

South Africa: Historic rupture or warring brothers again?

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August 1, 2021

Everything we are now is built upon all that we were and where we came from. The same can be said for countries, any analysis has to look backwards before it can begin to understand the influences and causes of the present. This makes analysis intrinsically complex and often, almost impossible. At some point we are forced to simplify, look for patterns and analyse situations with a focus on where the key locus of power lies.

An analysis of the recent events taking place primarily in Kwa-Zulu Natal and Gauteng has to be done with this in mind. It is impossible to follow every strand of the complexity that is South Africa, but at the same time the link between the spate of large scale looting that took place and two very obvious conflicting ruling class power bases that currently exist in the country is undeniable. To claim that there was an exercising of working class power is to fundamentally misunderstand the powers at play and where the locus of power at this point in history actually lies.

By now, it is commonly accepted that the transition to democracy was a half-hearted one that saw the creation of an equal and democratic society on paper only. There was no real transfer of power or economic wealth to the majority. Economic wealth remained in the hands of those that held it under Apartheid, with the exception of a few in the political elite benefiting from the deal made between those able to garner enough votes to control the state and those in control of the economy. What emerged were sponsored politicians and strategically enriched individuals acting as the face of the new South Africa.

Since 1994 the vying for control over this power (and by power we mean control of the state and the economy) has been the hallmark of politics in the country. The structure of the economic and social system has never been in contestation, the ruling party has never, even in its most progressive moments, questioned the economic system underpinning our grossly unequal society. What has been and continues to be a matter of contestation is who in the elite controls it. We saw this playing out right from the beginning; under Nelson Mandela the Reconstruction and Development Programme's (RDP) economic policy was crafted to defend the interests of the capitalist elite. This was further entrenched in Thabo Mbeki's economic policies under Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). As a reward for the loyalty shown by the party to established capital, that same capital made people like Cyril Ramaphosa and his ilk into instant millionaires.

Indeed, one faction in the ANC – now around Ramaphosa – is deeply entwined with established capital, which made its fortunes from the cheap labour of Black workers under Apartheid.

Jacob Zuma's victory in 2007 saw no change to the underlying capitalist economic policies, what changed was who in the capitalist class was providing patronage and who in the party would benefit from this patronage. Ramaphosa's victory in 2017 cut the new Gupta-sponsored ruling state elite centred around Zuma off from this patronage and it is this which lies at the heart of the current events. It is this power struggle, not the power of the working class that has driven these events and that will continue to shape the future if we pretend that this is not the case.

The taking of goods by people from chain-stores, but also small shops in places such as Alexandra, following the initial upheaval instigated by the Zuma faction of the ANC, can only be seen within the above context as representing the attempts of people, systematically impoverished by the system, taking an opportunity and not an exercise of working class power able to shape a new future. The drivers of the events of mid-July were, to paraphrase Karl Marx, the warring brothers of the ruling class and each faction was and is vying to gain from it and for control of the state and the economy. The sections of the working class (workers and the unemployed) that took goods were mostly desperate and hungry, but were acting on individual interest and did so because a small window of opportunity presented itself to take some relief from the daily poverty they face. The government's cancellation of the R350 special COVID-19 grant no doubt added to the desperation and justifiable resentment. As we are already seeing, however, they are now the ones who will pay for the games the two factions of the ruling class are playing.

Indeed, it is undeniable that the Zuma faction set off the events of mid-July. This faction has two strongholds of supporters on the ground: around the migrant hostels that used to be linked to the Inkatha Freedom Party in Gauteng – that are now aligned to Zuma – and areas in KwaZulu-Natal. Besides those strongholds, and importantly for how events unfolded, some leaders in the Zuma faction have been or still are in positions high up in the state, including intelligence structures. These leaders were relying on the presumption that unrest would follow the initial spark lit by their supporters and spread. Indeed, they would have been privy to reports developed within the State Security Agency arguing that widespread unrest could easily erupt due to massive poverty that exists in areas in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, if there was a spark. It is this faction of the ruling class and their supporters that mobilised to start the events and tried to spread the events as far as possible to place pressure on their rivals in the elite. Certainly thousands of people did become involved in the rioting and widespread looting that followed the initial spark, but they were never the political drivers of it; other organised forces in the Zuma faction were.

It is this Zuma faction too that took advantage, as more and more desperate people joined the looting, to then target infrastructure systematically, such as cell phone towers, water infrastructure, and bulk fuel pipelines. In one case, 1.5 million rounds of ammunition were stolen and whoever did it was well organised and had to have extensive knowledge of where and how this ammunition was being stored – these targeted acts were not those of the looting masses. To gloss over the role that the Zuma faction played throughout events, even though thousands of people became involved in the looting who don't back Zuma, is a fundamental mistake. As such, to think that anything that happened in mid-July was the working class exercising some sort of power is wishful thinking at best.

Despite this, there are some commentators on the left who argue that the upheaval that we have witnessed signals an end to post-Apartheid history being defined by intra-ruling class bat-

tles. In essence, they maintain that the events of mid-July were a historic rupture. As part of this, they contend that what we have seen are food riots signalling that sections of the working class are taking their place as the shapers and makers of history.

The problem with this proposition is that, if it were true, it would necessitate a significant section of the working class having a collective vision and praxis that counters that of the current ruling class's visions, ideas and dominance. Indeed, when the working class begins to shape history, and where there have been moments of true rupture, it has never been an individual project, but rather defined by a collective vision and culture that explicitly counters the hegemony of the ideologies emanating from the ruling class. What we witnessed in mid-July was not that – it was rather something quite different.

What we in fact saw was a section (a minority) of a desperate working class that has become fragmented, weakened and damaged by the ideologies that have been pushed by the ruling class. Indeed, we are all indoctrinated and damaged by ideas that define capitalism, nation states and nationalism; the looting and the reactions to it reflect that. This is not to deny that people across South Africa, and those involved in the events in mid-July are not angry – it is clear people are extremely angry with the poverty they live in, the unemployment that exists at intolerable levels, the hunger they face, the routine racism they are subjected to, the sexism and violence they encounter and the shit jobs they work. But anger and even riots, without a counter ideology does not lead to historic ruptures – it never has and it never will.

Capitalism is not merely an economic system, it is a culture and value system and we are all inculcated into it from birth, including the people involved in the looting in mid-July with no explicit links to Zuma. It promotes values and practices that form the worst aspects of human nature – individualism, egocentrism, and rabid competition. It is no accident that among those individuals who are Chief Executive Officers of major corporations, one in five statistically are psychopaths. It is not just the elite that are impacted, individualism has become more and more a feature within the working class. With unemployment nearing 43% and poverty levels at around 49%, the competition to survive among workers and the unemployed is also intense (this does not deny other aspects of human nature such as mutual aid, but rather what the system of capitalism promotes). This competition and individualism – despite some instances of solidarity – defined the looting of mid-July. While people stormed shops en masse, goods were taken on an individual basis to meet individual needs. Competition even existed to the point that dozens of people were stampeded to death in the rush to take goods and in some instances in fights over goods.

While some on the left have highlighted people taking goods from corporate chain stores to argue events had an organic anti-capitalism, what is overlooked was that small stores, traders, mosques, community radio stations and even the premises of the blood donors' association were looted too. In fact, in the areas of Alexandra that were looted, there were few corporate chain stores. Far from being acts of widespread organic anti-capitalism, the taking of goods, at best, represented desperation due to deprivation – but deprivation and desperate acts are not necessarily inherently anti-capitalist.

While society has become increasingly individualised, there is still an innate desire within the human psyche for a sense of belonging and what has arisen to fill that void are forms of nationalisms that serve ruling class interests. At times of true historic ruptures – whether the upheavals of the early 1900s in the United States led by the Industrial Workers of the World, or the anti-apartheid struggle of the late 1970s and early 1980s spearheaded by the Federation of South African Trade Unions, or the Russian Revolution, or the Spanish Revolution – significant sections

of the working class had a culture of its own. A culture forged in struggle over generations that gave people a progressive sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves that was not nationalism and that provided a vision of a fundamentally different world.

Since 1994 the working class culture that had been built through generations of struggle in South Africa was dismantled by the ANC as part of an elite settlement – defined by established capital being allowed to keep its wealth and an elite in the ANC being handed state power in exchange. For that deal to work, working class consciousness, its overt political culture and its organisations had to be broken. Unfortunately, broken and disempowered they were by the ANC and capital through promoting individualism, restructuring the world of work, valorising competition, and demonising worker organising. As the working class fractured under this, aspects of ethno-nationalism and racial nationalism were then revived by sections of the ruling class for their own interests.

In times of crises, and when a working class consciousness and culture is weak, people that are desperate sometimes turn to right-wing ideas and various forms of nationalism for a sense of stability or belonging. The Zuma faction around the ANC has offered alienated and marginalised people, particularly among sections of the population in KwaZulu-Natal, an authoritarian form of nationalism. This nationalism was borrowed from the Inkatha Freedom Party, as its cadres left for the ANC from 1994, and adapted for the Zuma factions' purposes. It has given some people a sense of belonging, even if a warped one that is hostile to any perceived 'other'. This is why Zuma's ethno-nationalism is appealing to some as it provides a home, albeit a very dysfunctional one. That is how it could be used to spark off the looting – even if only on a small-scale initially. It is also why the looting was contained to specific areas of the country. This could only happen successfully because of the void of progressive politics that has come to exist within the working class.

The mobilisation by some in previously segregated White and Indian areas against the looting, took place with an underlying racial identity and were undoubtedly driven by a long history of right-wing ideas that Apartheid promoted. Vigilante groups soon sprung up to protect property, and no doubt many involved, due to years of indoctrination, thought the spectre of the 'swart gevaar' (an Afrikaans term meaning "black danger" and used during Apartheid period) and the day of reckoning had arrived. In particular, vigilante groups in suburban areas in KwaZulu-Natal outwardly demonstrated the internal racism they had been indoctrinated into under Apartheid when they prevented people of other races, who were clearly not part of the looting, entering into 'their' areas and even killing people. The same can be said for areas that are predominantly Indian, where a section of these communities, some reportedly linked to gangsterism, formed vigilante groups. Again, in the absence of a progressive working class culture, rallying around racial identities and right-wing ideologies in the face of simultaneously being subjected to individualism becomes a defining feature of times of crises and mid-July showed it.

The faction around Ramaphosa, however, have also used nationalism in this crisis to deny class differences. In the aftermath of the looting, the notion that we are all South Africans and are in this together despite class, has been a rallying cry of this faction and their capitalist allies – despite them simultaneously promoting individualism when it suits them. In doing so, the Ramaphosa faction has used this form of 'soft' nationalism to try ensure that the status quo does not become questioned on a widespread scale, and that there is not a genuine re-awakening of class consciousness among the working class. To a large degree it has worked – it was why some workers defended their bosses' property.

Another telling feature of how deeply indoctrinated we have all become could also, ironically, be seen in the hope, by some of the left and some liberals, that this would finally spur the state to truly assist the poor. It has become completely unimaginable to most people that society could be organised without the state and without rulers. Yet states are new constructs in historical terms. For the vast history of modern humans – 200,000 years of it – society was organised without states. States only arose 5000 years ago and it was not until the 1950s that all territories in the world came under the control of states. In fact, states only arose when class domination by elites arose – and their purpose from that day until now was and is to protect the interests of the ruling class. This is done through ideology and when that fails, organised violence in terms of the police and military.

Of course states do provide some essential services, but the reality is that it was only in the 1800s and early 1900s that they were forced to do so in a period of unprecedented revolutionary upheaval driven by significant sections of the working class that had built a consciousness and counter-culture. We have lost sight of the fact that states do not rule in the interest of the working class, and due to their hierarchical structure they never will. This indoctrination has led most people to have a misguided hope that the very same state that has played a major role in driving people deeper into poverty in South Africa will somehow be the solution. That myth should have been put to bed when the state ruthlessly mobilised to raid homes and reclaim looted goods (and other goods that were not even looted) in order to destroy them to keep market prices high – yet due to indoctrination the myth won't be ended until the working class begins to build its own ideological counter-culture.

The manner in which the events of the past few weeks played themselves out, initiated by the vested interests of a particular faction of the ruling class spurred by ethnic nationalism and defined by people looting for individual purposes, many out of desperation, cannot be seen as a progressive historical rupture. It should rather be seen as a wake-up call to try and rebuild a movement based overtly on class consciousness, that has a new vision of a future beyond capitalism and the nation-state and that aims to build a progressive working class counter-culture defined by a belief system and daily praxis that counters the ideologies fostered from above by the ruling class – individualism, competition, and simultaneously warped collective identities that serve interests of wealthy politicians. To do so will require bringing the more progressive aspects of human nature to the fore through building a working class counter-culture defined by values and practices such as direct democracy, accountability, mutual aid, solidarity and love.

If that can be done, and if progressive struggles can grow and deepen consciously, then that would open up the possibility of a real rupture. Then instead of individual looting that was initially stoked by a faction of the ruling class for their own interests, it would become possible to collectively mobilise for the collectivization of the means of production, the democratic distribution of goods based on need, an end to private and state owned property, the re-introduction of commons and the creation of a truly democratic system based on direct democracy that is not a nation-state.

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