

ANC government roiled by angry protests as South Africans protest worsening social conditions

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South Africa has been rocked by four days of angry protests and riots across the country, in what has been described as the worst disturbances since the end of the hated apartheid regime and minority white rule and the assumption of power by the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994.

South Africa's two most densely populated provinces, Gauteng, home to Johannesburg, the country's commercial capital and largest city, and the capital Pretoria, and the eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal, were the worst affected. But protests have spread to Northern Cape and Mpumalanga provinces.

As protesters far outnumbered the police, people looted stores, warehouses, store depots and factories, making off with electrical goods, clothes and foodstuffs, while others set fire to shops and offices. The BBC aired a film clip of a mother dropping her toddler from a burning building into the arms of a group of people below.

Several of the country's major highways were blocked after trucks were set alight, prompting South Africa's largest oil refinery to announce the suspension of its operations, blaming the civil unrest and disruption of supply routes in and out of KwaZulu-Natal. This has led to long queues forming outside petrol stations and shops in the eastern port city of Durban and Johannesburg.

The violence has reportedly affected healthcare clinics and the faltering vaccine rollout programme, with medical supplies and medications looted, even as South Africa's third wave of Covid infections rips through the country. According to official statistics, the virus has killed at least 64,000 people, although excess mortality figures indicate that another 100,000, if not more, have died directly or indirectly due to the pandemic.

At least 72 people have died and more than 1,300 people have been arrested during the protests. While most of those who died were killed by live fire from the police, ten were killed during a crowd crush at the Ndofaya shopping mall in

Soweto, Johannesburg, and others were crushed in a warehouse when a stack of goods fell on looters.

The protests were initially triggered by last week's jailing of former president Jacob Zuma, ordered by the Constitutional Court for contempt of court for initially defying its order to appear at an inquiry into corruption during his presidency from 2009 to 2018. Fearing his actions and those of his cronies were impacting adversely on South Africa's business interests at home and abroad and costing the ANC electoral support, as reflected in major losses in the 2016 municipal elections, President Cyril Ramaphosa's faction in the ANC had forced him to resign.

The 79-year-old Zuma is a veteran of the anti-apartheid struggle that he joined when he was 17, serving a 10-year prison sentence on Robben Island in the 1960s alongside Nelson Mandela. Zuma was also a member of the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP) until 1990. He has played a major role in the ANC ever since. This, his professed support for the poor farmers and workers, and a significant degree of patronage, has enabled him to retain a measure of popular support, despite being mired for years in scandals and facing a long-postponed trial for fraud, corruption and racketeering.

Zuma and his faction attacked the judicial decision, accusing the court and his political opponents of political bias and imposing a prison sentence without trial that was unconstitutional. After initially refusing to turn himself into the police and calling on his supporters to oppose the sentence, he had given in at the last moment on Wednesday and reported to the authorities. On Monday, the Constitutional Court agreed to hear his petition to rescind its imprisonment order, although it has yet to declare its ruling.

The protests by Zuma's supporters, largely in his home province of KwaZulu-Natal, rapidly morphed into a wider movement against the ANC government. Millions are angered over its mismanagement of the pandemic and vaccine rollout and an escalating economic crisis that has

left many people without jobs, income or financial support from the government, as the top echelons of the ruling party have enriched themselves at public expense.

With one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, South Africa's most affluent 20 percent of the population take more than 68 percent of income. According to government statistics, a pale reflection of reality, one third of workers are without work, leading to the pauperisation of millions, while the government has frozen public sector wages, refusing to pay a wage increase due from April 2020 under the 2018 three-year agreement.

While Ramaphosa was forced to acknowledge the widespread anger over social conditions that have turned the country into a powder keg, this did not stop him ordering the army to help the police disperse the crowds, suppress the protests and arrest looters. Addressing the nation on television on Monday, only the second time since the riots broke out, he said, "Let me be clear: we will take action to protect every person in this country against the threat of violence, intimidation, theft and looting." By this he meant that the army would act to protect big business and the South African bourgeoisie from the enraged masses.

He announced a two-week extension of the limited lockdown measures to counter a brutal third wave of Covid infections at the weekend that include a ban on gatherings and the sale of alcohol, a 9pm to 4am curfew and school closures, seeking to lay the blame for disrupting the vaccination programme on the protesters.

Ramaphosa warned that the country faced the danger of sliding back to the ethnic infighting of the early 1990s when, under apartheid, "sinister elements stoked the flames of violence in our communities to try and turn us against each other."

Ramaphosa's faction more openly courts international finance and big business to invest in South Africa and has pledged to root out the corruption endemic within the ANC that has made foreign capital and the international financial institutions reluctant to deal with the country. He has sought to use the courts against his ANC opponents, arguing that what is at stake is the "rule of law." By this is meant that rule of capitalist law that has allowed Ramaphosa to build up a massive personal fortune, and which sanctions the financial elite's expropriation of the wealth created by the working class in the form of profit and dividends to shareholders and allows big business to hide its criminality behind the "corporate veil."

This does not mean that workers should support the nakedly corrupt Zuma or his backers. The factional infighting within the ANC expresses the protracted crisis gripping the entire South African bourgeoisie. The ANC came to power in 1994 in a bid to rescue South African

capitalism in a period of rapid transition. As globalisation of production became widespread, the nationalist and autarkic apartheid regime was no longer fit for purpose, amid fears that the rising militancy of the South African working class could spell the end of capitalist rule in the country.

The ANC was chosen as the mechanism to suppress the revolutionary strivings of the black working class, with a black capitalist class being formed to take its place alongside the white capitalists, through programmes of "Black Economic Empowerment" (BEE). This was sanctified politically through the SACP's Stalinist two-stage theory, which proclaimed the formal end of apartheid as a democratic revolution and a necessary stage before any struggle for socialism.

Ramaphosa's career, no less than Zuma's, expresses the trajectory of the ANC and its politics. Once heading South Africa's largest trade union, the National Union of Mineworkers, he was elected as ANC general secretary in 1991. Soon becoming a multi-millionaire, as a shareholder in the Lonmin mines in Marikana, in 2012 Ramaphosa called on the authorities to take action against striking miners. This greenlighted the security forces firing on the strikers, killing 34 and wounding 78 others.

The path of the ANC from opposition to co-option has been replicated across Africa and the Middle East. The national bourgeoisie, dependent upon imperialism and fearful of revolution from below, cannot resolve the fundamental democratic, economic and social problems confronting the masses. Only the working class can do that. It means breaking with the capitalist politics of the ANC and adopting a socialist and international programme in the closest unity with their class brothers and sisters in the African continent and in the imperialist centres, to take power and overthrow capitalism.



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