

Zuma's trial sparks fears of renewed violence in South Africa

Jean Shaoul
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The long-delayed trial of former African National Congress (ANC) President Jacob Zuma on charges of fraud, corruption and racketeering has resumed, with Zuma appearing by video link from prison.

The 79-year-old Zuma, a veteran of the anti-apartheid struggle who for decades played a key role in the ANC, is serving a 15-month sentence for contempt of court. The Constitutional Court ordered his imprisonment for defying its order to appear at a separate inquiry into corruption during his presidency from 2009 until 2018, when President Cyril Ramaphosa's faction in the ANC forced him to resign.

This trial relates to the \$5 billion purchase of fighter jets, patrol boats and military gear from five European arms firms, brokered in 1999 when Zuma was President Thabo Mbeki's deputy. The charges, that he accepted \$34,000 annually from the French arms company Thales in return for protecting the company from an investigation into the deal, were reinstated after the ANC forced him out of office. The alleged bribe was part of a broader corrupt relationship between Zuma and one of the consortium members that won a major bid to provide combat suites for new navy frigates.

The resumption of Zuma's trial has sparked fears of a resumption of the violence that followed his imprisonment on July 7. The protests by Zuma's supporters that started on July 9 in his home province of KwaZulu-Natal escalated into a wider movement against the ANC government. The ANC has turned South Africa into the most unequal society in the world since its ascent to power in 1994, while enriching a tiny black layer, including both Zuma and Ramaphosa. As poverty escalated, the ANC turned to the tried and tested policies of divide and rule, inciting against migrant workers and exploiting divisions based on tribes.

Millions are angered over the ANC's mismanagement of the pandemic and vaccine rollout and an escalating economic crisis that has left many without jobs, income or financial support with nearly 20 percent experiencing weekly hunger. Official figures that disguise chronic underemployment show that more than half of the country's young people, who form 50 percent of the population, are unemployed, forcing them to hawk on the streets where they face police violence. The number of people killed at the hands of the police (629) in 2019/20 was more than double that of the US on a per capita basis.

At least 212 people died during the riots that saw the destruction, damage and looting of 200 shopping malls, the plundering of dozens of food factories and warehouses and damage to hundreds of lorries and cars. The downtown areas of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, the two main cities in KwaZulu-Natal province, look like war zones. Scores of telecommunication towers have been put out of action and port facilities damaged, while attacks on chemical plants have led to dangerous and polluting spills. Damage across the country has been put at \$826 billion, although the full scale of the devastation is far from clear.

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. Armed "community groups" are barricading suburbs in some parts of the country against outsiders, raising fears of vigilantism and racial, tribal and communal fighting.

Last week, even as Ramaphosa was forced to acknowledge the atrocious social conditions that had animated the riots, he requested 25,000 troops for the three months to help the police suppress the protests

and arrest looters. He made clear that that the army would act to enforce “the rule of law” and protect big business and the South African bourgeoisie from the enraged masses. At least 10,000 soldiers have now been deployed and armoured vehicles are patrolling the streets.

Since then, Ramaphosa has attacked the forces behind the protests, which he called “economic sabotage.” Speaking on television Friday evening, he declared this was an “attempted insurrection” and “an attack on our democracy.” Authorities had identified “a good number” of those who planned and coordinated the violence, although he did not say who was behind what some pro-government commentators have called an “attempted coup.”

Certainly, the scale and nature of the damage suggests that some of it was planned and organized. It included the burning of more than 30 lorries on the main roads between the commercial capital Johannesburg and the port city of Durban that blocked key supply lines, attacks on water-treatment facilities, the disabling of mobile-phone towers, the burning of a pharmaceutical factory, the busing in of impoverished people to loot food stores and the theft of 1.5 million rounds of ammunition from a storage depot. According to *Daily Maverick’s* associate editor Ferial Haffajee, this was orchestrated by a dozen of Zuma’s close associates in the ANC and intelligence services that he had built up during his years in office, with the aim of undermining the Ramaphosa government and securing a pardon and the dismissal of his trial.

The factional infighting within the ANC has brought it to point of civil war. It testifies to the internal decay and bankruptcy not just of the ANC but the entire South African bourgeoisie that has used the ANC to maintain its economic grip on the country.

By the late 1980s, globalisation of production had become widespread, rendering nationalist and autarkic regimes, including South Africa’s apartheid regime, obsolete. As the militancy of the South African working class in the townships against the apartheid system escalated, sparking fears that this would end capitalist rule in the country, the white bourgeoisie released Nelson Mandela from prison, made its peace with the ANC, ended apartheid and sanctioned majority rule that brought the ANC to power in 1994.

The choice of the ANC as the mechanism to rescue

South African capitalism rested on its perspective and programme, based upon the Stalinist South African Communist Party’s two-stage theory, which proclaimed the formal end of apartheid as a democratic revolution and a necessary stage before any struggle for socialism. The ANC would maintain capitalist property relations and develop alliances with the capitalist class, posing no threat to the economic system.

It sought to develop a black capitalist class that would take its place alongside the white capitalists through “Black Economic Empowerment,” while suppressing the revolutionary strivings of the black working class, as expressed graphically by the career of Ramaphosa. The former head of South Africa’s largest trade union, the National Union of Mineworkers, was elected ANC general secretary in 1991 and soon became a multi-millionaire. Twenty years later, as a shareholder in the Lonmin mines in Marikana, in 2012, Ramaphosa called on the authorities to take action against striking miners, thereby sanctioning the killing 34 and wounding 78 others by the security forces.

Like its counterparts in the Middle East and Africa, the ANC was unable to provide any solutions to the social and economic problems confronting the working class and peasantry. Its only answer to the sharpening social tensions is repression, arrests and the lethal crushing of protests and strikes.

The working class must draw the lessons. It is not enough to take to the streets as repeated mass protests in Africa, including Sudan, Algeria and Nigeria, and in the Middle East during the 2011 Arab Spring, have demonstrated. Workers must be guided by their own political perspective and programme, rejecting all divisions on the basis of ethnicity, race or colour. 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, overthrow capitalism and carry out the socialist reorganization of society.



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