

The Elite and Community Protests in South Africa

An anarchist analysis of the rebellions sweeping South Africa

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Over the last few weeks in South Africa, community protests and land occupations have once again erupted. People are simply infuriated at continuously being ignored and treated as subhuman by the state and the elite, and for this reason they have been taking to the streets. While barricades have literally been spreading from township to township, politicians of every sway – from the DA to the ANC – have been condemning these protests. Along with thinly veiled threats, politicians have also branded the people involved as criminals. Not to be outdone, a number of business and conservative church leaders have formed a 25 person council to work with the government to end the protests through embarking on a ‘moral regeneration’ campaign. The fact that the elite have branded the protestors as evil and in need of moral regeneration should come as no surprise. This is because the elite have a deep-seated contempt for the vast majority of people. In fact, they have been waging an ideological, economic and physical war on the majority of people for years through neo-liberalism. Indeed, the only reason why the elite are now so upset by the community protests and land occupations is because they have realised that they are now beginning to reap the whirlwind of this war.

Scorn and the war on the poor

It is not surprising that people in South Africa are so angry. They have been the target of the elites’ war for years. In fact, the elite in South Africa have truly relished the war that they have waged on the poor. Freed from the status of apartheid pariahs, they have arrogantly attacked workers and the poor with a new found swagger. As part of this, the elite have systematically driven workers’ wages down. Behind the veil of their well manicured suits, most of the corporate elite still also view workers through extremely racist and patriarchal lenses. From their point of view, most workers are insignificant ‘others’. The onslaught on workers has also seen millions of people being retrenched. Bosses want fewer and fewer workers so that they can make more and more money. Thus, workers are also coldly viewed as costly inputs that need to be reduced. The consequences: 40% of South Africans are unemployed. To make matters worse, under the current system, it is likely that most of these unemployed people will never be formally employed again in their lifetimes.

The elite have not been content with just waging a war on workers and forcing people into unemployment, but have literally attacked all township residents by snatching up the few commons that exist. As part of this, vast sections of the public service sector has been privatised and handed over to the local and global elite to profiteer from. This has seen the elite selling basic services, such as water and healthcare, in order to make a fortune. Even when public services are not fully privatised, they have been commercialised by the state. This means that the state runs the remaining ‘publicly’ owned services to maximise profits. The poor and unemployed who can’t afford what corporations or the state now charge for these services are viewed as bad apples and simply cut-off. In fact, over 10 million people have had their water or electricity cut in South Africa since 1996.

Even when services are actually provided to townships, these are of an appalling standard. This is due to the reality that the elite view township residents as being little better than animals. Indeed, ANC officials have even admitted that they view providing services to the poor as a burden. It is partially for this reason that the ANC government dramatically reduced funding for public services in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Consequently, most townships are still defined by

raw sewerage running down the streets and uncollected rubbish blowing in the wind. Certainly, the maintenance of infrastructure or providing refuse removal in the townships is not viewed as a priority by the elite. In these conditions, diseases such [as] tuberculosis have become rife and cholera outbreaks have occurred at regular intervals.

A similar story of ruthless exploitation and disdain is also evident in how the elite have come to view housing provision. Since the early 1980s there has been a growing commercialisation of township housing. Banks have been given free reign in the township housing market and they have made a fortune out of it. When people have defaulted on their loans, these banks have evicted them without mercy. Similarly, corporations have also been contracted to build the associated housing projects. In order to maximise profits, these companies have literally taken short-cuts. Most of the houses that have been built consist of only one or two rooms. Added to this, the walls in these houses often crack because they lack proper foundations. When people have used the state's formal channels to lodge complaints about this, they have usually been dismissed with contempt.

As part of the economic war on the poor, South Africa's inner cities have also undergone a process of gentrification. This has seen hundreds of thousands of people being evicted from buildings and shacks in or near city centres, and then dumped kilometres away in the veld. Indeed, the people involved are often evicted violently by private security forces known as the 'red ants'. On being dumped, the evicted people are usually only given a few sheets of steel to build a shack. This is what, in the lexicon of the South African law system, passes itself off as adequate alternative accommodation. In most instances the land that people have been evicted from is sold off to developers. These developers then build trendy loft apartments or town houses for the latest wave of yuppies wanting to experience inner-city life.

The countryside too has not been exempt from the war. Over 80% of the land in South Africa is still owned by the white elite – meaning that little has changed since the supposed end of apartheid. Many white farmers have also unleashed a savage onslaught on farm workers. In fact, since 1994 over 1 million farm workers have been fired and evicted from the farms that they used to work on. In addition, racist attacks by farmers on farm workers have also continued. In the most extreme cases workers have even been dragged to death behind farmers' cars.

It is due to the elite's ideological and economic war on the poor that South Africa is now the most unequal society in the world. The white population still holds the vast majority of wealth. As part of this, the traditional swish white suburbs still receive outstanding public services, while the traditionally under-resourced dilapidated black townships receive an appalling standard of service. Likewise, CEOs reward themselves handsomely at the expense of workers. This has seen the average wage gap between CEOs and workers in South Africa grow to the region of 700:1. When the poor complain about such issues, they are told by the local political elite to be patient, and in practice ignored. Under such circumstances, most people are still forced to live in abject poverty, they have their few rights trampled everyday, and they are subjected to subtle and overt forms of racial abuse on an almost daily basis. It is, therefore, little wonder that people are furious and embarking on protests

The states' war on protests

The recent protests, however, are not a new development. From the earliest days of neo-liberalism in South Africa people have resisted. Indeed, from as far back as the mid-1990s community protests against poor housing, unemployment, and water and electricity cut-offs have occurred. Similarly, landless people have claimed land through direct action, and people have also resisted evictions. The response of the state has also been consistent over this period. The state elite have simply dismissed the protestors' demands and/or dealt with the protestors harshly. The state elite have even regularly unleashed the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) to quell these protests or to seek out mysterious 'third forces'. Likewise, whenever a community protest has occurred the police have responded immediately. Their favourite weapons for putting down protests have been tear gas, rubber bullets and even live ammunition. Underpinning this state repression has been the fact that the government has also continued to make use of apartheid era laws when dealing with demonstrations. Under these laws, any type of protest involving more than 15 people has to go through a lengthy application process otherwise it is deemed illegal. It has been this piece of law that the state has used in suppressing community protests and land occupations. In fact, thousands of people have been arrested under this law in the post-apartheid period. With the recent protests, we have once again witnessed the state elite using such mechanisms in an attempt to crush the communities involved. In fact, the state and the elite are fighting a physical war on the poor.

The events that occurred during the recent protests in the Gauteng township of Thembisa highlight these repressive tactics that are used by the state. The people of Thembisa organised themselves last year to demand decent housing, water, electricity and work. In November, the community took these demands to the local councillor. As happens in most South African townships, the local councillor arrogantly dismissed their demands. In July this year, the community then mobilised and organised a peaceful march to the mayor's office where they put the same demands forward and also called for the local councillor to be removed from office. Weeks later, they had still not received any response from the mayor. Clearly, the mayor had simply ignored them. On the 18th of July, the community then got wind that the local councillor was at a nearby school spending public money on a party to celebrate Nelson Mandela's birthday. The community decided to go to the event and demand the councillor's resignation and effective service delivery. The police, however, stopped the protestors confronting the councillor and a clash between them and the community ensued. With this, the police opened fire with live ammunition and two of the protestors were killed. The police then followed this up by unleashing an operation in the township to find the 'ringleaders'. Two people were eventually arrested and charged with public violence. Clearly, the two people arrested were being used as examples in order to intimidate the community.

The actions of the police during the recent protests, such as those that occurred in Thembisa, have been sanctioned at the highest levels of the state. Various Ministers and politicians have called on the police to crush the protests without mercy. Indeed, the President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, called for even more arrests and said the 'instigators' of community protests must be dealt with harshly. Added to this, the NIA has once again been unleashed and a special task team has been established to investigate the causes of the protests. Clearly, a new round of arrests and repression is in the offing.

The protests and the left

Many of the people involved with the authoritarian left, like the elite, have also taken a very dim view of community protests. In the past, the South African Communist Party (SACP) has repeatedly condemned community protests. For example, the SACP's General-Secretary has often labelled the actions of community based organisations – such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), Abahlali baseMjondolo (ABM), and the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) – as “irresponsible” and “infantile”. Similarly, in the past, the COSATU leadership have also actively prevented and deterred workers from linking up with community struggles and protests. A similar story has unfolded during the current protests. Notably, the largest union in COSATU, the NUM, condemned the destruction of private and public property that accompanied the current protests. They also said that instead of protesting, people should use the proper channels to have their grievances heard, such as phoning the government's call centre – the ‘Presidential Hotline’. Clearly, the union bureaucrats don't seem to realise that the official channels don't listen and don't care. In addition, the ‘Presidential Hotline’ that the NUM are encouraging people to call is not even up and running yet. Clearly the union bureaucracy has lost touch with reality. Over and above this, the real reason why elements amongst the SACP and COSATU condemn community protests is because they see them as a threat. This is due to the fact that they are not in control of them, and can't impose their will on them.

In the past other elements of the authoritarian left, however, have tried to tap into the sentiments that have driven community protests. Under this, these elements have tried to create their own organisations, which have taken up some of the issues raised by protests such as unemployment. In fact, they do this instead of offering genuine support to community movements. This authoritarian left has then controlled the organisations they created tightly. The end result, naturally, was that these became highly authoritarian and undemocratic organisations. The result has been that most of these organisations collapsed, and many of the activists involved – who were treated as mere foot soldiers – have become as disillusioned with the left, as they are disillusioned with the elite.

Over the last decade, however, some of the protests that have occurred have led to a number of genuine community organisations forming. As such, past protests have been sights of self-organisation and self-education. For this reason alone past protests have been highly important. A similar story of self-organisation – outside the influence of any union, NGO or political party – is once again taking place in the current protests. Indeed, it is likely that one or two new organisations could emerge from the current protests. It is this self-organisation that carries great potential. Added to this, a process of self-education is also evident in the current protests. Many people involved in the current wave of protests have also explicitly stated that they have come to realise that direct action, like blockading roads, is the best way to get a response from the authorities. The people involved have also started to articulate their desire for a more participatory society, where their views and grievances are not squashed by the elite. Hopefully, this desire will also begin to extend towards creating self-managed, non-hierarchical and participatory organisations that are pre-figurative of a better society. It is in this context that anarchists and libertarian socialists, who are involved or linked to the protests, can also make a huge contribution. Unlike the authoritarian left – who wish to capture and dominate organisations emerging from protests – this contribution could revolve around sharing our visions and ideas around a free, non-hierarchical, and self-managed society: a society which is the antithesis of the oppres-

sive one we are currently forced to live in. Indeed, libertarian socialists could also play a role in sharing ideas about how we could possibly get to such a society, and how the means and the ends should be compatible. In fact, the ideas associated with libertarian socialism and anarchism can make a massive contribution to the new struggles that are emerging in South Africa, as these ideas were themselves born in struggle.

Conclusion

The actions of the elite, defined by their attack on the poor, have created the environment in which the current wave of protests has occurred. Indeed, it has been the attack by the corporate and state elite on the poor that has led to peoples' anger. In fact, the elite have literally driven people deeper and deeper into poverty, and then condescendingly blamed the people for their poverty. It is also the elites' failure to even acknowledge peoples' demands, and to continuously treat people with utter disdain, that has driven the current protests. Nonetheless, despite the elites' violent repression, these protests will continue. Hopefully, these protests will strengthen existing community organisations and perhaps even lead to newer ones being formed. Certainly, anarchists and libertarian socialists involved or linked to the current protests could play an important role in this. Already, certain ideas associated with libertarian socialism have come to play key roles in the current protests, such as direct action. In this context, other ideas of libertarian socialism, such as community and worker self-management, could also come to play a vital function, as clearly the people involved in the protests want a more participatory society. It is this desire for a more participatory society that could also lead to organisations becoming pre-figurative. In this context, the vision of libertarian socialism could make a huge contribution towards challenging the current system, which is defined by neo-liberalism, state repression, extreme racism, extreme exploitation, patriarchy, and all manner of other hierarchies. Hopefully, the community protests that we have been witnessing are also the start of a road to a better world that is created by workers and the poor themselves. Such a world would hopefully be a world where there are no bosses; where hierarchies don't exist; where workers and communities manage themselves, and where the economy is collectively planned through assemblies for the benefit of everyone.

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