

In run-up to June 2 elections

Political and social tensions mount in South Africa

Helen Halyard
18 March 1999

Army troops and additional police have been sent to the Nyanga township, just outside Cape Town, following a wave of violence linked to the upcoming national elections. The repressive exercise, codenamed Operation Chaka, means an indefinite period of occupation for the township.

The vote set for June 2 is the second national election since the collapse of the apartheid dictatorship, and the first conducted under the rule of the African National Congress. The campaign has already triggered a series of political killings in several regions of the country.

In the Cape Town area, both ANC local area councilors and members of the United Democratic Movement (UDM), a breakaway from the ANC set up two years ago, have been assassinated. It is unclear who ordered the political hits, as both parties have denied responsibility. The political atmosphere is one that can be easily exploited by police agents and freelance gunmen, and suspicions have been voiced publicly that the killings are carried out by forces hostile to both parties, seeking to destabilize the existing regime.

It is common knowledge that the Inkatha Freedom Party, headed by Zulu chieftain Mangasuthu Buthelezi, worked with South Africa's security forces in its bloody repression of the ANC before 1994. Thousands died in the region of KwaZulu/Natal in fighting between the IFP and ANC in the run-up to the 1994 elections. The IFP is now part of the ruling coalition.

While the ANC is expected to win the national elections easily, based largely on the popular reputation of President Nelson Mandela and the absence of any credible alternative, officials of the ruling party are concerned, however, that they may fail to win the two-thirds majority required to make changes in the

constitution, especially as popular dissatisfaction increases over the ANC's unfulfilled promises.

The UDM was formed two years ago by Bantu Holimisa, a former official of the ANC expelled after leveling corruption charges against several party leaders, and Reolf Meyer, formerly of the National Party, which maintained apartheid rule in South Africa for more than 45 years. Exploiting popular hostility to the widespread nepotism and corruption in the highest levels of the government, the UDM is a right-wing capitalist party whose program differs from the ANC's only in minor details.

The fresh eruption of political violence is an indication of the unresolved political and social contradictions after five years of ANC rule. Although legal apartheid was dismantled and a black majority government installed, the repressive security apparatus of the old apartheid state was left intact.

The efforts of the ANC have been directed toward protecting private property and preventing a reckoning by the black majority with the capitalist ruling class. The main beneficiaries of ANC rule have been a small layer of black businessmen and government officials. The economic underpinnings of apartheid remain, with the minority white population, only 14 percent of the country, still controlling the major banks and corporations and the best areas of land.

While nearly all whites enjoy a lifestyle that is at the level of the US and European middle class, the necessary requirements of life--a job, housing, decent medical care, electricity, water and education--are denied to large segments of the population. More than a third of the country is unemployed and faces appalling levels of poverty.

Following the dismantling of apartheid and the end to economic sanctions on South Africa, the country has been opened to the global market, its industries faced with competition from transnational corporations based in Europe, North America and Asia. South African companies have responded by eliminating 500,000 jobs since 1994 and increasing productivity.

Despite these measures, the South African economy is sliding into a recession. In the past year the country only registered a 0.1 percent increase in Gross Domestic Product. Business failures reported for January stood at a record 362, more than double last year's figure of 162.

One indication of how little things have changed was a recent report issued on the state of education by South Africa's Human Rights Commission. The author of the report, Barney Pityana, told a news conference, "Today, virtual apartheid is alive and well in our schools." The report describes how white and Asian schools located in more privileged suburbs continue to have superior resources while schools in black areas lack basic facilities such as electricity, adequate water, toilets and decent classrooms.

The schools epitomize life in the country as a whole. The more privileged neighborhoods, including those where the new black middle classes reside, are fenced in and patrolled by armed guards, many equipped with pump-action shotguns.

For the majority of workers, the government's housing program consists of a concrete slab, a water tap and a tin roof. The program's title, "site and service," tells more than was intended. The ANC has absolved itself of the responsibility for providing decent housing, instead placing the onus on individual families to build walls, windows and doors, a daunting task when one is out of work.

Many young people who have become disillusioned and frustrated by social inequality and unfulfilled promises from the ANC have turned to petty thievery, producing the highest crime rate of any country in the world. In response, the ANC has adopted an American style law-and-order campaign replete with an increase in police forces, lengthening of prison terms, expansion of the courts and building of new prisons.

Measures of social reform, which brought the ANC mass support in 1994, have been totally abandoned. The government is preoccupied with creating a

favorable climate for international investment with the justification that this will solve the country's social crisis.

US President Bill Clinton's tour of Africa in March 1998 has been followed by closer relations between the United States and South Africa. A Bi-National Commission regulates relations between the two countries and several meetings have been held involving Vice President Al Gore and Mandela's likely successor, Deputy President Thabo Mbeki.

The major subjects of US-South Africa discussion have been trade and the growth of crime. During a trip this February a US delegation that included Attorney General Janet Reno and Commerce Secretary William Daley set up a Justice and Anti-Crime Cooperation Committee, giving South African officials access to resources from the FBI and other US police agencies. The United States will also play a central role in training South African police and prosecutors and joint military exercises have been scheduled.

The US views South Africa as crucial to its penetration of the entire continent. Its developing ties to the ANC regime are part of an ongoing attempt to exert US hegemony in an area of the world dominated historically by European and especially British imperialism. Investments by US firms in South Africa now total more than \$10 billion.

Far from ameliorating conditions for the masses of workers, increasing American involvement, motivated by the drive to protect corporate interests, will only intensify the existing social contradictions.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact