

Police and ANC fire on protesting South African schoolchildren

Thabo Seseane Jr.
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On March 15, African National Congress (ANC) spokesman Nkenke Kekana said his party would meet the citizens of Bekkersdal to discuss “concerns of the community.” Town residents, including schoolchildren, were shot at last week by the police and members of an ANC contingent campaigning in the area.

Bekkersdal was the scene of intense protests lasting a month towards the end of 2013. Residents have still not forgotten a visit paid by Gauteng premier Nomvula Mokonyane last October, when she was heckled and booed. She inflamed that situation by telling her audience, “People can threaten us and say they won’t vote, but the ANC doesn’t need their dirty votes.”

When residents heard last week that ANC dignitaries would be campaigning in the area, they erupted even in Mokonyane’s absence. Schooling was disrupted around 11 a.m. as pupils streamed onto the streets.

The *Citizen* of the previous day carried a photo taken in Bekkersdal of an armed man wearing ANC colours. Nkenke said, “Right now, we don’t know who that person is. If he is a [VIP] protector, he is not supposed to wear ANC gear.”

Without much difficulty, the *Mail & Guardian* identified the man as former ANC councillor Nelson Mdayi.

Another image from the *Citizen* shows a South African Police Service (SAPS) officer firing a shotgun at point-blank range at two civilians backed up against a wall.

Along with scores of other towns, Bekkersdal in the west of Gauteng continues to be the scene of violent protests over issues like municipal corruption. In last week’s incident, residents vented their spleen on an ANC contingent including Ntombi Mekgwe, head of the housing department in the provincial cabinet, and the West Rand district municipality mayor, Mpho

Nawa. The politicians were canvassing door-to-door for the party ahead of the May 7 elections, when they were forced to vacate the area after being pelted with stones.

Six people were arrested for public violence, according to Gauteng police spokesman Lt. Col. Lungelo Dlamini. ANC Gauteng caucus spokesman Mbangwa Xaba praised the SAPS and claimed there were no deaths or injuries in the clashes.

Police fired at schoolchildren and residents who had barricaded streets with rocks and burning tyres. The *Citizen* likened the scene to the Soweto uprising of June 16, 1976. By the time the ANC dignitaries arrived, there were running battles between residents and police and columns of black smoke in the air.

A potential scapegoat for the authorities, Thabang Wesi, denied that he instigated the attack on the ANC campaigners. Wesi, a leader of the Greater Westonia Concerned Residents’ Association, said “residents learnt about the ANC’s planned campaign through social media networks.”

As evidenced by the two-month platinum miners’ strike, working class militancy is enjoying resurgence. The weekly protests in every province are like little explosions heralding a more general conflagration. The timing could not be worse for the ruling ANC.

During another door-to-door campaign last Saturday in the Jacksonville area of Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape province, President Jacob Zuma was heckled and booed by a crowd so hostile that bodyguards had to physically intervene. Before that, Zuma was booed at the South Africa vs. Brazil soccer match on March 5 at FNB Stadium. This is the same venue that hosted Nelson Mandela’s memorial service last year, and where Zuma was booed in front of a global audience. *City Press* reported that the ANC’s own internal polls show electoral support for the party slumping in 2014 to as

little as 36 percent in Gauteng. The ANC won 64.4 percent of the same vote in 2009. An ANC West Rand branch chairperson said of the internal poll results, “The mistake we made was to underestimate Julius [Malema’s] boys.”

Expelled from the ANC, Malema now leads the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which according to a 2013 Markinor poll could win over 7 percent of the vote in the province. Another ANC leader remarked that his party may well find itself in the “embarrassing situation where we have to go cap in hand, begging to Julius for a coalition for us to stay in power.”

In spite of his leftist rhetoric, Malema has already signalled the EFF’s readiness to serve in that capacity.

The ANC position is that protests like those at Bekkersdal are about service delivery. More specifically, the party line is that a minority of citizens impatiently take to violence when they see that they lack the facilities already delivered to other communities, courtesy of the ANC government.

Peter Alexander and other researchers attached to the South African Research Chair in Social Change at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) refute such claims. In a *Business Day* piece, Alexander et al. point out that the very rubric “service delivery protest” has become a catch-all for issues encompassing representation, corruption, unemployment and crime. Citizens also complain about the quality of municipal services as opposed to absolute non-delivery.

The Wits researchers urge the establishment to “take into account the way in which sympathetic handling of grievances can minimise conflict, and that dishonesty and arrogance trigger disorder.” Excluding the bloodbath at Marikana, they note that 43 protesters have been killed by police since 2004. There are “no reports of police killed by protesters.”

The ANC government is heedless of all this. Already, indications are that Cyril Ramaphosa, one of the instigators of the Marikana mass murder of miners, is to serve as deputy president in the new administration. In this role, he will be entrusted with implementing the National Development Plan (NDP). Together with trigger-happy policing, the NDP, an anti-poor neoliberal blueprint, is the ruling elite’s only answer to the worsening crisis of global capitalism.

Under these circumstances, the ANC polls suggest that fully 25 percent of habitual ANC voters are

undecided about their preference in the upcoming election.



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