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Rise of the hired hitman: assassinations and democracy in SA

Press coverage of the 2016 local elections shone a spotlight on the murky world of political assassinations in South Africa, while high-profile cases such as those of Anni Dewani and Jayde Panayiotou indicate contract killings may be more common for resolving personal problems than we realise. Researchers at the Centre for Criminology have studied targeted killings in South Africa over a 16-year period, and have revealed how consistent a feature 'hits' are in resolving conflict in many sectors of society, including business, the taxi industry and the political sphere – with, they argue, very negative consequences for democracy.

Targeted killings in SA

It was a late Friday afternoon in October 2015; prominent and politically-connected North West businessman Wandile Bozwana was travelling with a colleague, Mpho Baloyi, when gunmen in a silver BMW pulled up next to the pair as they were coming off the N1 highway in Pretoria and began firing. Baloyi, who was driving, was shot twice, and Bozwana was hit nine times. While Baloyi survived the attack, Bozwana was not so lucky, and died in hospital several hours later. For Professor Mark Shaw, Department of Science and Technology/National Research Foundation South African Research Chair in Security and Justice, and postgraduate researcher Kim Thomas, the Bozwana case is a classic example of a 'hit', South African-style.

Bozwana, a former Bophutatswana policeman under the apartheid regime, became a sharp-elbowed business operator in the North West, benefiting from his political connections after the dawn of democracy. He was a prolific funder of the governing African National Congress (ANC), and was awarded a number of government tenders. Despite accusations against him in the past of tender fraud and poor delivery, Bozwana was posthumously styled as an anti-corruption fighter, because he'd taken the North West government (under Premier Supra Mahumapelo) to court, accusing the premier of self-enrichment and interfering in government procurement. After his death, fingers were pointed at Mahumapelo and his allies in the ANC for the assassination.

"This case encapsulates the political and economic nuances behind so many of the hits or assassinations in South Africa," says Thomas, who worked with Shaw on the paper 'The

commercialisation of assassination: hits and contract killing in South Africa, 2000-2015", published earlier this year in the journal *African Affairs*. Thomas and Shaw used the media (including local, regional and national news) to build a database of individual hits or attempted hits over a 16-year period. They recorded just over 1 000 individual cases of assassination or attempted assassination.

These hits and attempted hits were then categorised into four broad groupings: hits related to the taxi industry; political assassinations; contract killing related to organised crime, or grey or illicit markets; and finally, contract killing related to personal or family matters. However, the categories are not clear-cut, and the lines are often blurred, notes Thomas. For instance, cases in the political category are generally targeted at individuals holding political or administrative office; but often the motives for the hits are economic, and relate to tender disputes.

A number of unexpected discoveries came up in the research. For instance, a handful of assassinations over a number of years have taken place in the bread distribution industry; and more recently, in relation to the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) scandal of teaching jobs for 'sale' in several provinces as contained in an [Eye Witness News article](#) published six months ago. The personal category includes several cases of hiring a hitman to resolve messy love triangles; attempts to obtain insurance payments; and disturbingly, children arranging for their parents to be killed.

Thomas notes that the number of hits in the personal category is the lowest by far. "Often, in the personal cases, the motive for killing shades into the other categories, where business and family disputes have overlapped," she says. The majority of the hits in the database are related to the taxi industry.

The researchers note that their database offers only a window into a wider problem, considering the major methodological obstacles to studying a social phenomenon such as hits, in which activities are hidden because of the consequences of their discovery. However, the researchers are working on developing a long-term database of hits in South Africa.

The history of hits, and South Africa's nurseries of violence

Targeted killing is not a new thing in South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the 1990s, as well as various post-apartheid journalistic accounts, exposed not only apartheid government hit squads, who targeted political activists, but also instances of the ANC eradicating 'problematic' members of the organisation, or suspected sell-outs in the fight against apartheid.

"Assassinations have shaped the course of South African history on several occasions," says Shaw. "The killing of then-Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in parliament in 1966 and the gunning down of communist party leader Chris Hani in April 1993 are just two examples."

But the nature of the assassinations has changed since 1994. There has been a shift from political killings, for ideological reasons, to killings reminiscent of mafia-like violence, characterised by the use of targeted killing (or the threat thereof) for political or economic gain.

South Africa's dark and difficult past is certainly an important contributor to the ubiquity of hits in society today. "Because of the history of apartheid, we see a number of people living in SA today who received military training," says Thomas. But, she adds, the former veterans are not the only ones with a very particular set of skills who go into this industry. Gangs and the taxi industry are also common breeding grounds for hitmen.

South Africa's poverty and unemployment are important contributing factors to the growing commercialisation of assassination. The market has grown, argue Shaw and Thomas, because of how many people are available for hire.

"The reality is that South Africa is a violent country, and there are many people who are willing to do anything for the money," says Thomas. This has pushed down the costs of ordering a hit – it costs around R10 000 to have someone killed – and has created a demand for hitmen, because of the relative ease of contracting one.

There are three tiers of 'hitmen', says Thomas. Those who are professional obviously cost a great deal more. When these specialists are used, usually the body just disappears, and nobody knows what happened. The middle tier is often related to the taxi industry or gangs – when mid-level criminals are willing to kill for financial gain or career growth. At the bottom level, often, the hitman is just an ordinary individual, desperate for the money. These are usually the personal killings, and it is often these hitmen who are caught, and the story makes it into the public eye.

It is also extremely common, at this level, for individuals accidentally to contract an undercover police officer to make a hit, or for the potential hitman to go to the police. The paper references one particularly high-profile case, in which according to a 2013 [TimesLive article](#) serving Minister Dina Pule, who was accused of fraud, allegedly contacted a potential hitman to eliminate the chairperson of the parliamentary ethics committee. The prospective hitman reported the matter to the police.

Hits and democracy: a veil of opacity

The study of hits in South Africa is relevant to those trying to get a measure of the strength of South Africa's democracy.

"Key to the success of a democracy, particularly a new democracy such as South Africa, is transparency," says Thomas. "People need to know what is going on. If business or political conflicts are being resolved through the use of violence, it has major implications for democratic processes."

When targeted killings begin to become common in a society, they replace trust with the threat of violence: a threat that is only good if delivered upon, notes Shaw. He notes that these hits can become a regulating power in economic, personal and political transactions. But this regulation takes place in the murky criminal underworld, with no transparency or public scrutiny. A hit serves as both a practical function (in that it removes an immediate obstacle to political or economic power), and a powerful symbolic function. When the threat of violence supersedes legal regulations, all of society suffers.

“If political party positions, for instance, are determined by the threat of violence, politics is ultimately shaped by hidden forces and transparency is reduced,” says Shaw. “If municipal officials who prepare tender documents fear threats to their lives, work contracted out may be much more expensive than required, and go to parties who have no intention or capacity to fill the terms of the contract. The public good is no longer the priority, and the law no longer the primary regulation tool.”

According to Shaw, interviews with hitmen reveal a deep awareness of the symbolic nature of assassination, in which the killing need not be regular but is always a possibility. Such a fear of violence, found a [study of survivors of violence in KwaZulu-Natal](#) published by the Taylor & Francis Online peer-reviewed journal in 2015, leads to fear, anxiety, greater risk aversion and a dampening of political participation.

“Where there is a cross-over between the involvement of state and criminal actors in perpetrating such violence, or cooperating in ways that facilitate violent outcomes, the position is particularly serious,” says Shaw. “The result is a blurred distinction between the licit and the illicit, with a resulting replacement of trust with violence, or with the threat thereof.”

Shaw is currently working on a book on South Africa’s underworld, to be published by Jonathan Ball early next year.

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