

Marikana tragedy must be understood against backdrop of structural violence in SA

By [Bill Dixon](#)

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For some observers, the long-awaited and much-delayed publication of retired judge Ian Farlam's report on the death of 44 people at the Lonmin-owned platinum mine at Marikana in August 2012 is all about [Cyril Ramaphosa](#).



Did the former union leader, multi-millionaire former businessman and current deputy president of South Africa have the blood of 34 striking mineworkers on his hands? Did the [emails](#) he sent and the phone calls he made to Lonmin management and senior government ministers amount to the smoking gun lawyers representing the miners' families and his political opponents - [the Economic Freedom Fighters](#) in particular - have hoped and argued for?

[Farlam](#) concluded that his hands are clean and there is neither gun nor smoke. So much is clear from President Jacob Zuma's summary of his [findings](#) when he released the report. But, with so much at stake for so many, this is unlikely to be the end of the [controversy](#).

It would be a pity, and a waste of both public money and a lot of people's time, if the wider meaning of [Marikana](#) gets swept away in a tide of politically charged controversy about the deputy president and what he did or did not do, should or should not have done, in the fateful days leading up to the bloody events at Marikana on August 16 almost three years ago. This is not to say that the politicians, police officials, company executives, union leaders and others responsible for what happened should not be held to account, and face prosecution if there is evidence of criminal behaviour. They should.



Notwithstanding [Farlam's verdicts](#) on Ramaphosa, former Minister of Police, Nathi Mthethwa, former Minister of Mineral Resources, Susan Shabangu and National Police Commissioner, Riah Phiyega, and the field commanders on the ground at Marikana, it is important to see what happened as indicative of more deep-rooted structural and institutional problems. At

the centre of it all is the problem of violence.

Structural violence

Writing almost half a century ago, the peace researcher [Johan Galtung](#) distinguished between what he called structural and personal violence. It is South Africa's misfortune that both forms of [violence](#) are part of the bitter legacy of apartheid - a legacy that the events at Marikana suggest has not yet been overcome.

For Galtung, structural violence was a result of the uneven distribution of resources: income, education, medical services and so on. Above all, it stemmed from differences in the power to decide over the distribution of resources. It is evident wherever power is held by some and denied to others, wherever life chances are unequal. Personal violence, he argued, was more familiar and more obvious in the context of personal interactions.

Millions of South Africans felt the effects of structural violence under colonial and apartheid rule. Thousands became the victims of personal violence meted out by the police - beatings, torture and murder.

Migrant labour and public order policing

Studies of life on the mines in the twentieth century by [Dunbar Moodie](#) and others have uncovered the structural violence inherent in the migrant labour system on which South Africa's mining industry has depended for so long. The report of the [Truth Reconciliation Commission](#), several academic histories and a host of biographical accounts - not to mention the work of a few courageous individuals writing at the time - have documented the routine use of sometimes lethal personal violence by the old South African Police (SAP).



A good deal of this violence was visited on usually unarmed people protesting against the iniquities of the system. In probably the most notorious incident, 69 people died and more than 300 were injured at [Sharpeville](#) on March 21, 1960.

The tragedy - a much overused word that seems unusually appropriate here - of Marikana was that 44 lives were lost in circumstances that can only be understood in the context of the continued use of [migrant labour](#) on the mines, and of lethal

force in policing crowds by the SAP's successor, the [South African Police Service](#) (SAPS).

Efforts to make the system of ethnically segregated single-sex mine compound hostels a thing of the past have led to the development of sprawling, poorly serviced shack settlements around Marikana and other [mines](#). Migrant workers struggling to maintain two families and two homes have been forced into the iron grip of loan sharks.

Meanwhile, the process of police reform that gathered pace after 1994, and led to the major changes in [public order policing](#) observed by Durban-based scholar, Monique Marks, stalled and then went into reverse in the 2000s. The response to protests over the provision of basic services became [increasingly violent](#).

A low point was reached when [Andries Tatane](#) was killed at a protest in Ficksburg in the Free State in 2011. David Bruce, an independent researcher who gave evidence to the Farlam Commission, has tracked a [disturbing trend](#) in the use of increasingly lethal amounts of force by the police to the re-establishment of Operational Response Services (ORS) as full division within the SAPS.

Understanding Marikana

Events at Marikana can only be understood against the background of the structural violence faced by the striking mineworkers and their families and the personal violence routinely used by the SAPS in public order situations calling for more sensitive handling.

Throw in the politically charged atmosphere of the time - [Julius Malema](#), the [ANC Youth League](#) and all that - the struggle for dominance in the mining industry between the ANC-aligned [National Union of Mineworkers](#) and [Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union](#) and continuing uncertainties about South Africa's ability to attract foreign investment and the scene was well and truly set for - that word again - tragedy.

Forty-four people lost their lives that week in August 2012. The search for an explanation for their deaths must go far beyond the "sent" folder and cell phone records of one man, however powerful he may be.

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