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South Africa. ANC Attacks Shack Dwellers Movements

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ANTI EVICTION CAMPAIGN

W E S T E R N C A P E

On September 26th , a gang of forty armed men attacked the Kennedy Road shack-dweller community, an informal settlement in Durban, South Africa's second largest city. During the attacks, they killed four, displaced more than a thousand residents and torched homes. Facing death threats, leading members of the shack-dwellers' organization, Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM – literally "Shack Dwellers' Movement") on Kennedy Road are now living underground.

The gang was organized by local and regional African National Congress (ANC) leaders, with support of the local police. When called, police arrested not the ANC attackers but 13 members of Kennedy Road Development Committee, AbM's local affiliate. Although six detainees have since been granted bail, five languish in jail. During court hearings, local ANC activists mobilized, demanding the judge deny bail and threatening AbM supporters inside the court. International support for the remaining prisoners is urgently needed for the next round of bail hearings set for mid-January 2010.

The roots of the present attacks date are complex but go back to the early years after the collapse of apartheid, in the broken promises and dashed hopes which have grown since 1994, the disillusionment with what is known in South African circles as "the gravy train" – personal enrichment and corruption - and the ANC's " Big Sell Out."

Under apartheid, the ANC was always ambiguous about its ultimate goals. In large part, this was a result of the unspoken division of labor in the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) alliance that was the backbone of the anti-apartheid struggle. The South African revolution was supposed to unfold in two stages. The ANC would lead the “democratic” revolution against apartheid and the SACP would then step in and guide the revolution to the socialism that would follow.

But in 1996, the ANC dropped any hints of adopting the developmentalist Keynesianism policy many assumed it would implement. In its place, the ANC embraced the IMF-brokered Growth Employment And Redistribution (GEAR), although South Africa was not facing any default and in fact had low external debt. Despite its title, GEAR had little to do with income distribution and better conditions for the poor and unemployed. Instead, GEAR led to massive job loss and poverty because in reality it was a structural adjustment program intended to make South Africa more attractive for foreign investment.

These job losses weakened trade union power, making the unions more dependent on alliances with the governing party. The sort of extra-union shop-floor movements of the 1980s, like those in the auto factories of Port Elizabeth where workers burned effigies of “sell out” union officials and carried mock cardboard rifles on the assembly line to point at supervisors, are all but gone. While strikes still take place, some quite militant, and at higher levels than in many other countries, these strikes are increasingly more defensive than offensive, reflecting the changed balance in forces.

Because of these trends, living standards for the poor and working class have plummeted since GEAR. As an article in Pambazuka News sums up the current situation, “Levels of human development are now lower than in 1994, and South Africa has overtaken Brazil as the country with the widest gap between rich and poor.” But while many ordinary people barely survived, many ANC leaders by contrast became millionaires in the process. It wasn’t uncommon in the “new” South Africa for a former comrade, now older and jobless with no realistic prospects of ever landing one, to see other former comrades drive by in Mercedes. What Michael Neocosmos calls “the sequence of elite construction,” with a native South African black bourgeoisie, and represented most clearly under the Mbeki regime, in fact has been openly underway for some time. The recent election of Jacob Zuma and the split within the ANC, which led to Mbeki’s decamping with a significant minority to form a rival party, doesn’t so much signal a fundamental shift in direction as it does an in-house falling out over how best to carve out future spoils and what strategy to follow if discontent or expectations rise too quickly.

Since the mid-2000s though, small but significant struggles have cropped up, struggles involving those living in substandard housing and working, if at all, precariously in the informal economy and fighting against privatization, evictions, water-collection and electricity turn-offs. These community-oriented struggles are based in the “illegal” settlements which are mushroom in and around major cities and sections of the countryside because of South Africa’s ongoing housing crisis. Loosely linked together in the Poor People’s Alliance, movements like AbM, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Landless People’s Movement, and Abahali baseplasini (Rural Network), have taken direct action against government policy and official neglect. The movements have used tactics like:

- Going behind government workers removing water meters (needed for both running water and billing) because of non-payment and replacing meters with pipes that not only supply water but are harder to remove.
- Successfully defying evictions by surrounding shacks with other residents, thus keeping the authorities from evicting families. Creating diversions during evictions like setting cars on fire in nearby streets to divert police. If evictions take place, moving families back in as soon as possible.
- Keeping officials from confiscating residents’ possessions to pay off debts owed to children’s schools.

- Refusing participation in party politics and using mass assemblies to decide actions and policies. For example, groups organized boycotts in recent elections under the slogan, “No Land, No House, No Vote.”
- During anti-foreigner attacks on African immigrants in the townships last year, groups like the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign quickly set up street committees composed half of immigrants and half of native born, successfully defusing potential violence.

These movements refuse to wait for government action or ask permission – there are already lofty phrases guaranteeing decent housing and stable employment embedded in the Constitution and never enforced – but instead take whatever steps are needed for what they call “the right to live.” As someone active in the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign put it, “these are things our ancestors struggled and died for to win. Rightfully, they belong to us.”

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH300/Joburg_Solidarity-d0187.jpg

In response to these small but increasing numbers of “no-go” areas effectively out of government control, the ANC has repeatedly denounced a “culture of non-payment,” “criminal elements” and “ultra-leftists” and at times brutally intervened. For example in 2007, police fired rubber and live bullets on demonstrators during a housing protest in Protea South in Gauteng. A reporter for a Durban newspaper investigating police attacks on Pinetown shack-dwellers the same year was kidnapped and severely beaten. In other instances, the ANC has used “the carrot”: co-opting “leaders” with grants and patronage positions in the local party hierarchy and drawing independent organizations into the NGO orbit as junior consulting parties representing “civil society” to the state.

But the ferociousness of recent attacks on shack dweller movements may signal a shift in current government policy. As one observer writing after the Pemary Ridge incidents points out, “It is an expression of a particular form of state politics akin to the politics of colonialism and apartheid, where a certain section of the community is considered the enemy.”

Repression then may be intentional, a sign of a stealthy slide in recent years, despite the splits, factionalism and rival appetites within the bureaucracy, toward increasing authoritarianism in ANC rule or even a partial “ZANU-ization” of the ANC, a reference to Mugabe’s party in next door Zimbabwe first hypothetically raised and then quickly dismissed by the SACP’s Jeremy Cronin during the Mbeki years. It’s too soon to tell for sure whether the attacks result from specific local and regional factors or whether they stem from new national directives for a “zero tolerance” policy.

The ANC without a doubt still enjoys widespread and genuine mass support for now because of its visibility, courage and sacrifice during the apartheid era. But already there are mounting signs that this support won’t last forever, something more far-sighted ANC leaders must realize. As the older generation dies off and memories fade, the glow of “the struggle” will inevitably wear off and the party will not be able to draw on personal memories of life under apartheid. Its political capital and ability to balance between competing interests will weaken. Internal and external pressures will build up, especially if South Africa gets mired in long-term Japanese-style economic stagnation as result of the world recession.

But worries about the recession’s social effects, which are just now starting to roll over South Africa, can’t be ruled out either as another more pressing factor behind recent government actions. The government justifiably fears rising social tensions might threaten to escape the usual containment brokered by the official parties. In that case, state violence can be seen in a different light, as a sort of pre-emptive strike and a hidden warning to the population as a whole not to step outside the bounds. These local “poor people’s” organizations, relatively small and powerless now (at least when compared to the many millions of desperately poor South Africans living in atrocious conditions) in the right circumstances could suddenly snowball anti-government feeling into something far more powerful - and threatening both to the ANC and South African business interests.

Post-scriptum :

Resources:

AbM website: www.abahlali.org

Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign: www.antieviction.org.za

Part of Jenny Morgan's film on AbM can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fr7h6aTQp5A>

Pambazuka News: [www.pambazuka.org">www.pambazuka.org]

"After the Thrill is Gone: A Decade of Post-Apartheid South Africa." Special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. Volume 103, Number 4. Fall 2004.