community dug up the main road and threw stones at the cars attempting to pass, one person died on the road to the hospital. Moreover, the community demanded the Mbashe Municipality Mayor to respond, and then the electricity was installed. Hence the study proposes that the role of practical theology is to condone peaceful protests, not violence. The caution from a theology of praxis is to watch that the line of peaceful protest is not crossed into violent protest. Pathologically, the state only responds to people's reactions at times. Furthermore, there are different kinds of violence; the purpose of this study is to explore violent protests resulting from demonstrations that damage public goods, state infrastructure, and vandalism and looting, particularly in the highest tension of the infectious COVID-19 pandemic. Maybe a deeper question to ask is what motivated these violent protests and what is wrong in South African communities. The study seeks to achieve the investigation of violent protests through a practical theological and psychological contribution concerning the conduct of the people. We¹ therefore need to find ways through which 'practical theology can contribute, through the church and its pastoral services, to assist communities in curbing or avoiding such destructions' (Baloyi 2024). In this regard, practical theology should focus on everyday people's concerns, such as violent protests and present remedial interventions. On the other hand, an interdisciplinary approach to integrate spirituality and psychology has to take place to subdue aggression issues and curb violent protests. South Africans cannot be free of violent protests unless the quality of service

delivery reaches out to the communities. It is required that psychology, through counselling, behavioural change and emotional intervention, should give awareness to South African citizens about the dangers of violent protests, destruction of state properties and others. Therefore, 'psychology, as a mental health profession and behavioural science, ought to be at the forefront of this task requirement' (Nguse & Wassenaar 2021:308). In addition, Afrika (2021:122) articulates that 'it is likely that many violent protesters who participated in the 2021 July rioting were physically injured and psychologically traumatised by the violence: both the victims and the perpetrators'. Therefore, this study advocates a crucial need for clinical and spiritual counselling for both the victims and perpetrators of violent protest. It also unravelled gross disparities between the elites and ordinary South African citizens.

The psychology behind violent protests

Psychology 'studies the individual, social behaviours, the human mind, emotions and human experiences' (Cherry 2025). Within this study, we explore what role psychology plays in people's social behaviour, particularly frustration and aggression, which lead to violent elements during protests in South Africa. According to Radburn and Stott (2021), classical crowd theories suggest that mere exposure to the behaviour of others leads observers to act in the same way; in this line of thinking, behaviour is spread via a process of 'contagion', transmitted automatically from one person to another. As per the earlier statement, we learn that during a peaceful protest, an element of violent behaviour can be processed by an individual and influence others to reckless behaviour. Radburn and Stott (2021) add that individuals lose their sense of self, reason and rationality in a crowd and so do things they otherwise might not as individuals. This relates to the mental process and behaviour of individuals during the riots in July 2021 amid the harshness of the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The actual violent protests and looting experienced in July 2021 were perpetuated by the individual acts of violence in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), which spread and infected others in Gauteng and Mpumalanga, inciting them also to riots. In an argument with Albert Bandura (1925–2021), an influential social cognitive theorist, he posits that 'people learn new behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling, emphasising the role of cognitive processes and environmental factors in shaping behaviour' (Nabavi & Bijandi 2012:5). In this case, the psychological effects of bad and unscrupulous individual behaviour in a protest can influence the crowd collectively to destruction and looting. Hence the study proposes that *indlala nomsindo zinamanyala*. The violent protest during the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood through the views of psychological theories like Bandura's. According to these theories, behaviour is often learnt through observations. The study further proceeds that the malicious history of South Africa has been affected by the element of violence since Dutch and British invasions colonised South Africa's black, 'indigenous population from

1. In this article, we use plural terms such as 'we', 'us', and 'our' as the author in conversation with the reader.

1652 and 1803, respectively, forever shaping its psychology of violent protest' (Pillay 2022:294).

This stipulates that the history of violent protest actions in South Africa has been politically, socially, economically, and racially influenced. South Africa's black indigenous population have been protesting for their space in their country since colonisation and apartheid, and even during the COVID-19, where violent protest actions emerged. South Africa's history of violent protest actions indicates recurring patterns of associated criminality, and we must differentiate between peaceful protest actions and protest actions that have a violent element (Human Rights Commission [HRC] 2024:221). This demonstrates that South Africans commit violent protest actions at times when they demand immediate state attention. Violent protest has become a subconscious mind. In the latter, during the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africans were forced to adapt to the countrywide lockdowns, school shutdowns, and business closures, which resulted in deterioration of mental health (Nguse & Wassenaar 2021). The lockdown restrictions aimed at slowing the infection rate, but they created challenges such as increased unemployment, poverty and mental health problems. The 'stay home' and 'social distancing' orders may have been tolerated initially, but having continued for several weeks and even months, they have had psychological effects to varying degrees with increased prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms (United Nations [UN] 2020). For a large proportion of South Africans who live in lower socio-economic communities, characterised by smaller living spaces and inadequate sanitation, this became problematic. At the same time, violent protests and social inequalities were reinforced by the COVID-19 emergency, and many people engaged in demonstrations as an opportunity to express their frustration and aggression to the government. Having studied Bandura's social cognitive theory, many individuals may have participated in violent protests during the COVID-19 pandemic after witnessing others engaged in destructive actions and were influenced by both peer dynamics and broader societal challenges. Some protesters might have been driven by immediate needs, such as obtaining food, materials or money for themselves and their families. So, they took advantage of the situation. Moreover, frustration-aggression theory (FAT) argues that:

[T]here is a psychological element that stems from violent protests, with the aggressiveness induced by frustration produced by unmet government aspirations, frustration becomes aggression when something sparks it, such as when citizens run out of patience. (Damoah 2023:654)

The July 2021 violent protests sparked the already existing phenomenon of poverty and inequality in South Africa. Individuals who 'exhibit impulsive behaviour or lack sound judgement are more susceptible to engaging in mass violent actions, as psychology suggests that such individuals may be driven by frustration and aggression' (Damoah 2023). Hence, Biko stressed that:

[P]sychology should become a liberating force for good, actively playing its part in the radical re-imagining of a more humane

world order, where black people are not financially or culturally excluded from spaces of higher decision-making in their country. (Pillay 2016:158)

This correlates to the violent protest actions that occurred amid COVID-19; ordinary people demonstrated against exclusion from participating in social welfare and well-being in their country as they were restricted in their homes. The COVID-19 pandemic not only evoked deep emotions, stress, and anxiety but also sparked critical thoughts, particularly regarding influences that fuelled the violent protests. A typical case of violent protest was in July 2021, 'when the Constitutional Court sentenced former President Zuma to 15 months, and tensions kept rising, especially on the political front' (Afrika 2021). However,

[W]hile many tagged the violent protest and looting as ignited by the pro-Zuma protesters, others argued that looting was rather spurred mainly by poverty as well as a reaction of many to the continuation of the lockdown measures announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa on the eve of the protest and looting. (Patrick et al. 2023:87)

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) argued that:

[T]he reality of poverty encouraged hungry people to unresisting the opportunity to go and grab what they think will help them in the short term, but the extreme poverty of our people served as the dry wood ready to burn when the match is struck. (Khumalo 2021)

This shows the impact of what happened on the psychology and moral fibre of the hungry people in the communities.

Following the July violent protest action, the Department of Social Development conducted a:

[R]apid assessment to determine the impact of the unrest of individual households and communities in the most affected areas within Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, with a focus on child welfare and the need for goods and services, such as food, monetary grants, psychological support, social mobilisation and infrastructure. (HRC 2024:47)

This is an attestation that people suffered emotional stress from the consequences of the July 2021 unrest. Many faced threats of food scarcity, the fear of dying, losing loved ones and job loss. Unfortunately, some even saw the protest action as an opportunity for violence and looting driven by various factors, such as poverty, crime, trauma, frustration and aggression. The lack of resilience in managing emotions and impulsivity can further contribute to their involvement in such criminal events. It is reported that in 'KwaZulu-Natal at Phoenix town, Mr Mokubung's sustained injuries on his legs during the violent protest, his inability to work and in addition to the trauma of the physical attack, had a severe negative psychological impact' (HRC 2024:47). The psychological burden of the COVID-19 pandemic and violent protests played a role in these incidences. Violent protest, crime, and trauma are normative within South African society. Despite all the efforts made, violent protest prevailed: 'it has become a culture and is deeply embedded in the South

African psyche' (Vorster 2013:3; see Dreyer 2020:3). Some people refer to South Africa as a country with a culture of violence. Therefore, 'violent protest depicts that South Africans resolve to fight until their grievances are heard' (Patrick et al. 2023:95). The violent protests we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic are similar to the period of contestations against the apartheid government. Bowman (2020) states:

South African psychology must re-inscribe these crucial units of analysis while not losing sight of their intersections with the social and economic risks for violence so systematically uncovered by rigorous research work. (p. 312)

This psychosocial approach requires new modes of mapping the causes, situational contexts, and consequences of violent protest actions.

The violent protest actions during COVID-19 in South Africa

South Africa is rated as one of the highest in violent crimes that result in murder, standing at number four in the world. We may ask why South Africa is regarded as experiencing such malevolent hostilities. This struck my memory when I was young, growing up in the Mdantsana township of the Eastern Cape Province in the late 1980s. It was normal to encounter protesting groups chanting and singing political struggle songs. These songs expressed dissatisfaction against the government and cited violence. We loved the songs, although we did not understand the meaning behind them by then. Typical songs like:

Yemama ndiyeke ndiyoshaya amabhulu [Mom release me to go and fight the boers]

Umama akafuni ndishaya amabhulu [My mom does not want me to fight the boers]

Dubula, dubula, dubula ngesibham [Shoot shoot, shoot by the gun]

Wegagagaga dubula dubula ngesibham [Bang bang bang and shoot by the gun]

While we observed the protesters singing and marching on the roads, suddenly we would witness law enforcement officers dispersing the crowds using tear gas and water cannons. We did not know where the protest originated and where it led the people. However, South African literature, geographical allocation, and demographics reveal that the 'history of violence emanates from colonialism, apartheid and post-apartheid' (Pillay 2022:298). According to Powers (2021):

[T]he South African state carries within it divergent historical continuities, some of which carry forward the necropolitical modalities of the colonial and apartheid eras and others that redistribute resources to safeguard life. (p. 60)

Due to the malevolent historical nature of the country, violent protests are a key tool used by the citizens for a better quality of life and basic human rights, even in the post-1994 epoch. Some people are asking unanswered questions about how

long the pervasiveness of violence, anger, hurt, and protests propelled by social inequality will continue in South Africa. Why would the African National Congress (ANC),

[A] party that helped to bring South Africa into its democratic age, implement policies that enact lethal violence towards historically marginalised black South Africans, who also served as its political base? (Rebello et al. 2021:3)

In argument, the South African ANC-led government enshrined the Bill of Rights policy as the cornerstone of democracy, which states 'equality, freedom and human dignity to all' (RSA 1996:10). Moreover, the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy benefitted a minority of the black elite, and the vast majority of black citizens became poor, and that resulted in violent protest actions. The violent protests are one way to challenge the corruption and mismanagement enacted by the government officials. The economic policies which the South African government operates are a capitalist system which favours the minority; subsequently, the majority resort to criminal violent actions. This propels us in this article to examine, in the light of the advent of democracy after centuries of colonialism and apartheid rule, the culture of violent protest actions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are wondering, where do *umsindo nokucaphuka okungaka* [intense violence and anger] originate? Especially amid the deadly, feared invisible COVID-19 virus, people living in abject poverty would dare the enforced restrictive rules made to protect *humanity* against the pandemic and gather to protest and loot despite the greatest risk of illness. Therefore, this study affirms that violent protest action is a direct response from an underprivileged group protesting for *salvation* and *liberation* from economic struggles. Hence, the concept of *indlala nomsindo zinamanyala*² becomes embedded and evokes a message that resonates throughout this study. On Tuesday, 24 January 2023, at a practical theology conference, Prof. Dion Forster, in his keynote address, kept on saying, 'Can you imagine a world without a war?' In his context, the argument was supporting a pacifism response to the wars in the world, particularly Israel and Palestine. In the study, we echo the similar sentiments, 'Can you imagine South Africa without violence and protest actions?'³ In Matebesi's words, 'a hungry stomach knows no allegiance [*indlala inamanyala*] (2018:242)'. Perhaps a last question we can pose is: What is the message of good news that people

2.The African common Nguni language term is *indlala inamanyala* (famine is obscene). The Oxford Dictionary in the mid-17th century describes an English idiom that attests that 'A hungry man is an angry man?' In the Bible, Proverbs 29:22 says, 'An angry man stirred up strife, and a furious man abounded in transgression'. Lastly, the term *indlala inamanyala* has been popularised by Mzwanele Lamati (1994) through his book, which became a prescribed novel for Grade 12 in isiXhosa. The term is added up with *umsindo* in the Xhosa language, meaning anger or aggression because of the aggressive response to South African violent protests. Note that *umsindo* should not be mistaken with the Zulu interpretation, as it means just noise. The overall concept of *indlala nomsindo zinamanyala* describes that people can do any risk to survive even if it costs their lives to death or foolishness. For example, an angry person against the government's failure to install electricity burnt a school in Katlehong township on 12 July 2019. <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/opinion/letters/2019-07-12-burning-schools-clinics-has-to-stop/>

3.This article is a development of a paper which was presented at the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (SPTSA) conference which was held at the University of Stellenbosch on 24–26 January 2023. Prof. Dion Forster is a systematic theologian who was invited as a guest keynote speaker at the conference.

should hear? The situation of violent protest actions has 'enormous implications for theological development and engagement for other forms of theology in South Africa' (Vellem 2007:72). To such an extent that many of the church leaders, faith-based organisations, and theologians began to engage in non-violent campaigns and challenged the government vehemently to tackle the inequalities that feed violence. Because of the dynamics and prevalence of violent protests and strike actions in South Africa, Van Huyssteen (2007:413) states that 'we need to engage in interdisciplinary conversations to empower ourselves to cross the limits and boundaries of our contexts and traditional discourses without sacrificing our convictions'. In this case, a psychological perspective and theological responses are also required for this study. Several studies in social sciences and humanities have shown that 'spirituality has a positive influence on people's well-being and psychology for positive cognitive thinking' (Halder & Tibrewal 2024:20; Karakunnel 2005:80). Hence, the ultimate aim is to offer a broad research framework and to encourage multidisciplinary work in and beyond the violent protest actions culminating in South Africa. Therefore, investigating violent protest actions during COVID-19 will lead to understanding the interconnection of Christian spirituality and psychological well-being of individuals in protest.

Theology of violence

Rathbone and Verhoef (2012:67) plead 'for the nurturing of a theology of life, freedom and peace as a corrective on the modernist theologies of the past which, in their minds, perpetuated violence'. Therefore, with a good theological perspective on democratic South Africa, a theology of life is against violence, looting, and damage of public infrastructure, as they lead to death and destruction of properties. The biblical theological approach teaches about the significance of life: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it in abundance' (Jn 10:10). Contrary to the theology of life, some churches perpetuated hostilities by siding with various parties in the conflicts. Violent protests became a method of solving problems supported by churches under apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism. This apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism were propagated 'in school curricula, political and academic presentations and even in some of the sermons in the three Dutch Reformed and Pentecostal Churches' (Vorster 2013:4). Nonetheless, there were denominations who were anti-apartheid under the interdenominational forum, such as the SACC. The challenge is that an ideology of apartheid theology was entrenched in South Africa, and many churches fought it throughout. However, this study's assertion is that there is no theology of justification for violent protest, looting, state property destruction, and killings; everyone has a right to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources (Bill of Rights 1996). Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana of the SACC spoke against social unrest and said:

[O]ur church leaders joined the Soweto Ministers Fraternal to pray at the looted Ndofaya Meadowlands Mall where 10 people

perished in the looting stampede, we extend condolences to the families of all those who have died and pray for a speedy recovery to the injured. This whole commotion happens in the thick of the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic. (Khumalo 2021)

The Christian churches embraced the spirit of reconciliation and negotiations between the violent protesters and the state.

Shockingly, with the 2021 July unrest, 'violence was hectic to the extent that the South African Police Service (SAPS) could not control nor interfere in managing the huge numbers of people involved in the looting and damage to infrastructure, the looting focused on destroying shopping malls and warehouses in key parts of Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces' (Patrick et al. 2023:87). Moreover, 'it is the role of practical theology, through its pastoral care and counselling, to engage with broken communities in trying to teach, counsel and show them the importance of avoiding vandalism and cruelty when seeking service delivery from their leaders' (Baloyi 2024:1). Because practical theology is a discipline that takes both practices and theology seriously, it advocates for the churches to respond to the contextual needs of society and that of the peaceful and violent protesters, respectively. In alignment with that, the SACC responded to the state saying (Khumalo 2021):

On a more deliberate basis, we need leaders of all faiths everywhere, civic and community leaders, traditional leaders in rural communities, and business and trade unions in the workplace, all of us to pull together and chart a path of restoration. The soul of the South African society will be built from the ashes of shame we are witnessing. As Prophet Ezekiel promises, 'on the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will also enable you to dwell in the cities, and the ruins shall be rebuilt'. (Ezk 36:33)

Dreyer (2020:7) notes, 'the Bible has something to say about the human condition and the suffering of people, this is the context from which theology and theological hope emerged'. The violent protest is a result of desperate communities in South Africa living under poverty and inequality, which requires a theology of hope to address their sufferings. It is in this belief that 'God is aware of human affliction and that there will be a reversal of adverse situations in the future' 'eschatologically' (Masoga 2022:9). However, in democratic South Africa, the social, political, and economic landscapes have assumed new shapes completely. Therefore, South African violent protesters cry out for a change: 'salvation' now in their miserable economic conditions, not in 'eschatology'. Jesus Christ's theology was always committed to the ministry of transformation, changing people for better lives. In Vellem's (2007:38) words, 'God acts "salvifically" [liberatively] through our actions with Christ as the Liberator'. The apartheid government did not succeed in reducing the sufferings, violent protests, and struggles of black South Africans as a result (Masoga 2022):

The increase in crime and violent protest could be the result of prolonged trauma leading to feelings of anger, hopelessness and frustration. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, repeated lockdowns have forced companies and

industries to close, leading to massive job losses. As a result, suffering, crime and looting opportunities during the 2021 July unrest have surged. Added to this is public corruption. Efforts to make the public service more efficient have failed. Democratic institutions are battered and in some cases are likely to collapse. Furthermore, racial mistrust persists. It seems South Africans have lost the ability to debate and disagree civilly without confrontation and are trying to humiliate each other into silence. (pp. 9–10)

In an attempt to come up with resolutions and recommendations from the churches during the violent protests amid the COVID-19 pandemic, they urged the process of reconciliation and the restoration and recovery of the positive human spirit, akin to the African concept of Ubuntu-Botho (Khumalo 2021). Moreover, churches used scriptures such as Hebrews (3:13), 'Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness"'. On the other hand, pastoral care within a hermeneutical paradigm involves a 'theology of life and the healing of life, it is about dwelling in the presence of the pathos of the suffering Christ' (Thesnaar 2011:29). Pastoral care is about hope, care, and the endeavour to give meaning to life within the reality of suffering. Practical theology is concerned with human vulnerability and the predicament of trauma, illness, and sickness. Cochrane (1997) asserts that:

[T]he Church needs a prophetic vision which goes beyond protest and which is prepared to be constructive 'A Theology of Reconciliation', yet our present situation calls for a prophetic vision of the future which arises from and is constituted by the historical consciousness of the poor and oppressed. (p. 147)

Practical theologians are presented with a 'hermeneutical challenge to explain and interpret violent protest actions and deconstruct and reconstruct hegemonic systems and institutions for social and economic transformation' (Meylahn 2014:4). Vellem (2007:148) asserts that '*Reconstruction Theology* seeks to go beyond protest, the church should be a prophetic voice to the government of the day and speak to their wrongdoings'. These theologians are voicing out that the church should speak out prophetically against unjust action from the government and be the voice of the community's protest. Moreover, Manala (2010:528) states, 'Black Theology should avoid being philosophical about the suffering of the poor and become "practically involved" in the service-delivery struggle'. It becomes noticeable how Manala (2010:529) confines his practical perspective that 'Black Theology (as the means of intervention by the Black church) should play in building a new relationship of commitment and cooperation between local government authorities and residents'. In summary, the theologians and the church do not endorse violent protests; violence is not an option for change. However, in cases where a violent protest is an option, the church should take the challenge to side with the poor and the deprived.

The root of violent protests in South Africa

The literature demonstrates that 'violent protest in South Africa is not new, it dates back to the first contact between the indigenous people and the emergence of the settlers as a result of the forced colonisation' (Pillay 2022:294). This affirms that among the indigenous people, there were continuous tribal wars and fights for land space, economic territories, and tribal protection. However, the arrival of the settlers exacerbated the violence and protest actions. It is argued by Vorster (2013) that:

South Africa's early history was characterised by tribal wars, annexation of land, racial and political conflicts, internal friction between blacks and whites, the Afrikaners and the British and violent clashes between ethnic groups. (p. 3)

It thus appears that this culture of violence was perpetuated, aided and abetted by the legacy of the apartheid regime and security apparatus, which continued to harass the people and created instability, fear, and chaos in South Africa. Moreover, the black majority, which was the most oppressed, were fighting and competing for political space in their country, which led to violent protest actions. Violent protest actions are part of resilience.

Sadly, it was not an intended decision to introduce violence into the political struggle against apartheid. However, it was the only appropriate response to a violent state system, which was unwilling to listen to the voices of the marginalised South Africans. In an agreement, a personal witness to a message from Mrs Winnie Madikizela-Mandela at the thanksgiving function of Adv Sonwabile Mancotywa in July 2017, where she was a guest speaker. She narrated how Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo struggled to convince Chief Albert Luthuli of the need to form Umkhonto Wesizwe as the military wing of the ANC. Mr Luthuli was a devoted Christian and pacifist. Black people were excluded from all socio-political processes and economic participation, which might transform the South African political economy. The only alternative was a revolutionary strategy, which would do away with the apartheid regime and that consisted of violence, which Luthuli was against. Hence, 'the apartheid government banned the ANC and forced it underground, which was then transformed from an organ of black protest and resistance into a liberation movement' (Karodia & Soni 2014:7).

According to Powers (2021:60), 'as part of South Africa's COVID-19 response, there have been significant examples of state violence relative to the country's historically marginalised Black population' as protesters complained against corruption and mismanagement of funds linked to the fight against COVID-19, and the government responded by violent repression. Congruent to that, South Africa's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic led to mass arrests, and some people died at the hands of the security forces, for example:

Mr Sibusiso Amos, a 40-year-old black man living in Vosloorus Township was shot dead by a metro police official alleged to be smoking near his gate and the law enforcement official accused him of violating lockdown regulations. (Langa & Leopeng 2020:119)

Amid COVID-19 in South Africa, while lockdown regulations were implemented for the citizens to curb the spread of COVID-19 infections, 'disadvantaged people were hungry and revolted against law enforcement' (Zenda 2021:2). In early July 2021, while:

South Africa was in the midst of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country was also in the midst of a dispute between former President Jacob Zuma and the National State Capture Commission which sentenced Zuma to fifteen months in prison for refusal to testify at the Commission. (Chetty 2021:85)

His imprisonment was followed by social unrest in some of the provinces in South Africa. According to Africa (2021):

[F]rom 08 July 2021 and for a period of approximately two weeks, South Africa experienced a period of hostility, characterised by violent protests, looting, destruction of property, disruption of economic activity, physical injury and over 300 deaths. (p. 146)

These events occurred primarily in the provinces of Gauteng and KZN, but instances of unrest were reported also in Mpumalanga, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. Overall,

[T]he July 2021 protests resulted in the deaths of 337 people in KZN and Gauteng as of 22 July 2021, with over 3400 people arrested on allegations of inciting public violence, murder, arson, and looting. (Chetty 2021:99)

South Africa was one of the countries in Africa which implemented strict regulations and 'lockdown' within weeks of the dawn of COVID-19. The broad response, 'from the international community praised the South African government for the implementation of lockdown regulations and commended President Cyril Ramaphosa for strong leadership' (Powers 2021:61). The lockdown was enforced by both the:

South African Police Services (SAPS) and the South African National Defence Forces (SANDF), with 70,000 SANDF troops deployed to enforce the public health measures put into place by the ANC government. (Rebello et al. 2021:3)

However, the South African population was not prepared enough for this emergency response. Unfortunately, some government officials took advantage of the situation and they engaged in corruption and mismanagement of the allocated money and other resources which were meant to be used to combat COVID-19. For example:

South Africans' already substantial mistrust has been strengthened by the scandals that have occurred under the Ramaphosa government as well as forms of accusations of corruption in the health sector during the COVID-19 pandemic which health minister Zweli Mkhize was forced to resign. (Muller 2021:5)

Poverty and violent protests during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the increase in disparities between the wealthy and the underprivileged has been noticeable, and this is considered one of the contributory factors conducive to violent protests. Additionally, inequality, a lack of service delivery and housing remain a challenge, and many people are unemployed. Moreover, Alexander and McGregor (2020:10) state that 'lack of accountability by local councillors and municipal officials strengthens these violent protests'. In South Africa, corruption is a daily problem, and political conflicts worsen the situation in marginalised communities. For example, in a trended narrative interview on live South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) television on 07 April 2020, Mr Doyi Whitey begged for R20.00 from the SABC journalist.⁴ Mr Doyi Whitey was hungry, frustrated, and stressed by his situation as he recycles for a living. However, during the lockdown restrictions, this has come to a halt and left him hopeless with no food and a source of income. This applies to the narrative of Mr Whitey; disadvantaged people found it extremely difficult to survive during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the elite and middle class did not cope well, either. Many middle-class people of all races lost their jobs and businesses.

Congruently, Bassier et al. (2023) say:

[T]he effect of job loss on poverty line during COVID-19 in South Africa, job losers (5.23 million), Job retainers (8.23 million) and estimation was between 15% and 35% of job losers fell into poverty, 40% decline in active employment between February and April 2020, half of which was composed of job terminations rather than furloughs. (p. 419)

In a notable case, on Good Friday of 2020:

[S]oldiers and police arrived at the home of Collins Khosa, a 40-year-old man in Alexandra township who was allegedly drinking alcohol in violation of lockdown rules, within hours, he was dead – the victim of a brutal assault and torture by soldiers as police watched. (Bowman 2020:313; York 2020:1)

This includes:

[T]he gross use of excessive force by the SAPS in death of Petrus Miggels (27 March 2020), the extent of this problem was also highlighted in the number of complaints against metro police services between March and June 2020. (Rebello et al. 2021:3–4)

In some townships, particularly Alexandra, limited space allocation caused conflicts and difficulties in adherence to lockdown regulations. Alexandra township is overcrowded and minimal; people are often outside their small houses, and law enforcement battles to retain people indoors. The policing of areas such as Alexandra and other townships demonstrated that middle-class fantasy and comfort are not accessible to poor South Africans. This article argues that poverty and inequality make people suffer injustices, and as a result, they resort to committing crime and violent protests.

4. See https://twitter.com/Sipho_Stuurman/status/1245745502378999810?lang=en.

Another example of excessive state interventions in violent protests happened on 14 July 2020, in the small town of Peddie [Ngqushwa] and surrounding villages, 'where the SAPS dispersed peaceful protesters with rubber bullets and used excessive force in arresting protestors' (Rebello et al. 2021:8). This part of the Eastern Cape has been experiencing issues with undrinkable water and water shortages for close to 10 years. It is said that '*Toyi-toyi* emerged from the political struggles and efforts of the liberation armies that fought against colonial and white minority rule, in every Southern African country from the 1960's' (Magakoe 2021:1). The *toyitoyi*⁵ and violent protests highlight the identity of the liberation movements in exile and the political parties in South Africa in the pre- and post-1994 period. In black townships, the term *toyitoyi* is rooted and connected with the liberation movement for black people from their struggles for change. The fact is that 'liberated South Africa, the violent protest songs through rhythmic chanting of *Toyitoyi* played a significant role in motivating the black masses' (Magakoe 2021:2). The advent of the *toyitoyi* violent action and the singing of both the liberation and rhythmic songs became one of the instruments that contributed to the demise of the apartheid government. It is embedded in black South Africans to communicate, celebrate, and express their identities and feelings through a song, whether hurt or happy. However, in the *toyitoyi* singing, it was always known that the people demonstrated collective unhappiness to the government authorities or a particular company. Apart from its performance nature, the *toyitoyi* culture can be summarised in the word '*ukuzabalaza*', which means to stand firm and be resilient and refuse to give up. In other words, *toyitoyi* became known as '*umzabalazo*' in many South African townships, which means a protest for a certain purpose. Some *toyitoyi* songs had a vehemently liberating meaning for black people, such as the following:

Siyaya e Pitoli, mayibuye i Afrika [We are marching to Pretoria, to bring back Africa]

Elilizwe lokhokho bethu [This land belongs to our forefathers]

Elilizwe labantu abamnyama [This land belongs to black people]

U Mandela uthi mayihlomi ihlasele [Mandela says, let us prepare to attack]

However, *toyitoyi* has changed its meaning and relevance. According to Alexander and McGregor (2020:11), '*toyitoyi* is no longer about liberation struggles, but to express discontent, affliction and hurts from the angry society against their government'. South Africans are disappointed by their elected democratic government; as a result, *toyitoyi* has become hostility and looting in the form of violent protests. This was especially demonstrated during the July 2021 riots, when some South Africans protested against the imprisonment of former President Mr Jacob Zuma.

5. The *toyitoyi* is a high-kneed, foot-stomping dance, rhythmically punctuated by exhaled chants and call and response. It can be observed at almost any kind of protest in South Africa and Zimbabwe today. In South Africa, university students *toyitoyi* when they protest against fees, while township residents might *toyitoyi* when they object to the presence of 'foreigners'. *Toyitoyi* is accompanied by singing revolutionary songs, which became so popular in South Africa during the liberation struggles, and the South African Student commemoration of 16 June is a remarkable note of *toyitoyi*.

The looting started in KZN and spread to some parts of Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces. Provinces, which protested and looted, were mainly KZN, Gauteng, and some parts of Mpumalanga and the people demonstrated their support and loyalty to former President Jacob Zuma, probably the reason why some provinces did not protest or participate in looting. In summary, South Africa is a democratic country, but socio-economic disparities, political inclination and the lack of service delivery continue to polarise the citizens, and violent protests are prevalent. Therefore, 'the current service delivery issues and systemic corruption in South Africa, require the development of new social policy theory and the reconstruction of related practices' (Alexander & McGregor 2020:10).

The violent protests that are so rife call upon exponents of practical theology to view *toyitoyi* [strikes] as a spiritual matter. Practical theology, as alluded to by Dreyer (2008:5, see Oviedo 2023:1) 'is deeply concerned with human well-being and human flourishing'. While in psychology, Van der Weele (2022:1) asserts that 'human flourishing or complete human well-being is understood as living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good'. Moreover, theology is not just speaking of God in himself, but God with the human being, salvation and the God who journeys with all his people. The argument is that all of God's people should be offered the possibility of economic activity. This concern is theological, expressed in the term *salvation* by Bosch (1991:393–400), 'it is in the tension between the *already* and the *not yet* of practices that Christians are involved in the mediate salvation in this broken world'. According to Vellem (2007):

[T]he reality of the spiritual, when others are made desolate with the poverty of the material and excluded to participate in the economic development of their country, they become violent. (p. 114)

Vellem's articulation is that when people of God are hungry and isolated from active involvement in the economic development of their country, they resort to violence because *indlala inamanyala*. In a nutshell, spirituality should be interconnected with the life realities of the people in their context. Christianity should not be a pie in the sky. Vellem (2007:148) states that the 'Church requires a prophetic vision, which goes beyond protest and is prepared to be constructive, a "Theology of Reconciliation" with a "historical consciousness" of the poor and oppressed'. We, therefore, argue that Vellem accentuates that the Church should engage with the protesters in their plight and provide a prophetic voice. A theological ministry that speaks truth to power and the status quo challenges corruption and maladministration.

Pervasive violent strike actions and service delivery protests demonstrate a lack of ethics, spirituality, values, and *ubuntu* [humanity] from government leaders entrusted and nominated to leadership positions by the masses. One such aberration is the notion that 'violent protest in South Africa

is committed not by strangers, but people who are its victims and are familiar with the perpetrators' (Vellem 2007:385). The study agrees with Vellem that the South African democratic government comes from the apartheid era and some leaders suffered from the past. It is shocking for the current leaders to oppress their people in the post-apartheid regime. Bishop Sithembele Sipuka stated that 'Conditions of abject poverty in the country made ideal conditions for the wildfire of violent protest and looting' (Zenda 2021:3).

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the significance of interlocation between theology and psychology when understanding violent protest actions and COVID-19 in South Africa. The arguments give a summation that South Africa is a violent, protesting, and angry country in the world, and this is attributed to its historical roots of colonialism, apartheid, and post-apartheid government corruption system. The study reveals the division of theologies of the past apartheid and churches that endorsed apartheid and those that condemned it, which led to several tensions in the country. Violent protest actions have many causes and faces and need approaches such as practical theology, churches and psychological intervention. In the study, we learn that South African politics negatively contributed to violent protests and looting. It is overwhelming that the outbreak of an aggressive COVID-19 pandemic was met with strikes, looting and violent protests despite policies and law enforcement. Indeed, *indlala inamanyala*. Moreover, this study found that the South African toxic social norms, inequality, political instability, social injustices, economic stress and societal uncertainty exacerbated violent protests during COVID-19. Therefore, this study argues that practical theology, churches, and psychology can play an important role in the struggle against violent protest behaviours. Furthermore, churches and psychology can set signs of hope in society by being actively engaged in the alleviation of poverty, the recovery of family values, life and the nurturing of social cohesion. Faith-based communities should set examples of non-violent solutions to conflicts. Church institutions should motivate other moral agents in society to apply their minds to develop these deeper convictions. They should raise awareness about the challenges brought to the communities for taking opportunities by looting and committing crime through violent protests. Committing acts of violence, for whatever 'noble' reason, is against the law. Finally, practical theology should encourage the spirit of reconciliation and justice and challenge the government to fight corruption, poverty and inequality. Above all, plead with South Africans to find other strategies to voice their concerns against poor service delivery, not to destroy the existing structures, in need of other facilities. At the same time, the South African government should be responsive to protesters' petitions to prevent aggressive behaviour.

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