There is a good side to the machete and bludgeoning death of Eugene Terreblanche in South Africa on April 3, but it’s not what you think. You don’t have to listen very close to hear the cries of ‘good riddance,’ and indeed Mr Terreblanche and the white supremacy and separatism he preached won’t be missed, but the passing of an exponent of a vile racist nationalism isn’t the most important thing to issue from his murder.

South Africa may now finally be able to confront the fear that lurks in the public imagination there but which is rarely addressed in a rational way – the fear that white retribution for the end of apartheid will cause a civil war.

In a sense, the threats of a white backlash were always like the shouts of a petulant teenager. The government is big enough and the army and police loyal enough to the government that it can meet any internal threat easily. But that didn’t stop people like Terreblanche from trying.

The reason he got nowhere in the end was that he was always looking for the one big shot to tip the country into anarchy. It never happened. He deployed the rhetoric of violence so often that most people tuned him out. His actual violence was so parochial and small-scale that its effects were sharply limited.

Ordinary people grew tired. They got on with lives and left bigots like Terreblanche to stew in their own hate. His AWB – Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging or Afrikaner Resistance Movement – proved unable to ignite the civil war or establish the Boerestaat – a whites only Boer Republic – that he promised on the handover of power from apartheid to democratic regime in 1994.

By the time of his death Terreblanche was little more than a crackpot cult leader: a big-mouthed guaranteed news-maker and a father figure to a few thousand armed or wealthy (or both) believers in a Fascist utopia on the plains of the Orange Free State.

In spite of his bluster he made South Africans of all sorts nervous. He made most whites nervous because unlike him they wanted to be part of something bigger, richer and better than apartheid and they feared being tarred with his brush as Terreblanche tarred and feathered white university professor Floors van Jaarsfeld in 1979.

He made them nervous because he led an attack on police in his hometown in 1991 when then President FW DeKlerk spoke about the need for political reform, an event which killed four people and entered the history books as The Battle of Ventersdorp.

He made black people nervous because it was never clear precisely who and how many of the...
country’s five million whites really shared his dream. He made governments before and after the end of apartheid nervous because he represented a challenge to the power of the state and a spark to civil war.

The government, at least, had to take him seriously because he periodically led his supporters on armed photo-ops like the ‘invasion’ of the negotiations to establish majority rule at Kempton Park in 1993. He also beat up a black gas station attendant in 1996 and spent time in prison, where he was one of only three white faces and where he claims to have found Christianity again and softened his anti-black views. Indeed.

The long nightmare of interracial bitterness might end there, with the burial of Eugene Terreblanche, were it not for an equally loud-mouthed and equally divisive black man of importance. Julius Malema is the leader of the Youth League of the African National Congress, the political party which holds the Presidency and about two thirds of the seats in South Africa’s parliament.

The twenty-nine year old firebrand is notorious for his commitment to the ANC – he was working for them at age thirteen, destroying ex-apartheid National Party posters in the run-up to the 1994 elections – and for his willingness to say almost anything in order to get media attention.

His latest gambit, which has earned him plenty of media exposure, a rebuke in court and police interest but so far no direct action from his employers at the ANC, is to revive the singing of the party fighting song Dubul' ibhunu from the days of the (often violent) struggle against apartheid. Translated to English, it goes something like this: “Kill the Boer / Shoot him / Shoot him / Shoot him with a gun.” Boer is a word for a white Afrikaner farmer and a slang term comparable to ‘whitey’ in the US.

Not everything Mr Malema says or does is so virulent, and his criticism of the balance of economic power in South Africa is often pointed. Still, he seems determined to paint himself as the favorite of violent anti-white South Africans, as when he shook hands with the loathsome Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe this month and pronounced his (Mugabe’s) stealing of white farmland there a success before claiming that South African farmers were next.

He also advocates nationalizing South Africa’s gold and diamond mines, on the grounds that they concentrate wealth too narrowly in white and foreign (he says ‘imperialist’) hands. He is blamed for indirectly causing the murder of Eugene Terreblanche by reviving Dubul' ibhunu, though there is no evidence that he solicited the murder. You would be hard pressed to find a better wedge with which to separate white and black now that Terreblanche is dead.

The novelty of majority rule in South Africa – it is not yet twenty years since the first election in which black politicians stood for the Presidency – makes it harder to brush aside extremists of left and right like Mr Malema and Mr Terreblanche than it is elsewhere. It’s not that current officeholders are susceptible to extremist ideas – they are or aren’t in the same way as politicians in all countries. It’s not that black politicians have to develop the expertise or habits of governance – that’s an absurd Orientalist claim used to justify colonial repression everywhere.
Rather, new democracies are fragile because they’re new democracies. The power of democratic institutions depends critically on the willingness of people to live under them. When we talk of stable governments, really we mean those which rule by force of habit backed by guns and money. If people don’t believe your government will be around for very long, they are more inclined to secede from its influence or try their luck at a *coup d'état*, but if most people in a country have faith in the system, it will ride out the shocks.

The real danger of extremists like Mr Terreblanche and Mr Malema isn't that they will personally upend the status quo, but that they will erode faith in the system to unsupportable levels before workable alternatives emerge. The country could slip into general violence without a spark if the present constitutional order was widely accepted as insufficient.

Today, South Africa is prosperous and stable. The institutions of government show no sign of cracking despite efforts from the right and the left to undermine the authority of the state. But the longer it takes to put existential fears arising from race tension behind them, the longer South Africans will have cause to worry – just a little bit – about that part of their future.