

Marikana not like Sharpeville tragedy

It was inevitable that in the wake of the killing of the 34 mine workers near the Lonmin Marikana platinum mine by South African Police Service members, there would be comparisons with other state-led mass killings.

The shooting of the mine workers at the Lonmin-owned mine was the first such mass killing by a state agency since the onset of democracy in SA.

But to call it democratic South Africa's own Sharpeville Massacre, as many continue to do, is to indulge in historical revisionism.

What is more, it downplays the callousness of a white supremacist regime and plays into the hands of those who have made it their life's work comparing the morals of fighting for and against apartheid.

I can understand why some people would want to compare the two events but I do not accept the validity of the comparison. To compare Marikana to Sharpeville is to desecrate the graves of the 69 men, women and children who opened the world's eyes to the brutality of the National Party's

The F-Word

FIKILE-NTSIKELELO MOYA

racist regime.

In case some have forgotten, the South African police in Sharpeville massacred innocent men, women and children whose only crime was that they had resolved to stop voluntarily carrying the badge of their servitude, the *dompas*, in the land of their forefathers.

Scores of them were shot in the back as they tried to flee the trigger-happy apartheid defenders. Within minutes, 69 people – including 8 women and 10 children – were sprawled in the dust of the township not too far from the banks of the Vaal River; and 180 – including 31 women and 19 children – were injured.

I am in no way suggesting that the Marikana workers deserved their fate. Nobody deserves to die at the hands of those who are mandated by law to ensure their safety.

The facts, the culpabilities

and the reasoning behind the actions of the protagonists in the Marikana deaths are subject to a judicial commission of inquiry chaired by Judge Ian Farlam.

We shall know in time what the commission has found.

Sharpeville was about human dignity. Marikana was about cash in the workers' pockets, hence they returned to work once Lonmin, their employer, agreed to their demands.

What is also indisputable is that unlike in Marikana, the Sharpeville victims had not murdered two police officers and a security guard in the days preceding their violent deaths.

Instead, the organisers of what turned out to be the day the whole world got to know about Sharpeville had reiterated *ad nauseum* to those who intended to support their campaign that it would be a nonviolent one.

Evidence already presented to the Marikana commission was that the local shop that sells pangas was sold out a few days before the shootings. That is not to pre-empt the findings of the commission for buying an assortment of weapons nor

does it in itself suggest that those who died perished in combat using the weapons.

In a democratic state founded on human rights and the rule of law, the police have a duty to protect the same way they did under apartheid. But back then, all that was required of them was to protect the white state from any protest.

Sharpeville marked an epoch. It was because of the sheer callousness of the apartheid regime that all hopes of peacefully engaging with apartheid authorities evaporated and for the first time the idea of an armed resistance to apartheid could no longer be postponed.

Unlike with Marikana, there were no grey areas about what happened in Sharpeville.

Inevitably, politicians and other interest groups would want to frame events in a manner that advances their agendas.

It is important when that happens, that facts and history not be compromised in the name of short-term political games.

Marikana cannot be compared to Sharpeville.

► Follow me on Twitter @fikelelo