

# 'The Purple Shall Govern'

Purple Rain



Obed Zilwa

## Using Newspapers to Understand Historical Events

In this lesson plan, learners will be able to compare a personal account with a more detached report of the same incident.



### Purple March (3 September 1989)

In 1983, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was created, bringing together a number of organisations to fight against apartheid. Two years later, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was formed and brought the unions into a massive federation. The apartheid government's declaration of a state of emergency in 1986, did not stop COSATU from organising several successful stayaways and a miners' strike. In 1988, the government imposed severe restrictions on COSATU and banned the UDF. But COSATU rejected the restrictions and began a new Defiance Campaign. The Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) carried the Defiance Campaign forward. In Cape Town, on 2 September 1989, about 30 000 people came out into the streets of the city centre to stage a symbolic march on parliament. Church leaders, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, were prominent.

The 'purple march' is widely thought to have been significant in showing the National Party that it could not continue with its repressive ways. Many felt sure that the time for the 'people (or was it the purple?) to govern' was close at hand.

The Purple March inspired a lot of other marches around the country:

- 2 000 marchers in Grahamstown
- Thousands of marchers in Johannesburg
- Thousands in Oudtshoorn and Durban
- 30 000 in East London
- 7 500 in Kimberley
- 20 000 in East Cape
- 50 000 near Bloemfontein
- The biggest march in South Africa's history in Uitenhage

Information sourced from the Cape Times in September and October 1989

Do you know of any cases where dye has been used to track people down or identify people by the police, FBI or other agencies?

Read two accounts of the Purple March – one is a personal account, and the other is a journalist's report for the newspaper.

Source A: Sunday Times article on Purple March by Alison Ozinsky

### Crowds are routed by purple dye

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crowd gave a thunderous cheer before police arrested him.

As canisters of teargas exploded in the road, police bundled demonstrators into waiting vans.

A cordon at both ends of Burg Street ensured that many people could not flee.

Witnesses said that for at least two hours after the incident, police patrolled the area searching for people covered in the purple dye, many of whom had hidden in any building that offered the protection of an open door.

Several people were later treated for minor injuries by paramedics. A doctor said one man had to be treated for a heart attack.

At 3pm a large crowd gathered inside St George's Cathedral for a church service. Police cordoned off the area using trucks and Casspirs.

A delegation, which included civil rights advocate Dullah Omar, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Rev Colin Jones negotiated with police who agreed to allow the crowd to leave peacefully in small groups.

In a separate incident, police charged demonstrators and Saturday shoppers in the city's Grand Parade, where a large crowd had gathered.

An SABC TV crew were among the 52 newsmen detained for three-and-a-half hours after a police round-up of Pressmen during the demonstrations.

The journalists were arrested after they had been warned not to be at unrest situations in the city," said a police spokesman.

He said police also confiscated video tapes depicting violence from two members of an international news service.

Brigadier Mellet said the media had been warned on Friday that action would be taken against them in terms of the emergency regulations if they were found at scenes of unrest.

He said 186 foreign journalists had entered the country claiming they wanted to cover the general election.

"Not one has done so; they have come only to praise the MDM in international forums."

The scene in Burg Street, Cape Town, before the unrest began. Publication of unrest pictures is prohibited under the emergency regulations

Sunday Times,  
3 September 1989

**Transcription:** Walking out of the church into Burg Street is like the moment before jumping from a high place. All of us know exactly what is outside. I hope that all the others are braver than me. There's still time to pull out. The rows are forming and my elbow forms a link. Figuratively, we close our eyes and take deep breaths and launch ourselves forward. The crowd of Saturday morning spectators is huge. The pavements are spilling over with curious shoppers. At the end of the road the police are six deep and waiting. I see no quirts or batons. I wonder what they have in store for us. Will we just be led right through the phalanx of policemen? Predictably, our march grinds to a halt as we are given ten minutes to disperse.

The whole march sits down in the road and the tension mounts as our leaders negotiate with the police to continue to parliament. The crowd of supporters is clapping slowly and cheering.

Now we see what the ten minutes was all about. The yellow pride of Caledon Square careens down the road flashing its lights. A soft noise of hydraulics and the infamous nozzle of the water cannon is aimed at the crowd. The marchers brace themselves. Somewhere a crucial button is pushed and a sharp burst of water bursts forth, changing in mid-stream to lurid purple.

Some are hit head on, full in the face. Some are knocked off their knees. Scramble and panic and somebody is shouting 'Sit down, sit down.' Some are pinned against the wall and are painted like paper dolls as the jet sweeps past. A small remaining huddle in the road is covering their heads under the purple spray. The supply of purple dye seems endless and the machine sprays on and on. The gutters run with oily foam. The crowd is stunned into strange silence. All we can do is watch this weird purple blast sweep backwards and forwards. Then it stops. A lone protester has climbed on top of the truck and is diverting the nozzle away from the people. He is struggling with it, fighting with it and the purple jet streaks wildly across the building. The crowd stares for a moment in disbelief – then goes wild, cheering and shouting, and leaping in the air with delight for this brave young man.

It is an indescribable moment. Even the police can simply stare seeming to have momentarily lost their grip on the situation.

Not for long. They retaliate as teargas billows into the square. Marchers and policemen alike are stumbling and choking and fighting for breath. Spectators have become participants, willingly or not.

Some collapse in the road. Eyes streaming, nose and mouth and lungs burning, we run up streets, into building, it's like a war.

It is a war and it feels like the city is on our side. A friend of mine runs into a hairdressing salon and is washed clean of his purple stains. Another is rescued by taxi and is whisked off down the back streets. A department store is used as a hideout and a comrade emerges with a clean pair of trousers.

We hear that all purple people are being rounded up and arrested. Jackets and jerseys are being turned inside out and incriminating stains are quickly concealed.

All the roads are being cordoned off and we walk up the middle of Adderly Street in a daze. The silence is heavy and ominous. Five hundred people have been arrested and taken to Caledon Square we hear.

If it was a war, then peaceful protest was the victor. Not a stone was thrown. The feeling of unity and friendship in the city was real and very tangible. By Monday morning an efficient graffiti artist had said it for all of us: 'The purple shall govern.' I can believe it.

Cape Town's watershed march has notched an unprecedented victory for the Mass Democratic Movement and put peaceful protest firmly back on South Africa's political agenda...

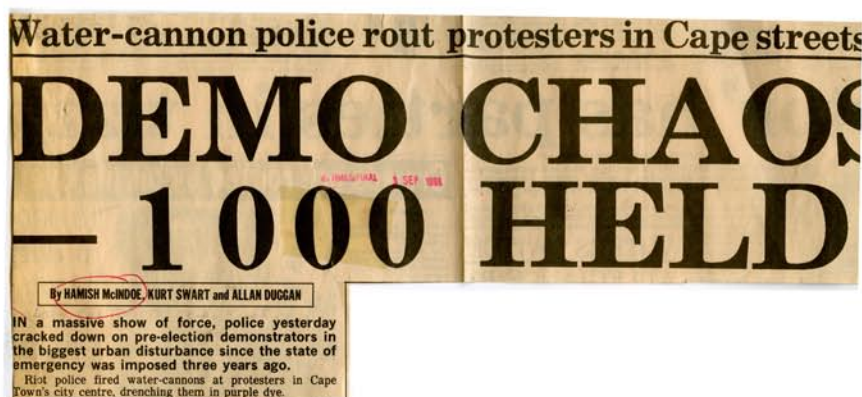
As Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Allan Boesak addressed the jubilant crowd from the city hall balcony festooned with ANC colours and the UDF flag, an old man commented: 'The National Party will never be able to stop the march to freedom now...'

*Sunday Times, 3 September 1989*



**The police water canon moves in to disperse a demonstration, protest in Burg Street outside the National Party Offices. This time, the cannon fired a purple dye. Obed Zilwa**

Source B: A newspaper article Sunday Times, 3 September 1989



### 'Demo Chaos – 1 000 Held'

In a massive show of force, police yesterday cracked down on pre-election demonstrators in the biggest urban disturbance since the state of emergency was imposed three years ago.

Riot police fired water-cannons at protestors in Cape Town's city centre, drenching them in purple dye.

Police said last night that 500 people had been arrested.

Most were freed after being brought before a temporary court on charges of illegal gathering and breaking the emergency laws.

Last night police announced that a further 500 had been arrested since Friday night in unrest related incidents in other centres, bringing the total to 1 000.

SA Police liaison officer Lieutenant-Colonel JH Labuschagne said these included about 300 arrested at the University of Natal on Friday night.

In Cape Town 52 foreign and local newsmen were detained and 'removed from the scene', a police spokesman said last night: 'All is quiet and the SAP have withdrawn'.

As canisters of teargas exploded in the road, police bundled demonstrators into waiting vans.

A cordon at both ends of Burg Street ensured that many people could not flee.

Witnesses said that for at least two hours after the incident, police patrolled the area searching for people covered in the purple dye, many of whom had hidden in any building that offered the protection of an open door.

At 3pm, a large crowd gathered inside St George's cathedral for a church service. Police cordoned off the area using trucks and Casspirs.

A delegation, which included civil rights advocate Dullah Omar, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Rev Collin Jones negotiated with police who agreed to allow the crowd to leave peacefully in small groups.

An SABC TV crew were among the 52 newsmen detained for three-and-a-half hours after a police round up of pressmen during the demonstrations.

'The journalists were arrested after they had been warned not to be at unrest situations in the city,' said a police spokesman.

Sunday Times, 3 September 1989

## Learner Activities

In Source A, how does Alison feel at these different stages?:

1. Before the march starts
2. When the water cannon is fired
3. When the young protester tries to turn the nozzle away from the crowd
4. When the teargas is released
5. When she hears that purple people are being arrested
6. About the reactions of retailers in the area?

- The Purple March sounds funny. But was it?
- Why was the National Party unable to stop 'the march to freedom' by the end of the 1980s?

In Source B, what do we learn about the context of the purple march (note the word 'pre election')?:

- How many people were arrested in all in activities related to the purple march?
- What reason did the police give for arresting journalists? Do you think they made a mistake in doing so?
- Now make a list of all the information that is the same in BOTH sources.
- Now draw two columns and compare the two sources under the following headings: Tone, sources of information used, details.
- What can you conclude about the advantages of a) personal accounts and b) newspaper accounts?

## Other Ideas

Compare the Purple March with peaceful protests taking place in other parts of the world at the same time like Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution.

### Criteria for Assessment

- Learners can follow narrative accounts given in different sources.
- Learners can make deductions about why the National Party was failing to keep its grip on power.
- Learners can identify points of corroboration in two sources.
- Learners can identify points of difference between two different kinds of historical sources.

### Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 1, AS 2  
LO 2, AS 3  
LO 3, AS 3  
LO 4, AS 3

Grade 11 Content Link – what was the nature of resistance to apartheid?



This lesson has been developed by the South African History Archive (SAHA)