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South Africa

# Social Movements in South Africa

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**A middle-aged woman continued stuffing an old tire with bits of straw, refusing to stop as two younger men pleaded with her not to ignite it. She didn't seem to take them seriously, presumably because one of them was wearing a Democratic Alliance (DA) shirt, the reigning party in the Western Cape and largely despised by black voters. It was hard to hear the substance of the debate over the chanting of struggle songs and vigorous toyi-toyiing, not to mention the crowd shouting down officers in an SUV marked "Anti-Land Invasion Unit." [1]**

It was only after a well-known leader of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign told her that a fire would provoke arrests that she relinquished the kindling. With the burnt asphalt of Symphony Way easily visible from the previous few days' protests, it seemed obvious where this was going, but this time no tires were torched; the critics of the tactic won out.

Instead, residents of Blikkiesdorp and Tsunami formed a line and continued dancing, blockading the thoroughfare through Delft South on the eastern periphery of Cape Town just east of the airport.

This was one of hundreds of so-called "service delivery protests" that have occurred over the past decade in South Africa. As the post-apartheid promise of housing for all "a guarantee enshrined in the country's constitution" proved to be empty rhetoric, residents in shack settlements around the country have begun to demand change.

With grossly inadequate access to potable water and sanitary toilets in major metropolises including Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, not to mention the unlikelihood of legal electricity connections, the number of such protests has grown remarkably over the past few years, combining demands for municipal service provision with disgust over the dysfunctionality of post-apartheid housing delivery. [2]

According to analyses now circulated around the internationalist left, South Africa has the highest per capita number of uprisings of any country, a rapidly intensifying "rebellion of the poor" marking it as the "protest capital of the world." [3]

But even if a purely quantitative analysis of these gatherings suggests escalating unrest, does their content match the hype? While certainly one can find instances of cumulative organizing and the emergence of sustained challenges to a rapidly degenerating welfare state, can these protests reasonably be described as "rebellions"?

I asked the woman who was prevented from lighting the tire what she was hoping to achieve and why she thought this might be an effective tactic. She told me that all of this "the blockade, the tires, the confrontation with police" was an effort to attract the ward councilor for Delft South.

## Trying to Get Attention

Hardly a rebellion in the standard sense then, this was actually an attempt to engage an elected official, as heterodox as it might appear. According to numerous residents with whom I spoke, the councilor had never set foot in Blikkiesdorp despite having been in office for the better part of a decade. All they wanted, I was told, was to get answers.

Lest this be dismissed as an isolated incident, I witnessed similar modes of engagement by peri-urban shack residents across the country. Last November, 700 members of the youth league of Abahlali baseMjondolo, reported to be the country's largest shack dwellers' organization, marched on Durban's City Hall through the pouring rain, and I marched with them.

Some brandished plastic sjamboks "heavy whips" and others carried a mock coffin reading "Down with Nigel Gumede!" in both English and isiZulu, which they would subsequently bury in a staged funeral.

Gumede remains the Chairperson of the Housing and Infrastructure Portfolio Committee for the municipality, and he was reported to view Abahlali's political independence as an affront to his African National Congress (ANC) support base, going so far as to physically threaten Abahlali leaders during official meetings. Suffice it to say that this was a fairly militant march.

When we arrived at City Hall, people gathered around the front steps, waiting for Gumede to appear. Instead a representative of Mayor James Nxumalo emerged, gave a brief speech in which he promised to address people's concerns regarding inadequate housing and service provision, and then agreed to sign a memorandum, the delivery of which had been the purpose of the march.

People chanted militantly, or so it appeared, though they were actually shouting, "Sign it! Sign it!" in isiZulu. When the representative signed, agreeing to issue an official response within fourteen days, the chant became, "He's signing! He's signing!" No response from Nxumalo was ever issued.

Did either of these instances constitute a "rebellion of the poor"? Even if the widely cited quantitative assessment of Peter Alexander indicates an increase in number, this tells us little about the political content of these assemblies, marches, and protests. Indeed, with few exceptions, even apparently charged actions are all too often limited to making demands on a degenerate welfare state "and even these tend to be ignored.

We might conceive of service delivery protests, then as a new grammar of politics fitted to the nature of the post-apartheid state. If the militancy of the mid-1980s was institutionalized in the form of a bourgeois democratic state led by the ANC, complete with the preservation of revolutionary imagery, rituals and rhetoric, its engagement with citizens has likewise maintained a pseudo-revolutionary guise.

Thus the very making of demands on the state "the delivery of memoranda to City Hall, the scheduling of meetings with elected representatives, requests for more adequate municipal services, open critiques of local policy implementation" all take the form of protest, pairing confrontational tactics with more typically reformist strategy.

## Revolts and Social Realities

To label the majority of these uprisings "reformist" is hardly to dismiss them as insignificant. Instead, it offers a realistic assessment of the aims and logic of precarious politics in contemporary South Africa. [\[4\]](#)

Far too many leftists have begun describing increasingly spontaneous uprisings as a coherent revolt against neoliberalism, privatization and the like, failing to distinguish between rare instances of organized anti-capitalist politics on the one hand, and the majority of cases on the other. Very much related to the pitfalls of populism is a tendency of many writers to treat social movements as representative of precarious politics more generally, covering every move of the Unemployed People's Movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, the Landless People's Movement, and

others as representing service delivery protests in general.

If only most actions took the form of such organized and sustained mobilization! Instead, localized instances of sabotage, displays of discontent, and (all too often) engagement with the state must be considered in addition to these more exciting developments.

If a “rebellion of the poor” is what we would like to see transpire, projecting this label onto a present that it does not adequately describe is an illusory move, deceiving ourselves into believing that revolt is already here rather than an aim that must be brought about. It is essential that solidarity be shown not to representations of these movements, but to the movements themselves.

Let me illustrate the point by way of the shock I experienced when I first encountered the Protea South branch of the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) in Soweto last fall. I was familiar with many left academic accounts of this movement, from its inception in 2001 to its role in the formation of the anti-electoralist Poor People’s Alliance a half decade later, popularizing the slogan, “No Land! No House! No Vote!”

Protea South was one of the few active branches in peri-urban areas, and its chairperson Maureen Mnisi seemed especially adept at attracting middle-class sympathy. The neighborhood itself is located on the southern boundary of central Soweto, with proliferating shack settlements just across a dirt road from so-called “bond houses,” meaning the modest homes of those whose incomes are high enough to qualify them for a loan.

In the popular imagery of many of the more militant shack residents, loan recipients stand in for the bourgeois class enemy, though these residents are “privileged” only in the sense of regular access to formal employment. The parallels with Fanon’s privileged proletariat are quite clear:

"In the capitalist countries, the proletariat has nothing to lose and possibly everything to gain. In the colonized countries, the proletariat has everything to lose...These elements make up the most loyal clientele of the nationalist parties and by the privileged position they occupy in the colonial system represent the “bourgeois” fraction of the colonized population." [5]

But the class divisions are not as stark as they immediately appear. In addition to bond houses and shacks, “RDP houses” line the adjacent streets. RDP is a reference to the ANC’s Reconstruction and Development Program of 1994, with redistribution and poverty alleviation a central goal immediately following the transition.

While many of the social welfare underpinnings of the RDP were jettisoned following the passage of the ironically named Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) plan of 1996, the national Department of Human Settlements (formerly Department of Housing) continues to fund a provincially administered housing delivery program. Despite the delivery of more than 2.6 million formal homes since the transition in 1994, the backlog has continued to grow, and the number of shack settlements has increased nearly tenfold over this period. [6]

The irony then is that while these RDP homes reproduce the bourgeois ideal of homeownership, they simultaneously guarantee a legal space for squatting or low-rent shack erection. Behind nearly every RDP house in Protea South, one finds multiple self-built shacks of corrugated sheet metal, thinning tarps, and pressboard. This phenomenon of backyarding (as it is standardly called) is now so common that Cape Town Mayor Patricia de Lille recently proposed installing water taps behind RDP houses for use by backyarders.

It is not just the RDP house/backyarder couplet that complicates the spatial arrangement of the class structure here.

The social background of the recipients of RDP houses is itself quite varied. In interviews conducted in settlements in South Africa's three largest municipalities, I encountered numerous shack residents who claimed to have been on the housing list for thirty years, preceding the demise of apartheid by more than a decade.

While the veracity of these claims cannot be confirmed, just about anyone you talk to in a South African shantytown will scoff at the promise of an RDP home. One squatter in Mitchell's Plain in the Cape Flats told me that she has been on the list for a dozen years, whereas her neighbor, a card-carrying ANC member, was given a house after a mere two.

I heard this type of story too many times to count. Suffice it to say then that the category "RDP residents" is a motley bunch, ranging from unemployed former shack dwellers to formally employed party cadre.

Amidst this complex assortment of formal workers, the precariously employed, informal producers and the altogether unemployed, the LPM had its broadest constituency among shack dwellers annoyed at watching bond house owners guaranteed electricity while they themselves often lacked access to potable water. In late May 2010, several residents burned down a central electricity transformer. As one participant would later tell me, "If we can't get electricity, no one gets electricity."

The Homeowners' Association collected 100 rands (about \$12) from each bond household and used the money to hire vigilantes to take out some of the LPM's key organizers. One such organizer abandoned his shack and took refuge as a backyarder a mile down the road. He later took me to his former shack and showed me the bullet holes lining his front door. Even walking around the neighborhood more than a year after the incident, he insisted on carrying a small knobkierrie.

## Solidarity with What?

A few weeks after the attacks, press releases proliferated, one even eventually making its way onto the most widely circulated blog of the California student movement at the time. [7] This "call for urgent solidarity with the LPM" was of course a movement press release, by definition a slick piece of PR, but even Bay Area insurrectionists seemed to be taking notice, and the LPM started to be discussed as a leading light of the South African left. Admittedly those hyping the organization had little knowledge of its actual politics, but the international solidarity was well intentioned.

It was to my surprise then when the LPM comrade leading me around Protea South told me that the group was all but defunct. Maureen Mnisi, the chapter's long-time chairperson, was running for ward councilor with the DA — a party indisputably to the right of the ANC — and had taken the majority of the membership with her. Since my contact was a longstanding left critic of Mnisi's leadership, I thought he might be putting me on, but as we turned a corner, I saw an election poster plastered onto the side of a shack, complete with DA logo. "See?" he laughed. "I told you!"

As we made our way down the path, rancid water eroding its sides into makeshift gutters, he stopped a woman on the road. "She's LPM," he insisted. She nodded. He then spoke with her briefly before she produced a DA membership card. I asked him how many others had joined the DA. "Only two or three of us stayed out of it," he replied.

This small faction, two of whom were actually elected to a new leadership, attempted to hold LPM meetings, but whenever they would call one, Mnisi would schedule a meeting at the same time, using her power of minor celebrity

and control over the group's financial resources to overpower their opposition.

Other than the fact that these people were landless and a movement, was there anything worth supporting? Would discerning Bay Area leftists, all but sectarian in our local context, support such a group if they knew they were aligned with the openly neoliberal DA?

## Realistic Assessment Needed

The point of this discussion is not to engage in a round of "reformism" accusations, nor to scorn the persistent efforts of those organizations currently speaking what I have called a new grammar of post-apartheid politics. This is important and necessary work, and those critics who would dismiss groups like Abahlali Mjondolo as doing the work of the state miss the point.

Even if certain branches are "merely" demanding access to basic municipal services or durable housing, who would dare fault them for that?

What's required, however, is a realistic assessment of the content of social movement politics in contemporary South Africa, beyond the limited quantitative tallies indicating that this year will be the biggest yet, or that next year will put us x uprisings closer to the revolution. Without this kind of analysis, we might end up cheerleading a bunch of ward councilor meetings and DA affiliates, under the false impression that this constitutes some sort of political novelty worthy of the label "rebellion of the poor."

Indeed, without proper critical engagement with the content of politics, our engagement as members of the internationalist left cannot but constitute cheerleading, and cannot (by definition) supplant this form of limited support. Real solidarity requires genuine engagement with the politics of these movements; the extolling of all poor people's politics as "revolts" is an insult to poor people's politics.

A proper analysis needs to take stock of qualitative developments "in terms of forms of organization, class bases, shifting geographies of struggle, the emergence of new historical blocs, the formulation of programs" and must provide a realistic assessment not as a desperate search for any action whatsoever, but as a longitudinal mapping of the shifting terrain of struggle.

While some analysts would tout 2011 as the year of the greatest number of per capita protests since the demise of apartheid, active organizers "those actually involved in South African social movements" cannot possibly take these claims seriously.

In the wake of the virtual collapse of the Anti-Privatization Forum, the fragmentation of the Anti-Eviction Campaign, and the dissolution of the Landless Peoples Movement, the post-Mbeki left is running on fumes. [8]

Far from cause for withdrawal, such a realistic assessment will enable South African revolutionaries to take proper stock of the prevailing conditions and ready their forces for the battles to come. But counting spontaneous service delivery protests and "Malemaite" populism [9] as indications of a new wave of social movements is mistaking the aftershock for the wave.

From [Against the Current](#).

[1] Toyi-toyi is a protest dance that became a standard part of militant demonstrations during the final decades of apartheid. It involves mock spear jabbing (without an actual weapon) and a distinctive rhythm. These days it is fairly common to see the dance at service delivery protests and mass marches.

[2] Peter Alexander, "Rebellion of the Poor: South Africa's Service Delivery Protests – A Preliminary Analysis," *Review of African Political Economy* 37(123): 25-40 (2010).

[3] Peter Alexander, "Protests and Police Statistics in South Africa: Some Commentary," [Lenin's Tomb \(April 3, 2012\)](#)

[4] I borrow the term "precarious politics" from sociologist Marcel Paret, whose soon-to-be-completed dissertation *Precarious Politics: Citizenship and Class Struggle in the United States and South Africa* addresses questions concerning subproletarian uprisings in a comparative context. For a brilliant autonomist critique, see Franco Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011)

[5] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2004 [1961]): 64.

[6] Kate Tissington, *A Resource Guide to Housing South Africa 1994-2010* (Johannesburg: Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa, 2011): 32-4.

[7] "5 More Members of Landless People's Movement Arrested," [Occupy CA \(June 6, 2010\)](#)

[8] Two key critical participant accounts written during the nadir and peak of this wave, respectively, are Dale McKinley and Ahmed Veriava, *Arresting Dissent: State Repression and Post-Apartheid Social Movements* ([Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2010](#)); and Prishani Naidoo and Ahmed Veriava, *Re-membering Movements: Trade Union Movements and New Social Movements in Neo-liberal South Africa and Mauritius* ([Durban: Centre for Civil Society, 2003](#))

[9] This is a reference to former ANC Youth League President Julius Malema, expelled from the party earlier this year. The bane of the South African media and middle classes (not to mention most ANC officials), Malema led a 5000-person "Economic Freedom" march from Johannesburg to Pretoria in October 2011. Later that evening, he caught a jet to Mauritius for South African real estate mogul David Mabilu's wedding. While a proper study of what I call Malemaite populism remains to be undertaken, one might start with two hackneyed overviews: Joshua Hammer, "A New Crisis in South Africa," *New York Review of Books* (April 26, 2012); and Fiona Forde, *An Inconvenient Youth: Julius Malema and the "New" ANC* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2011). Steven Friedman provides a more generative avenue for such an analysis; see especially his "Avarice Masquerading as the Voice of the Poor," [Business Day \(November 2, 2011\)](#)