

A revealing British documentary on post-apartheid South Africa

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In 1994 the Government of National Unity, consisting of the African National Congress, the National Party (a long-time pillar of apartheid) and the Inkatha Freedom Party replaced the South African apartheid regime. ANC leader Nelson Mandela took the place of F.W. De Clerk as president.

John Pilger, a respected investigative journalist, returned to South Africa 30 years after he was banned for his reports on apartheid to find out what changes have taken place since 1994. His findings were shown nationally in a documentary entitled, 'Apartheid Did Not Die,' aired on Britain's ITV station April 21.

In the programme Pilger says 'behind the modern face of democracy, the scourges of inequality, unemployment and homelessness persist.' The documentary provided much valuable material in this respect. Fully 80 percent of all South African children suffer poor health and a quarter of all children under the age of six suffer chronic malnutrition. More people have died since 1994 from malnutrition and preventable disease than did under apartheid.

One of the government's 'success' stories is providing one million people access to running water. Yet up to 14 million still have no reliable water supply. While rich families continue to irrigate their gardens and fill their swimming pools, women in the townships were shown walking up to half a mile carrying water, which is often polluted.

Pilger comments that the forced removal of millions of people from the land was the most brutal weapon of South Africa's rulers. Yet today, wealthy white farmers continue to control more than 80 percent of agricultural land and their existing property rights are guaranteed in the new constitution.

Almost one-quarter of the government's budget is used to pay interest on a huge debt left by the apartheid

regime. Five huge companies control over three-quarters of all business shares. Known as the Royal Balcony, they represent one of the greatest concentrations of corporate wealth and power on earth. They are dominated by the Anglo-American Corporation and their interests reach into every corner of South African life, from minerals to tourism, property to retailing.

The documentary provides an important insight into who have been the main beneficiaries of the election of the ANC. Pilger shows a suburb of Johannesburg where some of the richest people in the world live. They constitute 5 percent of the population, which together with the rest of the white South Africans control 88 percent of the national wealth.

The other significant beneficiaries of democracy are a thin layer of black businessmen and a handful of black politicians and trade union leaders who were cultivated as a social base for the National Unity regime. Cyril Ramaphosa, former head of the miners union, a member of the ANC National Executive and now a millionaire businessman, is shown socialising with mining magnate Nicky Oppenheimer.

By contrast, his former members continue to work and die in the inhuman conditions in South Africa's gold mining industry--one of the most profitable in the world. Pilger reports that it is estimated that the human cost of each ton of gold mined is one life and twelve serious injuries. Since mining began, 69,000 men have been killed in accidents. About 2 million men have passed through the gold mines in the last 10 years. One-third of them have contracted deadly lung diseases, with little compensation.

The documentary points out that the regime has instituted some limited reforms, including providing free health care for pregnant women and children under

six, legalizing abortions and immunising children against diseases like polio. However, these reforms are a far cry, Pilger points out, from the 'unbreakable promise' the ANC made in the 1994 elections to bring water, housing, electricity, education, health care and land to the South African masses.

Pilger points out, 'the ANC has offered a conservative economic programme now known unofficially as 'cautious Thatcherism.'"

While Pilger's documentary provided valuable material on the social conditions existing in South Africa, there are obvious political weaknesses in his presentation. Throughout the documentary he speaks disappointedly of the ANC's 'betrayal' of its programme. He implies if the ANC had only remained true to its 1955 'Freedom Charter,' it could have resolved the immense democratic and social problems confronting the South African working class and oppressed masses.

But the ANC's pro-capitalist policies are not in contradiction to its original bourgeois nationalist program. Notwithstanding the socialist phraseology that it borrowed from the South African Communist Party, the ANC's Freedom Charter guaranteed bourgeois property rights and upheld the institutions of the capitalist state. That is why after years of violently suppressing the ANC the apartheid regime, in the end, turned to it to prevent a social revolution.

By the late 1970s it became clear that the apartheid form of capitalist rule had isolated the South African economy from the global market. The impact of globalised production and the growing militancy of the working class meant that, if a revolutionary situation was to be averted, new forms of rule were needed in order to open up the economy to inward investment and enable South African capital to compete effectively in the world market.

Pilger describes very well the strategy behind De Klerk's 1990 decision to lift the ban on the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and other organisations. He says: 'De Klerk's strategy was to seize the initiative and co-opt the ANC leadership. The white establishment and its backers in Washington and London wanted above all to maintain power over the economy, keeping South Africa safe for international capital regardless of the colour of its government.'

In frank remarks to Pilger, Mandela spells out the reasons for the ANC's political prostration in the face of the impact of globalisation of production on South Africa's economy: 'We don't want to challenge big business in a way where they get frightened and take away their money. We are changing all economic aspects of this country. That has to be done skillfully'.

The documentary explained that under Mandela's rule foreign investment has tripled, while jobs have disappeared at the rate of 100,000 a year. Companies that continued doing business with the apartheid regime--Coca-Cola, Siemens, BMW, Shell, Mercedes Benz--are reaping the greatest benefits. 'We are seeking to establish an environment in which winners flourish,' says Trevor Manuel, the finance minister.

Pilger says: 'Yes, apartheid based on race is outlawed now, but the system always went far deeper than that. The cruelty and injustice were underwritten by an economic apartheid that regarded people as no more than cheap, dispensable labour. International corporations in South Africa, Britain, Europe and the United States backed it. And it was this apartheid, based on money and profits, which allowed a small minority to control most of the land, most of the industrial wealth and most of the economic power. Today the same system is called, without a trace of irony, the free market.' This film, he adds 'asks why apartheid continues by other means.'

Pilger's insistence that 'apartheid did not die' confuses the issue. Apartheid has ended, but capitalist oppression continues. The ANC, like bourgeois nationalist movements throughout the world, have proven incapable of putting an end to the legacy of poverty and exploitation in the oppressed nations. That is the task of the South African and international working class.



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