

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report

ANC paves the way for a travesty of justice

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) findings on human rights violations do nothing to provide justice for the victims of apartheid rule in South Africa. The truth is that the reconciliation it advocates is impossible because, behind the thin veneer of democracy provided by the ending of apartheid, South Africa is still characterised by appalling poverty and inequality.

The ANC government proposed the Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, after it came to office in 1994. The 3,500-page document was compiled after two and a half years of hearings based on accounts from some 21,000 witnesses and information contained in 7,000 amnesty applications. It contains detailed reports of atrocities committed by the apartheid regime and concludes that apartheid was a crime against humanity. The ruling white regime and its state forces are found to be responsible for the majority of human rights abuses, with the backing of big businesses such as Anglo-American, the Rembrandt Group, the Sanlam insurance company and 'hundreds, if not thousands, of others'. As well as this, the judiciary, the Church and the media are charged with helping perpetuate apartheid.

Hardly surprisingly, the National Party, which introduced apartheid and ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1994, has described the commission's findings as 'a mess' with 'no credibility'. General Constand Viljoen, former chief of the South African Defence Force, threatened to sue after being indicted for gross violations of human rights. He described the body's members as a 'bunch of civilians' of whom '90 percent ... were supporters of the ANC'.

The Zulu-led Inkatha Freedom Party described the commission as 'an institution which may best be described as a circus', and said criticism of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi for his role in the bloody war against the ANC was 'preposterous and flies in the face of reconciliation and nation-building'.

The anti-apartheid liberation movements, including the ruling African National Congress, are also indicted for human rights violations during the struggle against apartheid. This provoked an unsuccessful attempt by the ANC to suppress the report.

It was left to President Nelson Mandela to call on all South Africans to accept 'the report as it is, with all its imperfections, as an aid that the TRC has given us to help reconcile and build our nation.'

The Truth and Reconciliation report, despite its authors' intentions, is more than just an indictment of apartheid. It confirms the role played by the ANC in preventing a reckoning by the South African working class with their oppressors and the type of social and economic transformation necessary to establish genuine equality.

As in similar transitions to bourgeois democracy in Latin American countries such as Chile, or formerly fascist-ruled countries like Spain, not a single one of the central figures responsible for mass repression has been brought to justice. Only one cabinet minister during the apartheid regime sought an amnesty for his crimes. Every other minister blamed his subordinates for what took place.

Some lower-ranking members of the security forces confessed to murders and torture in return for an amnesty. Members of the State Security Council--the inner cabinet which effectively ruled South Africa in the 1980s and early 90s--suggested that, as they knew nothing, they could not be held responsible. The former police commissioner, General Coetzee, told the TRC that when members of his force were instructed to 'eliminate', 'neutralise', 'obliterate' or 'remove permanently from society' opponents of the regime, this did not mean to kill or murder them. Former Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Vlok said he apologised for the use of the word 'eliminate', because 'as a result of this misunderstanding people actually died.' The last president under apartheid rule, F.W. de Klerk, denied any knowledge of the security operations, whereas former Minister of Foreign Affairs Pik Botha claimed that 'elimination' meant detention without trial. P.W. Botha, prime minister from 1978 to 1984 and president from 1984 to 1989, simply refused to attend the hearings. Passages in the report linking De Klerk to the bombing of Anti-Apartheid and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) offices were blacked out after he threatened legal action.

No action will be taken, even against those indicted by the TRC. The report states that some had called for 'the disqualification or removal from public office of people who have been implicated in violation of human rights.' But the Commission 'decided not to recommend that this step be pursued.' The TRC report points out that the National Intelligence Agency, staffed with personnel from the apartheid era, was allowed to continue destroying documents as late as 1996.

This travesty was prepared under the remit agreed by the ANC government for the commission. The form the commission took was the product of compromise negotiations between the National Party and the ANC over several years prior to the 1994 elections. The TRC report correctly notes that the increasingly brutal imposition of apartheid was motivated primarily by fear of social revolution (identified as the 'communist threat') in Africa. So too was the decision to end apartheid. Faced with a growing mass movement against their rule, the South African bourgeoisie decided that it was necessary to bring the ANC into government. De Klerk was charged with carrying this out.

The ANC, under the tutelage of the Stalinists of the South African Communist Party, utilised socialist phraseology to win support in the working class. But it represented the interests of a layer of the black and 'coloured' middle class denied social advancement under the apartheid system. The 'reconciliation' its leaders agreed to was a pledge to defend the profit system and thwart the social and political strivings of the workers and peasants.

The International Committee of the Fourth International's 1994 statement 'In whose interests will the ANC rule?' explained: 'The capitalist class had been forced to alter the form but not the substance of their rule in South Africa, in order to stave off the threat of social revolution.... The ANC has taken on the task of overseeing the economic exploitation and political repression of the South African masses, in whose name it claims

to speak. It is following a well-worn path, taken by movements all over the world which once proclaimed 'national liberation' as their mission--from the PLO to the Sandinistas.'

The TRC was set up in order to head off popular anger and demands for justice for the tens of thousands of black workers and youth murdered or tortured under the apartheid regime. The ANC promised that politicians and big business backers of the apartheid system would not be prosecuted. Amnesty would be granted to those who committed crimes for political reasons on behalf of the state or a known political group, provided they made a full confession of what took place. The Commission was also charged with investigating abuses by *all* parties between 1960 and December 1993, in order to downplay the responsibility of the ruling regime.

Tutu was appointed chairman because of his opposition to the forcible overthrow of apartheid. He played an instrumental role in the negotiations between the ANC and the National Party for a peaceful transition to majority rule. His introduction to the report makes clear that the course pursued by the ANC was designed to prevent a revolution. He writes, 'Had the miracle of the negotiated settlement not occurred, we would have been overwhelmed by the bloodbath that virtually everyone predicted as the inevitable ending for South Africa.'

He states that the alternative of a negotiated settlement, championed by himself and the ANC, was a path towards 'national unity through truth and reconciliation ... a new and democratic dispensation characterised by a culture of respect for human rights.' This claim rings hollow even as it is argued by Tutu. He lists the terrible atrocities committed by the South African State--such as the Sharpeville massacre, the killings in Langa and Soweto. He writes, 'Can we imagine the anger that has been caused by the disclosures that the previous government had a Chemical and Biological Warfare Programme with projects that allegedly targeted only black people, and allegedly sought to poison President Nelson Mandela and reduce the fertility of black women. Should our land not be overwhelmed by black fury.'

Tutu and the ANC's role has been to prevent such a reckoning by black workers with their oppressors and ensure that the perpetrators and beneficiaries of apartheid remain in control. He writes, 'There were those who believed that we should follow the post World War II example of putting those guilty of gross violations of human rights on trial as the allies did at Nuremberg,' but, 'There is no doubt that members of the security establishment would have scuppered the negotiated settlement had they thought they were going to run the gauntlet of trials for their involvement in past violations....'

'It would also have been counterproductive to devote years to hearings about events that, by their nature, arouse very strong feelings. It would have rocked the boat massively, and for too long.'

Not only do the repressive forces of the state remain intact, but, more fundamentally, the system of economic exploitation on which it was based continues. At one point Tutu complains: 'The bulk of the victims have been black and I have been saddened by what has appeared to be the mean-spiritedness in some of the leadership of the white community. They should be saying, 'How fortunate we are that these people do not want to treat us as we treated them. How fortunate that things have remained much the same for us except for the loss of some political power.'

Things have indeed remained essentially the same. It is still the case that whites--14 percent of the population--control the bulk of the country's land and wealth, and have an average income nearly 10 times that of blacks. Only a thin layer of black businessmen and professionals has benefited from ANC rule. The members of the TRC are amongst them.

Tutu writes with pride how he has been supported by leading representatives of the imperialist powers in his efforts to preserve their interests in South Africa. 'Almost without exception foreign heads of state visiting this country have insisted on paying a visit to the Commission.

The royal couples of Norway, Sweden and Denmark have been amongst such visitors. Presidents of the German Republic, Portugal, France and most recently of the Swiss Confederation have met with the Chair of the Commission, as did the First Lady of the United States and the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan.... Some of us have been awarded the highest decorations of some of these countries; others have received honorary doctorates and some of my colleagues have gone on from the Commission to take up prestigious appointments.'

In contrast, the economic position of black workers has worsened since 1994. Official figures show that unemployment now stands at 4 million--back to the level of 1981, or 38 percent of the potentially active labour population. This labour population is expanding by 350,000 each year. Cuts are being implemented in public sector jobs, especially education and the Department of Public Works. Programmes to resolve the acute housing problems, promised in 1994, have failed to materialise. Schooling has also become a national scandal, with one in four schools without water and over half without electricity.

Opposition by workers has increased. Worried COSATU trade union officials have reported that 'strikes have been very intense and very protracted. It does not augur well for good industrial relations.' In the face of such mounting social tensions, the ANC's hoped-for reconciliation between the ruling elite and the South African masses is impossible.

The TRC report calls for 'closing the intolerable gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged' and providing housing, clean water and jobs. But its programme for 'empowering the poor' amounts to a vague appeal for a wealth tax on South Africa's ruling elite, a one-off levy on corporate income, equivalent to 1 percent of companies' capitalisation on the stock exchange, and a surcharge on golden handshakes to former senior civil servants. Even if such measures were forthcoming, they would do almost nothing to ameliorate the suffering of the South African masses.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report could not fulfil the mandate implicit in its title because it accepts and defends a system based on repression and lies. The construction of a true democracy in South Africa is bound up with the struggle for the social emancipation of the working class from the profit system. It requires the liberation of the African continent from imperialist domination and rule by a wealthy minority and their representatives such as the ANC.



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