Censorship and iconoclasm are two of the most powerful expressions of contempt for images. They testify – graphically and eloquently – to the power of the very effects they seek to annul. Throughout history people have sought to suppress, mutilate or destroy images. In some cases the assaults have been political, in others pathological. Often a current of concern about the sensual and sexual power of images underlies the efforts at their elimination or suppression of an image. The recent events surrounding Brett Murray’s The Spear, his satirical portrait of President Jacob Zuma, form part of this long history – though rarely has an effort at official censorship been followed so predictably by an act of iconoclasm.

Based on Viktor Ivanov’s iconic image of Lenin, Brett Murray’s The Spear shows Zuma gazing prophetically to the future. He stretches his arm out towards a shower in place of the penis. But it was the painting itself that aroused the fiercest controversy.

The Spear was put on display on 10 May 2012 in an exhibition at the Goodman Gallery entitled Hail to the Thief!. This title was a clear reference to the military wing of the ANC, Siswe (‘Spear of the Nation’). It was bound to be incendiary, and was immediately perceived as such. The ANC reacted by seeking a court injunction to have the picture removed from display at the Goodman Gallery and from the website of City Press. While politicians, political spokespersons and ministers, both of government and religion, insisted that art should not be allowed to insult people with impunity, most artists – of all colours – felt that the ANC’s action went too far. The basis of the lawsuit was that it impugned the dignity of the president and his office, as well as the government, the ANC and all Africans. Zuma’s own affidavit claimed that it impugned his dignity “in the eyes of all who see it”. He said that he felt personally offended and violated. Members of the cabinet made public announcements against the painting. The Minister of Public Works declared the picture “sadistic, an insult not only to the president but also to millions of South Africans. The leader of one of South Africa’s largest Baptist churches said that the artist deserved to be stoned to death. He had insulted the entire nation. He did not understand the culture of the majority of South Africans.

The ANC’s call to ban The Spear was echoed in an article in the Sunday Mail, the South African equivalent of the Daily Telegraph. The Spear, the article claimed, was “an uncontrolled, gratuitous, and visually spectacular prelude to iconoclasm. Things moved swiftly. No one could have doubted the satirical intention of the painting. As every South African knew, its title alluded to the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe (“Spear of the Nation”). It was bound to be incendiary, and was immediately perceived as such. The ANC reacted by seeking a court injunction to have the picture removed from display at the Goodman Gallery and from the website of City Press. While politicians, political spokespeople and ministers, both of government and religion, insisted that art should not be allowed to insult people with impunity, most artists – of all colours – felt that the ANC’s action went too far. The basis of the lawsuit was that it impugned the dignity of the president and his office, as well as the government, the ANC and all Africans. Zuma’s own affidavit claimed that it impugned his dignity “in the eyes of all who see it”. He said that he felt personally offended and violated. Members of the cabinet made public announcements against the painting. The Minister of Public Works declared the picture “sadistic, an insult not only to the president but also to millions of South Africans. The leader of one of South Africa’s largest Baptist churches said that the artist deserved to be stoned to death. He had insulted the entire nation. He did not understand the culture of the majority of South Africans. Matters threatened to become dangerous. The ANC’s call to ban City Press was eerily reminiscent of the old days of apartheid, in which censorship and bannings were a regular element of repression. Files of City Press were burned, recalling the book burnings that often accompanied censorship in the past, from the Reformation to the Nazi period and after. Such events have frequently been a violent and visually spectacular prelude to iconoclasm. To many South Africans, and certainly to visitors to the country (who can hardly have failed to note the controversy), the ANC’s reaction seemed excessive. Some not well acquainted with the sensibilities at stake might have thought that the ANC and its supporters in this matter should have ignored the picture entirely, and allowed it to enjoy its temporary notoriety before letting it sink into oblivion. Or its target (and his allies) could have made some coolly dismissive remark, like Canadian premier Stephen Harper’s aides when, confronted with a picture of their boss showing him in a nude pose with a dog at his feet, said that he was really a cat man. But this would have been a naïve reaction. It would have been to fail to see the full implications of the case, or of current South African realities. It would have comprehended neither the racist connotations of the work nor its political potential. The fact that The Spear was a work of art, it was frequently said, did not, could not and ought not to protect it. Although the public emphasis was on the assault on the president’s dignity (which many claimed should trump freedom of expression), what better way to gain support for Zuma than to insert this case into the whole history of racist prejudices about black male sexuality? The furor...
The controversy thus went beyond a satir on the president’s sexual behavior and an alleged affront to his official and personal dignity.
the hearing against the picture was surely not only attributable to the judicial tensions of the day or the legal complexities of the case. One of the first issues raised by the iconoclastic assaults on The Spear was whether they were spontaneous or organised, whether the individuals who seemed to be solely motivated by hostility to the image were in fact set up to attack it; “it was spontaneous on both their parts. They both just happened to be here at the same time,” said Malokala’s lawyer. The issue is as old as iconoclasm itself. When Protestant rioters stormed into Antwerp cathedral on the night of 21 August 1566, the fury and destruction seemed to be a spontaneous outburst of popular anger against images. For years historians debated this, but finally it has been agreed that the attacks were orchestrated and planned by acute political figures who knew how to mobilise popular support. After all, the basic fears and emotions images so often arouse are easily aligned, as I’ve tried to suggest, with political motives.

In 2003 I wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal about the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in Baghdad. In it I jumped to a conclusion that will not surprise readers. I wrote about the event in terms of popular hostility towards the symbol of a hated ruler. I described the ways in which even a mute image of wood and stone (as the Reformation iconoclasts always referred to images of art) could be insulted as if it were a living body, as if the hated leader were somehow inherent in it, and that by destroying it one somehow destroyed the leader himself. Then I discovered that the whole event had been orchestrated by US Marines. I had failed to learn from my own study of older cases of iconoclasm – whether verbal or actual – whether the individuals who seemed to be spontaneously or organised, whether the attacks were spontaneous or organised, the entire brouhaha had substantial benefits for a leader who was losing political traction. No wonder that the actions of the iconoclasts should here too have met with considerable approval.

One can debate at length the degree to which freedom of expression should give way to respect for human dignity; whether presidential dignity is more or less fragile than ordinary human dignity; at what point a satire on the president’s sexual history turns into the perpetuation of ancient racist and colonial prejudices; whether the best way to overcome such prejudices is to acknowledge how little sense it makes in the modern world, and therefore to ignore it; whether a work of art should be suppressed in the interests of public safety and the fear that the work somehow unjustifiably fed into ancient prejudices that still festered, in suppressing a work that she had for some time supported. What is clear is that the fate of The Spear forms part of a long history of fear and antipathy to images, as well as testifying to an acknowledgement of their powers. The age-old emotions it stirs up mobilised thousands of people. But in a reversal of the old view that an assault on an image is an assault on the person it represents, the metaphorical attack on Zuma (in the form of a painting) led to an attack on the painting itself.

In an age of supposed freedom of expression, and one that is reputedly tolerant of art, the assaults on The Spear – whether verbal or actual – clearly defined the limits of tolerance. The great lesson of this episode, however, is the need to acknowledge how deeply art touches the core of our personal and social existence, even at a time when it is often asserted that art is irrelevant, that art makes nothing happen, that it is solely constituted by its philosophical status. Philosopherically disenchanted it may still be, but politically disenfranchised it must never become. Malokala laid charges against the guards who handcuffed him, and the Gallery closed for an unspecified time. The editor of City Press apologised to one of Zuma’s daughters, and removed the picture from the paper’s website. The Committee of Young Communists said that the defacing of the portrait was people’s justice, and that the attackers should be awarded the Order of Isimangaliso – usually reserved for excellence in the arts, journalism and sport – for bravery.

The spokesperson for the ANC and the owner of the Gallery met to announce that the ANC would withdraw its case if the Gallery agreed not to display The Spear any longer. The case was referred to the Film and Publications Board, which decided to prohibit access to the picture to children under the age of sixteen, and to have it accompanied by an advisory warning. An appeal is under way.

A lawsuit has been initiated against Zapiro for his cartoons of Zuma, and will be heard in October. “The row has been good for business at the Gallery,” noted The Guardian. How much the value of the work rises, even in its damaged state, remains to be seen.