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South Africa

The July unrest: confluence of ANC implosion and the deepening social crisis

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This unrest resulted in the death of more than 330 people, the burning of trucks, warehouses and factories, and the looting of shopping malls. The week of unrest was preceded by the threatening events before and after the arrest of former president Jacob Zuma because of contempt of court on 7th July 2021. It is not easy to analyse these violent events because of their chaotic nature and their origin in clandestine organisation.

But what is clear is that it was a violent explosion rooted in the implosion of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), triggered by the arrest of Zuma. The dangerous right-wing elements of the ANC committed sabotage (destruction of strategic infrastructure) and incited violence. This coincided with the melting social crisis stemming from widespread poverty, massive unemployment and acute wealth inequalities.

This post-94 social crisis has added to apartheid legacies that continue to perpetuate since they were never addressed. There was no meaningful social transformation in the interest of the majority after the official fall of apartheid in 1994.

Colonialisation and apartheid established inferior and harmful social relations for the black majority in South Africa, through land disposessions, forced cheap labour, economic deprivation, underdevelopment, impoverishment, cultural humiliation, racial exclusion and discrimination.

This accumulated social crisis has been made worse by government's inadequate Covid-19 response, that meant limited social support for the poor. With deep hunger and feeling left to the margins, it was entirely rational for some people to use the unfolding chaos as a means to procure food and basic commodities at the supermarkets.

The unrest has died down for now and calm is returning. As the dust settles, revealing information is surfacing. The looting of shopping malls took a form not dissimilar to food riots, where the poor masses were mainly appropriating food and other basic commodities for household consumption from the supermarkets.

However, it was not as simple as this, as middle classes also opportunistically joined to appropriate luxury commodities such as big TV screens, microwaves etc. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the fact that the food appropriation by many denotes deep desperation due to high levels of hunger, poverty and unemployment.

Poverty played a big part

The growing levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality are a product of a religious pursuit of neoliberal policies. This has been coupled with a culture of rapacious corruption, with impunity for the elites, which has made matters worse. This is why, even though the unrest was not a revolt per se, it did contain some elements of protest and daring by the masses.

The large numbers of mostly poor South Africans looting the shopping malls, for three days nonstop, was daring. It constituted a protest against poverty and expressed a grievance about the failure of post-94 South Africa and the looting of elites in government and in business. This elite looting has amounted to a process of accumulation by dispossessing the masses. The tendency by some, including Cyril Ramaphosa, to criminalise poverty and condemn

the poor masses as pure criminals is not helpful, as it borders on reactionary moralism.

In his speech on 25th July 2021, President Ramaphosa reinstated the monthly R350 Covid special grant to the unemployed until next year March. Though this is way too little, it is acknowledgement from government that poverty had a big role in the riots. It is clear the acts of sabotage are dangerous and threatening to national security.

But government has not spoken with a coherent voice on the character of these acts of sabotage. President Cyril Ramaphosa initially said this was an insurrection, but he was contradicted by his defence minister, who denied that there was evidence of an insurrection. She was supported by the minister of intelligence.

Threat from the Right

There were potential progressive impulses in the daring and protesting spirit displayed by the masses, which should be mobilised for a constructive revolutionary project. But the unrest mostly underscores a possibility, which is not remote. That is the rise of extreme right-wing forces to the political centre stage, through violent means and forms of dangerous populist mobilisation that include racism, ethnicity and xenophobia.

This unrest found a fertile ground in the melting pot of social crisis of unemployment, poverty, inequality, climate change crisis, poor governance and the erosion of the legitimacy of the ruling elites. There was a marked difference in how the unrest unfolded in the two provinces.

KZN was more violent than Gauteng, and was more racially polarised. We saw this with the racial fights between Indians and Africans in Phoenix. KZN is a Zuma stronghold. The demand for his release is even formally expressed by the ANC provincial leadership.

The social crisis is deepening to a point of no return if audacious measures for a meaningful social change that benefits the majority are not implemented. We are no longer far from a situation where we will face two stark choices: of either a descent into barbarism or audacious measures for a meaningful social transformation and a sovereign development project that benefits the majority.

ANC imploding like an empire of chaos

The ANC looms large in these riots that happened in the context of the deepening social crisis. The Zuma reactionary phenomenon on the one hand, and Ramaphosa's sworn neoliberalism on the other, are two sides of the same ANC implosion that is threatening to trap South Africa in a tragic impasse.

Zuma is the personification of the deepening crisis and the decline of the ANC, which unfolds in all manner of reactionary manifestations: tribalism, corruption, neoliberalism, backward nationalism. The ANC's national liberation project has gotten exhausted. It is sad that it is taking an extreme rightward turn in its decline and implosion.

The ANC implosion makes it possible for the rise of dangerous right-wing groups into mainstream politics. Add together the weak left, plus the rightwing Zuma politics, that have found allies in Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters, plus the dead end of neoliberal policies that Ramaphosa's ANC so religiously pursues.

And it pursues them even when state intervention in the economy has become a necessity, amid a Covid-19 pandemic which found our economy already in a deep structural crisis. Let it be clear that it's the whole ANC, and not just the Zuma group, that looms large in this mayhem and the deepening social crisis of post-1994.

The entire ANC alliance has become the harbinger of backward politics, corruption, division, ethnicity, racism, xenophobia and all forms of polarisation in our society. So the calls by some on the Left to support Ramaphosa in his fight against Zuma's "Radical Economic Transformation" (RET) faction are not helpful at all.

Again, the two commonly cited fighting factions, the Cyril Ramaphosa (CR) group and the RET group, are not really two solid distinct factions as they are always presented in the media: the rogue and corrupt RET on one hand, and the constitutionalists, the clean, corruption-fighting CR group on the other. Far from it.

There is a lot of vacillation and overlapping of membership between the two groups. Both so-called factions have implemented neoliberal policies. And Zuma is a common factor in the dynamic relations of both groups. Zuma established a far reaching hegemony in the ANC after the 2007 Polokwane conference. He was uncontested until late at the end of the second term of his ANC presidency, in the period leading up to the Nasrec 2017 conference. Members of both groups (RET and CR) have had close ties with Zuma in the period since the Polokwane conference

Cyril himself was catapulted into the position of prominence as deputy president by Zuma in 2012, having languished in political obscurity. He was building his multi billion rand business empire for most of the time since he left the ANC Secretary General office in 1997. He openly defended Zuma's rotten and backward practices until 2017, when he launched his presidential campaign.

The ANC can't kick out Zuma, who is clearly a dangerous criminal, because, as evidence coming out of the Zondo Sate Capture Commission clearly shows, in many respects the ANC itself has become a criminal network. It is a network for organising political power and pursuing accumulation by ruling elites and sections of capital, both the established big business and the black business class.

Even though the ANC remains the biggest political mass movement, the mass of the ANC members don't play a meaningful role in setting the direction of the organisation. The ruling factions have appropriated all the power to themselves.

The ANC is rotten to the core, and the masses have generally given up on it as a legitimate political force to advance their social demands. It is a hollow mass movement without a mass political programme. The ANC crisis is mainly a show of the elites, and these elites don't necessarily control the ANC masses. That's why its electoral support is seriously declining (from 69.6% in 2004 down to 57% in 2019, and seems headed to get below 50% during this decade).

The ANC largely benefits from the weak state of mass movements among the masses who therefore can't organisationally express their social agency with autonomy. That's why the rotten and crisis-ridden ANC and its factions can still succeed to put up a semblance of a mass movement.

Transcend the ANC or get trapped in a tragic impasse

There is an amount of desperation in characterising this unrest as an attempted insurrection, without evidence of public mobilisation for the overthrow of government. Yes, the unrest was a threat to national security and stability, but

an insurrection should be noticeable.

The arguments by Cyril Ramaphosa calling this an insurrection could be more than just a poor characterisation. It is possibly not an innocent fault in analysis, but rather convenient for political purposes:

İ Is it made to justify a possible authoritarian turn and the use of state brutal force through the army and the police as the legitimacy of the ANC government is eroding faster with the deepening social crisis?

İ Is it made to crush with brute force Ramaphosa's enemies?

İ Could it be that the war of ANC factions is now reaching the ultimate dangerous point of "kill or be killed"?

Something serious is definitely cooking! But then ultimately this shows how the ANC has become a threat to national security, peace and stability, democracy and social progress. If the ANC is not transcended as a dominant political force, they will trap the country in a tragic impasse.

The main social demands of the popular classes for organising, mobilising, movement building and pursuing a mass-based Left renewal in the present situation should include:

1. An anti-austerity campaign against budget cuts on social services and public sector wages.
2. A basic income grant set at R1300 per month, as per the upper-bound poverty line as determined by Statistics South Africa.
3. An active sovereign industrial policy for the creation of jobs on a large scale, that also includes an agriculture policy that promotes food sovereignty and food security, instead of relying on alienated markets of shopping malls for the supply of food.
4. Community safety work to, among other things, counter the deployment of the army in our communities.
5. Support for the Constitution without siding with the CR faction of the ANC. Defending human rights, and the checks and balances for curbing the abuse of public power.

The South African Left and progressive forces must organise social forces. We must rebuild political forces capable of posing a revolutionary transformation agenda that can save South Africa from a dangerous rightist drift and the senile neoliberal capitalist path. South Africa must consolidate a sovereign development project that buttresses the social demands of the majority, or watch our country descend into barbarism!

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