

South Africa: poor confront ANC's rotten state

Jeremy Dewar, redflagonline Wed, 21/07/2021 - 16:40

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South Africa has just witnessed the worst violence in the country since the fall of apartheid nearly three decades ago. For five days impoverished workers and the urban poor looted and burned shopping malls, supermarkets and food processing plants across the country, in defiance of both police and military. This was first and foremost an uprising of the poor against the ANC government.

Many commentators, including the BBC, focused on the Free Zuma campaign and its base inside the top echelons of the ANC, who called for mass protests and orchestrated sabotage, targeting key infrastructures, like road and rail, factories and medical facilities, after the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma by the constitutional court. But the further the riots spread beyond Zuma's base in KwaZulu Natal province, the more it took on the appearance of a popular revolt against poverty.

ANC divided ? both halves rotten to the core

Of course, it suited both sides in the prolonged ANC faction fight to portray the unrest as the spilling onto the streets of their political battle for supremacy. That way they could ignore the plight of the masses, which is worsening by the week, and shift the spotlight away from their mishandling of the economy and pandemic, their graft and corruption, their murderous repression.

According to this narrative, events started at the end of June with the constitutional court sentencing Zuma to 15 months' imprisonment for failing to comply with its inquiry into state-level corruption during his presidency between 2012 and 2018. In what appears to be a tactically timed surrender, Zuma handed himself in on 8 July.

This sparked the first demonstrations, attacks on the police who, like those on Capitol Hill in the Trump putsch, seemed suspiciously underprepared, and transport blockades, ransacking of medical stores, etc. By the weekend the numbers on the streets had grown significantly. At this stage shopping centres and food warehouses became overwhelmingly the main targets, as the rioting spread to Johannesburg and the Gauteng province. In all, over 1,000 supermarkets were looted for basic food stuffs.

This led the Free Zuma campaign to opportunistically claim, 'Only a free president Zuma can address our nation and call for calm', adding that the investigation into Zuma's backhanders over arms deals 'must stop immediately' ? as if the rioters by this stage cared one iota about the corrupt Zuma's jail sentence or his cronies' 'state capture'.

In response, Ramaphosa latched onto this as a pretext to launch up to 25,000 troops onto the streets to defend 'the democratic state' and prevent a coup, claiming, 'The constitutional order of our country is under threat'. In reality, the real threat to Ramaphosa was that the riots could become a prelude to sustained working class resistance to the way he rules on behalf of domestic and foreign big business.

Government officials followed this up, stoking fears of a 'second stage' of the coup, where the aim was to make the country 'ungovernable' and return South Africa to the tribal and ethnic strife seen in the last days of apartheid, all without a shred of evidence. Zuma's camp also ramped up the rhetoric, demanding the fall of the government. However, it has to be said that the constitutional court on Monday 12 June rescinded Zuma's prison sentence, thus opening the way for a deal, although he is yet to be released.

Pandemic and economy

To understand the real nature of the crisis in the ANC, one has to look at the South African economy, which has stagnated for almost a decade and contracted by a record 7 per cent in 2020. Unemployment, always high, stands at another record of 43 per cent, and an astronomical 74 per cent for youth; 2 million jobs have been destroyed during the pandemic and 500 days of lockdown.

At the end of April, the government withdrew the monthly Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grants, a benefit worth just R350 and targeted at the unemployed. Ramaphosa claimed the pandemic was beaten and the recovery on its way. The only thing that was on the rise, however, was the cost of food, up 7 per cent in recent months with the price of bread doubling in the week before the riots. By early July, a third wave of covid that even surpasses previous waves forced Ramaphosa to re-impose harsh lockdown measures, forcing many to work even when sick.

Although the official count is 64,000 covid deaths, the real total is thought to be 175,000 deaths (in a population the size of Britain), as the health sector is overwhelmed. Only 2.3 per cent of the population are vaccinated, despite the fact that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is produced there, work or hunger are the only options for the workers and the worst is almost certainly yet to come.

Neither the actions of Ramaphosa nor those of Zuma's camp have exactly helped the situation. The taking away of even the meanest economic support for the unemployed and the isolating, ransacking and torching of medical factories and facilities will only increase the number of deaths among the poor. No worker should support either faction, both of which are its sworn enemies, not just for past crimes, but for the present danger they pose.

The crucial difference between Ramaphosa's ruling faction, called by its detractors 'White Monopoly Capitalism' and Zuma, accused of state capture in collusion with the Gupta brothers, is on how to revive the economy. As to corruption, both men are corrupt as hell but that is not the main root of mass impoverishment. Both men's solutions for this are also equally useless.

In truth, Zuma's 'radical economic transformation', while it contains some left demands like energy nationalisation and land redistribution, is a populist con. How come after eight years in office he failed to implement any of its key demands? How come, after his tenure, South Africa is ranked the most unequal country in the world? And that's even before we come to the corruption of 'state capture'.

Ramaphosa can certainly challenge Zuma for corruption, embezzlement and raw terror, given his record over the decades, like ordering the gunning down of 34 striking miners in 2012. Even today, key ministers have had to resign over improper issuing of covid contracts to cronies, only a third of the R5 billion reflation package has reached its intended recipients and his police and soldiers have killed up to 200 rioters and civilians in the past week. As for personal wealth, his estimated \$450 million net assets far outweigh Zuma's \$20 million 'you could say he's done very well out of 'Black Empowerment'.

However, Ramaphosa has orders he has to follow, primarily from foreign and South African imperialist investors. They have a double demand: cut the corruption levied on our business operations and tame the

working class and their unions. The foreign imperialists today come from the East as well as the West. The task facing socialists in South Africa today is to link the fight for emergency measures to secure jobs, health, benefits and food to a strategic fight against the system defended by Zuma and Ramaphosa, capitalism. The bosses are planning to benefit from the crisis and so should the workers.

The left

The South African working class has a proud record of struggle, and not just its historic spearheading of the anti-apartheid struggles of the 1980s, which brought the regime to its knees. In the past decade, it has regularly recorded the highest number of strike days in the world.

It is during this period that the working class vanguard, primarily in the unions but also in the townships and among the youth, began to break with the ANC popular front government. While this was necessary and a step towards class independence, it has also produced further divisions and with that confusion.

Unfortunately, much of this was on display during the recent uprising.

The Economic Freedom Fighters, led by Stalinist cult figure Julius Malema, struggled to make themselves relevant during the crisis. Malema carefully offered no criticism of Zuma, whom he regards as a credible political actor and potential ally. Feeling the need to raise the EFF's profile, out of the blue, Malema responded to the clampdown by tweeting, "No soldiers on our streets! Otherwise, we are joining. All fighters must be ready? they won't kill us all." Not only did this fail to materialise, but the farce has now descended into a court case, with Malema suing the leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance for defamation, when he denounced Malema for inciting violence!

What was needed was not a pitched battle with the army (which the EFF had not prepared for and could never muster) but working class defence guards, who could protect neighbourhoods from the police, fraternise with the soldiers and stop criminal gangs, who moved in to take advantage of the situation. There are some reports of this taking place, though not under the leadership of the EFF.

That Malema should tacitly support Zuma is no surprise, given how much they have in common. They are both from the Stalinist camp inside the ANC, both enmeshed in allegations of corruption on an industrial scale and both masters of demagoguery. But NUMSA president and leader of the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party, Irvin Jim, joined in, making his major complaint about Ramaphosa "his failure to mention former President Zuma by name?". Both these false leaders would rather do a deal with Zuma than point a way forward for the working class.

What next?

Riots, even when they are authentic cries of the poor and desperate, fuelled by anger against their oppressors, can never provide a basis for a prolonged struggle. At best, they can embolden the masses and politicise a minority, equipping them with some basic organisational training. But in the end, they can alienate the very communities, who have to live with the consequences: repression (over 2,500 arrests), food and fuel shortages and even greater deprivation.

Some on the left, notably the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP), have made this point and rightly sought to link the tasks of today's struggle to the fight for socialism. To concretise this, we argue for a united struggle to:

? Form workers' defence guards, accountable in each locality to popular assemblies, representative of all workplaces and working class neighbourhoods, to resist police, army and criminal gangs.

? Build councils of action in every town and district to discuss the crisis, call for and implement strikes, obtain and distribute free food to the needy and mount mass actions, demonstrations, rent strikes, etc.

? Call on all union federations, especially SAFTU and COSATU, to launch a general strike to demand furlough not job cuts, economic support for the sick and jobless, full and swift rollout of the vaccine and safety measures under workers' control.

? For a rank and file movement in all unions with the aim of removing the bureaucracy, uniting the unions, first in struggle and then organisationally, and using them to build a revolutionary socialist party, democratically controlled by its members and centralised in its anti-capitalist actions.

None of the existing 'parties' to the left of the ANC has passed the test of recent days. Out of the current crisis, the South African working class can not only stop Ramaphosa from making them pay for the multiple crises but lay the basis for a new party that can lead the struggle for socialism.

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