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South Africa

South Africa: Transforming community protests into an uprising

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Description:

There were protests galore in the build up to South Africa's May 8 national elections, which coincided with the 25th anniversary of the people's victory against Apartheid. Protests occurred in many parts of the country but predominately in Gauteng, the nation's industrial heartland, and in the Western Cape, with its legacy of colonialism.

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In Caledon, Western Cape, two protesters were shot dead by private security during a march and a land occupation. In Alexandra, the state president, Cyril Ramaphosa, addressed the protesting community after a tumultuous week, including a march to nearby ultra-rich Sandton.

Protesters were not celebrating their freedom and their right to vote. Many were saying they saw no need to vote because politicians and political parties habitually abused their vote, promising heaven and earth, but never honouring those promises. There were threats of disrupting the elections. As things turned out, they proceeded smoothly, albeit with a low turnout, especially by the youth, and a few sporadic instances of disruption.

The coincidence of protests and elections is not new in this country. What was new was the ferocity and proliferation of the protests. **The images of chaos in the country's urban working class townships during the elections implied that there was a crisis underlying South African politics.**

The 'urban crisis' is a crisis of labour. The central problem is that those who produce are not benefiting enough from the fruits of their labour. Workers are getting less than they need in order for themselves, their families and communities to have a decent life. As a result, the majority must endure their everyday life always short of food, water, energy, sanitation, housing, healthcare, education, transport, etc. It is worse for unemployed workers who must depend on the overstretched wages of employed family members and friends, or the paltry social grants provided by the state. Youth suffer the most because four out of ten are unemployed and, compared to adults, they have less social power, experience and networks needed to survive the hardships of working class life.

With freedom and the vote, too little changed and too much remained the same. Hence the call for a boycott of the elections.

A new social force

The dissatisfaction with bourgeois democracy is not unique to South Africa. Since the dawn of the 21st century we have seen everywhere in the world people rising up in protest against various aspects of the social injustice of the political and economic order. For example, the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the high school students' climate change movement, the Gilet Jaunes (yellow vests), etc.

But that resistance has not systematically been led by an organised working class. Instead it has more often been led by an insecure middle class, or groupings of refugees from the organised mass of the working class. The resistance has inspired new generations and layers confronting the situation from outside the traditions established by workers and their organisations.

In South Africa, at the forefront of the protests are unemployed and precariously employed workers and youth,

including those eking a living in the informal sector. **Protest action mostly takes place in poor working class communities (townships and villages) with about a quarter located in shack settlements or led by backyard shack dwellers.** The number of protests has increased consistently and sharply since the days of mass mobilisation by the 'new social movements', from about the year 2000.

From 'new social movements' to community uprisings

By 'new social movement' organisations I am referring to organisations such as the Landless People's Movement, Treatment Action Campaign, Jubilee SA and the Anti-Privatisation Forum, to name just a few. At the time, they organised across communities and aimed at building national and even international campaigns, mostly around a single issue or set of related issues.

From about 2004, beginning with the protests in Diepsloot and Harrismith, there has been a proliferation of community-specific local protests that focus on the grievances of a single community. These protests have mostly been about "service delivery" (water, houses, roads, etc.), although dissatisfaction with the "quality of democracy" in terms of accountability and government responsiveness appears to be a crosscutting issue. The protests are mostly peaceful, but they have increasingly been associated with disruption and violence.

From disruption to violence

To understand the protest methods and dynamics, we must distinguish between disruption and violence, and also between the violence of the protesters and of the police. **Disruption arises out of the protesters' desire to stop business as usual in their locality. This often includes declaring a 'stayaway' and stopping workers from going to work, with school students sometimes expressly exempted and allowed to attend classes. This is achieved through barricades consisting of burning tyres, boulders and logs strewn across the streets. An important aim is to stop police movement, including that of official and commercial vehicles.**

Bringing the locality to a 'standstill' or 'shutting it down' is a method of grabbing and directing the attention of the authorities and the media to the plight of the community. Attention is an indispensable tool of modern political culture. Protesters also want other communities to know about their action and the media serves this role especially in the absence of a national protest movement or organisation.

Sometimes violence is deployed to register the anger of the people and the seriousness of their resolve. Such violence, in the form of vandalism and arson, is often directed at symbols of state authority such as government buildings.

Research suggests that peaceful and disruptive protest often turns violent as a result of police intervention. Yet even the police sometimes express their unhappiness that, instead of the relevant authorities, such as the mayor or minister, coming to hear the grievances of the people, law enforcement officials are sent. This underlines the repressive and often violent response and contemptuous regard for the protesters of the political and economic elite. White farmers recently used tractors and private cars to block highways in a protest against farm murders - you could not smell a whiff of teargas.

The South African ruling class is ready and willing to use violence to shore up its rule. The Marikana massacre

tragically demonstrated this. When working class communities timed their protests to coincide with the election season, it suggested a political calculation: the political elite would be most receptive to their demands at this particular time. The elite was also at its most vulnerable because it wanted their votes and hopefully would not respond too violently.

The call for a 'no vote' was probably a threat to goad the authorities into action to meet the people's demands. It was also, for some, a rejection of the elaborate political machination that legitimates the so-called democratic order.

For the 9 million unemployed, and the millions who live in shacks, the South African social and economic order excludes and marginalises them. The solidarity of employed and unemployed workers in working class households, including in the backyards of formal housing, provides an organic basis for developing a working class consciousness that unites the various segments of the class.

But organisationally, these ties were broken when organised labour was drawn into a formal alliance with the ruling party and as a consequence turned its back on the poorer sections of the class, especially the unemployed. For 20 years, Cosatu militancy was contained and pacified in the name of supporting the ANC government.

The unemployed youth of today know no other labour movement. It has not seen a workers' movement that moves forward in determined and sustained struggle against the bosses, and in the name of the working class as a whole, as in the 1980s. The only militancy it sees and can be part of is that of protesting working class communities fighting and challenging state and corporate violence, rebelling against state neglect, super-exploitation and grinding poverty. For this youth, the resistance of protesting communities is the most dynamic source of fundamental rebellion against an unjust system.

Political parties

Some of this youth are inspired by the message of Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). During the elections the EFF spoke its militant rhetoric of struggle, of land redistribution, of nationalisation of the banks, mines and factories. Significantly, it attacked xenophobia and called for the dismantling of African colonial borders. But like all the other political parties, its currency was promises and it presented itself as a messiah that will solve people's problems. It does not tell them: 'you are your own liberators'. Rather: 'the EFF will liberate you, just vote for us'.

Some young and older workers looked to the Numsa-inspired new party, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP). Some unemployed township militants joined the party and campaigned for it. It turned out that it was not a mass party but vanguardist, in the elitist, top-down sense. Members must serve six months probation before they are accepted as full members; the party insisted on individual membership instead of basing itself on existing, struggling, tried-and-tested working class formations, etc. Its greatest shortcoming was its apparent failure to convince Numsa and Saftu members to vote for it.

The greatest blow to the class is that the idea of a workers' party was undermined by this poorly planned electoral effort. As socialist militants, we cannot wash our hands of the SRWP. We have to help rebuild it from the ground up in order to keep alive this most important idea: a workers party for a workers government.

From community protests to class politics

Community protests are fragmented, inward-looking and sometimes xenophobic. They need a class politics. The protesters do not own the means of production, they are mostly unemployed workers even if some of them have never worked in their lives. Employed and unemployed workers, including youth and students, face the same enemy.

A key missing ingredient is therefore a workers' movement that provides a centre of authority for the various struggles. We have to support the revitalisation of the workers movement through recognising and supporting every instance and opportunity of struggle by the class. We have to point to, celebrate and build upon moments when the organic capacity is visible and in action. And the constant message should be: 'We are strong when we unite. We can win if we support each other in struggle. We must move forward in struggle against the capitalist system if we want control over the decisions about what happens in our lives every day. No saviour can liberate us; we are our own liberators'.

The message to protesting working class communities is: 'We, as employed workers and union members are there with you when you fight for the things you need to make your everyday life more tolerable and enjoyable. Your struggle is a struggle against a bosses' government that protects the bosses and their profits. It is a struggle for water and electricity. It is also a struggle for power. The power to bring real lasting solutions. Because if the bosses' government is forever in power, and the bosses forever own the wealth, then we will forever be in that struggle. Because there will forever be the problems - not the solutions'.

Johannesburg United Front

The first step on this road is to unite protesting communities. One way of doing this is to develop a set of common demands that will provide a basis for solidarity and joint campaigns by communities in protest. The United Front in Johannesburg, together with a group of protesting communities, has drawn up, an Emergency Programme of Demands. This document will be taken to all protesting communities in South Africa under the slogan: "One Voice, One Action, One Rebellion. Free Quality Services for All".

This will take time but at the end of the process it should be possible to have a common day, week or month in which many communities would take action throughout the country behind the same set of demands. The idea is to overcome the fragmentation and thus stop the government's divide and rule tactics. The aim is to combine the movements and protests, turning them into an uprising.

From protest to uprising

Single issue and single community struggles are important building blocks in the campaign to keep the fires of struggle and hope burning among the various sections of the working class. But the militancy of the community protesters must combine with that of organized and unorganized workers, students and unemployed youth, women fighting against rape and patriarchy. A conscious and planned build-up for an uprising can provide a basis for joint work and knitting together campaigns, with the aim of winning partial victories and strengthening bonds between the different sections of the working class movement.

An uprising will show a glimpse of what is possible when the working class movement is moving together in solidarity and action. It will liberate creative energy that will generate new ideas and methods of self-organisation and struggle. It will generate historical convulsions that can change the balance of forces, providing emerging movements with goals that can be generalized beyond the local and sectional. It will restore hope in the vision that things can be

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different, that a better world without oppression and exploitation is possible. An uprising will be about taking forward the Spirit of Marikana.

June 18, 2019

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