

Andries Tatane: Murdered by the Ruling Classes

Shawn Hattingh

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On the 13th April, people in South Africa were stunned. On the evening news the sight of six police force members brutally beating a man, Andries Tatane, to death was aired. The images of the police smashing his body with batons and repeatedly firing rubber bullets into his chest struck a cord; people were simply shocked and appalled. Literally hundreds of articles followed in the press, politicians of all stripes also hopped on the bandwagon and said they lamented his death; and most called for the police to receive appropriate training to deal with ‘crowd control’ – after all, elections are a month away.

Andries Tatane’s death was the culmination of a protest march in the Free State town of Ficksburg. The march involved over 4,000 people, who undertook the action to demand the very basics of life – decent housing, access to water and electricity, and jobs. They had repeatedly written to the mayor and local government of Ficksburg pleading for these necessities. Like a group of modern day Marie Antoinettes, the local state officials brushed off these pleas; more important matters no doubt needed to be attended to – like shopping for luxury cars; banking the latest fat pay check; handing tenders out to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) connections and talking shit in the municipal chambers. Therefore, when the township residents had the audacity to march, and call for a response, the police were promptly unleashed with water cannons and rubber bullets. If the impoverished black residents of Ficksburg could not get the hint, in the form of silence; then the state and local politicians were going to ensure that they got the message beaten into them.

The reason why specifically Andries Tatane was murdered was because he had the cheek, in the eyes of the officials involved, to question police force members about why they were firing a water cannon at an elderly person – who clearly was not a threat to the burly brutes that make up South Africa’s arm of the law. For that act of decency, he paid dearly: with his life. The message was clear – how dare anyone question the authority of the state and its right to use force wherever and whenever it deems necessary.

A war on protestors

The sad reality though is that Andries Tatane’s murder at the hands of the state did not represent something new or even an isolated incident. For years, the South African state has been treating people that have embarked on protests with brute force and utter contempt. Activists from community based movements – such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), Abahlali baseMjondolo (ABM), Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) and Landless People’s Movement (LPM) have routinely been harassed by the state, arrested and beaten. For instance, on the day of the elections in 2004, LPM members were tortured by the police in Soweto. Some activists have also been subjected to attacks by vigilante groupings; to which the state and the police have often turned a blind eye. In reality, the state views community based movements as enemies and when they protest the state often dishes out violence. The fact that the vast majority of community based protests are peaceful, usually involving little more than people blockading a road and burning old tires, does not deter them.

Andries Tatane’s awful death, for standing up for what he believed, was also by no means the first at the hands of the South African state. Numerous people involved in community protests, much like the one in Ficksburg, have been murdered by police officials. As recently as February, protests erupted in the town of Ermelo; situated in one of South Africa’s poorest provinces –

Mpumulanga. The people involved were demanding the exact same basic necessities as the Ficksburg protestors. The state did not respond by listening or engaging the people, but rather sent 160 riot police, euphemistically named the Tactical Response Team (TRT), to end the protests. The country's Police Commissioner, General Cele; personally warned the Ermelo protestors and organizers that the TRT was going to restore 'order'. In the process, two people were shot dead by the police and 120 more were arrested. Raids were conducted throughout impoverished areas – due to the legacy of apartheid, residents in these areas are mainly or exclusively black – and, as part of this, an 80 year old woman was detained. An illegal curfew was also implemented by the police and anyone on the street was automatically shot at with rubber bullets. Indiscriminate violence by the police reportedly became the order of the day. In one incident, captured on a cellphone camera, a teenager was called out of a shop by a group of policemen. When he approached their car, he was repeatedly shot at with rubber bullets and forced to roll down the street as 'punishment'. Other people were also reportedly whipped by the police with sjamboks – the imagery of colonial and apartheid style punishment no doubt being deliberate. People were literally driven off the streets by state organised terror. The bitter reality, however, is that Emerlo and Ficksburg were simply microcosms of how the state routinely dishes out violence towards those that it views as a threat: in 2010 alone 1,769 people died as a result of police action or in police custody. Sadly, Andries Tatane will become part of these statistics.

Sinister interrogation processes have also accompanied the outright violence that the state has directed towards protestors. In the case of the Ermelo protests, a person who the state accused of being one of the organisers, Bongani Phakathi, was interrogated for 14 hours by the crack Hawks unit. Amongst other things, he was questioned about whether there were funders behind the protest. The questions asked to Phakathi reveal the level of paranoia that the state has shown around the ever-growing community protests. In fact, the state has repeatedly claimed that there has been a sinister 'third force' behind the wave of protests. To supposedly uncover this 'third force' and to intimidate people, the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) has been unleashed on communities over the last few years. In the process, many people have been arrested, interrogated and some have even been charged with sedition. For example in 2006, 13 people were charged with sedition in the small town of Harrismith because they were involved in a community protest. Almost all, however, have been released for a lack of real evidence and in the end the state was forced to drop the sedition charges. Nonetheless, the South African state's goal of intimidating people is clear. What has also become patently clear is that there is no 'third force'; the claims about a 'third force' are simply being used to 'legitimise' the use of intelligence agencies against people. The only 'third force' driving the protests are the conditions that people are being forced to live under – it is sadly not an exaggeration to say the dogs that guard the property of the rich, and that are used by the police, live under better conditions than the poor in South Africa.

It is also clear that police force members, who are the foot soldiers of the state, are taking their cue from leading state officials and politicians – whether tied to the Democratic Alliance (DA) or the African National Congress (ANC). The likes of General Cele has encouraged the police to "shoot to kill" if they feel threatened. The ANC, DA and Congress of the People (COPE) have more than once branded people embarking on protests as criminals that need to be dealt with. Even sections within the country's trade union leadership, and some 'leftists' associated with them, have at times called community protestors and activists thugs. Despite uttering regrets about Andries Tatane's murder, politicians have also continued to say that protestors need to be subjected to effective 'crowd control'. Likewise, police officials stated that anyone who "taunts"

the police, despite the death of Tatane, must still be dealt with. The fact that those in the state believe that they have a right to 'control' people and 'deal with them' speaks volumes about their oppressive worldview. In response to a wave of protests in 2009, the Cabinet also released a wrath of statements including one saying:

“The action that we will be taking is that those who organise these marches, those who openly perpetuate and promote violent action, the state will start acting against those individuals”

The Cabinet's and the state's message was clear: it was saying to the poor: protest and the state will come for you, isolate you and crush you. Such thuggish statements have become common on the lips of South African state officials. It is in this context that Andries Tatane was killed.

The way the current state views and deals with community protestors also has remarkable similarity, and continuity, with the practices of the apartheid state – despite the state being in the hands of a supposed black nationalist liberation movement – the ANC. Besides apartheid-style brutality, the post-apartheid state still makes use of apartheid laws to deal with protests. Under these laws, anyone wanting to protest has to apply 7 days in advance. Linked to this, the state can refuse permission on a number of grounds. If permission is not granted then any protest involving more than 15 people is deemed illegal. The state is then 'free', according to its own laws, to arrest or take action – a euphemism for firing rubber bullets – against the people involved. Freedom of expression is hollow under such circumstances. With such practices it is also no wonder that the South African state is attempting to pass laws that would allow it to classify vast amounts of information that would stop any public scrutiny of its practices, abuses and short-comings. The state is not an entity of the people; it is an entity of oppression.

The wider war

Of course, the suppression of protestors, such as Andries Tatane, is merely the outward sign of a larger and more intense war that the elite in South Africa have been waging on the majority of people. In fact, the elite, through capitalism, have been exploiting people through wage slavery; stripping people of their jobs to increase profits; turning houses into a commodity; stripping peoples' access to water to make profits; denying people without money access to food; and cutting people's electricity when they are too poor to pay. For years people have, therefore, been robbed by the rich and state officials. As such, the elite – made up of white capitalists but now joined by a small black elite centred mainly around the state and ANC – have forced the vast majority of people in South Africa to live in misery. Indeed, the elite in South Africa has created and entrenched a society that is defined by continued exploitation of the poor and workers; that is defined by continued racial oppression of the majority of workers and the poor, and that is defined by extreme sexism. The rich and state officials (the ruling classes) have grown rich and fat out of this situation – living off the blood, sweat and cheap labour of the, predominantly black, workers and the poor. It is for this reason that the rich and politicians have come to enjoy one of the highest living standards in the world. They enjoy lavish houses, serving staff, massive pay checks – lifestyles that even the royalty of old could only dream of. Thus, it should not be surprising that South Africa is statically the most unequal society in the world – it was and is designed by the ruling classes to be so: their wealth and power is based on it!

The state is war

It is this extreme inequality and deprivation — and accompanying experience of exploitation, oppression and humiliation — that drives people, including Andries Tatane, to protest. While we should rightfully be appalled by the death of Andries Tatane, and other people embarking on protests, at the hands of the state; we should, however, not be surprised. The state is the ultimate protector of the unjust and unequal society we have. If the status quo is even remotely threatened or questioned, the purpose of the state is to neutralise the threat and/or silence or co-opt it.

In fact, anarchists have long pointed out that states, of whatever variety, are inherently oppressive and violent. States are centralising and hierarchical institutions, which exist to enforce a situation whereby a minority rules over a majority. The hierarchical structure of all states also inevitably concentrates power in the hands of the directing elite. States and the existence of an elite are, therefore, synonymous. States are the concentrated power of the ruling class — made up of both capitalists and high ranking state officials — and are a central pillar of ruling class power. Thus, the state serves dominant minorities and by definition it has to be centralised, since a minority can only rule when power is concentrated in their hands and when decisions made by them flow down a chain of command. It is specifically this that allows minorities who seek to rule people (high ranking state officials) and exploit people (capitalists) to achieve their aims.

The fact that the state is an oppressive and hierarchical system, which operates to protect and entrench the privileged positions of the ruling class, has also resulted in the continuation of the racial oppression of the vast majority of the working class (workers and the poor) in South Africa. The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin foresaw the possibility of such a situation arising in cases where national liberation was based upon the strategy of capturing state power — as has happened in South Africa. Indeed, Bakunin said that the “statist path” was “entirely ruinous for the great masses of the people” because it did not abolish class power but simply changed the make-up of the ruling class. Due to the centralised nature of states, only a few can rule — a majority of people can never be involved in decision making under a state system as it is hierarchical. As such, he stated that if the national liberation struggle was carried out with “ambitious intent to set up a powerful state”, or if “it is carried out without the people and must therefore depend for success on a privileged class” it would become a “retrogressive, disastrous, counter-revolutionary movement”. Over and above this he stressed that national liberation and the end to all forms of oppression, including that of race, had to be achieved “as much in the economic as in the political interests of the masses”. Through their position in the ruling class (based on their control of the state), the black elite have escaped the effects of racial oppression and have become oppressors themselves (their power over the state at times has even been used by them, for their own interests, against other sections of the ruling class like racist white capitalists), but racial oppression for the majority of the working class continues. The privileged position of the black ruling elite — like their white capitalist counterparts — is based on the continued oppression of black workers, who have been and are deliberately relegated by the state and capitalism in South Africa to the role of extremely cheap labour. Thus, although the working class in South Africa includes white people, the main source of wealth for the white and black ruling elite depends on the exploitation of the black working class as a source of super cheap labour. It is this combination of racial oppression and exploitation on which the wealth of the elite rests. Thus, when the state and capitalism remained intact in South Africa, after apartheid, the continued exploitation of the working class and racial oppression of the majority of impoverished people were assured. It is

this situation that has created the conditions that have led to the protests in townships in places like Ficksburg and Ermelo, and it is this situation that has assured that they will continue.

Indeed, the oppression and exploitation of the majority of people will, and does, happen even under a parliamentary system. This is because even in a parliamentary system a handful of people get to make decisions, instruct others what to do, and enforce these instructions through the state. When people don't obey these top-down instructions or disagree with them, the power of the state is then used to coerce and/ or punish them. Thus, the state as a centralised mechanism of ruling class power also claims a monopoly of legitimate force within 'its' territory; and will use that force when it deems necessary – including against protestors raising issues like a lack of jobs, a lack of housing and a lack of basic services. It is this violent, oppressive and domineering nature of all states that have led anarchists, rightfully, to see them as the antithesis of freedom. The brutal reality is that protestors in South Africa, like Andries Tatane – demanding a decent life and greater democracy – have ended up victims of the mechanism of centralised minority rule: the state. In terms of trying to silence protestors – whether by baton, water cannon, rubber bullets or live ammunition – the South African state has also been carrying out one of the main tasks it was designed for: organised violence.

Conclusion

The fact is that capitalism and the state systems are one of the key reasons why South Africa is the most unequal society in the world. The state entrenches and enforces this status quo: a status quo based on the exploitation and oppression of the vast majority of people; made up of the workers and the poor. Andries Tatane too was a victim of this system. Indeed, for as long as capitalism and the state exist; inequality will exist and people will be forced to live in misery. When they raise issues and protest; the state will try to silence them either by co-option or violence or a combination of both. The fact also is that for as long as the state and capitalism continue to exist there will be thousands upon thousands of Andries Tatanes, Ernesto Nhamuaves, Steve Bikos and Hector Pieterse. The state and capitalism, to paraphrase Bakunin, are in combination a vast slaughterhouse and cemetery – sometimes killing workers and the poor suddenly and openly; sometimes killing them silently and slowly.

For as long as the state and capitalism are in place people will also be driven to protest against the oppression, exploitation and inequalities that are generated by, and that are part and parcel of, these systems. If people want a just, fair, equal, genuinely democratic, non-racist, non-sexist and decent society then capitalism and the state systems need to be ended. Certainly, people should demand and organise to win immediate gains like jobs, better wages, housing and services from the state and capitalists; but ultimately for as long as these systems of class rule exist; domination, inequality, and oppression will exist. Thus if genuine material equality is to be achieved, people are going to need to organise to take direct control of the economy, and run it democratically, for the benefit of all and to meet the needs of all. Only under such circumstances will the poverty, which has been driving people like Andries Tatane to protest, be ended. Only under such a system will racial oppression too be ended. Likewise, if people want a genuine democracy and a say over their lives, and not to have their concerns dismissed, then people are going to have to get rid of the state and replace it with a form of people's power based on structures of self-governance like federated community/worker assemblies and federated councils at regional, national and

international levels. There have been historical experiments, although on a limited scale, with such structures of direct democracy including in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle. We need to learn from these. In fact, if we want to ensure that there will be no Andries Tantes in the future we need to revive the best practices of Peoples' Power and build towards achieving a free and egalitarian world: a world based on the principles that have become known, through a 150 year struggle for justice, as anarchist-communism.

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