

# South Africa's ANC to deploy army to police the working class

**Jean de Jager****18 February 2026**

Last Thursday, Cyril Ramaphosa issued a de facto declaration of martial law during his annual state of the nation address to parliament, stating that the African National Congress (ANC)-led Government of National Unity intends to deploy the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to the provinces of the Western Cape and Gauteng on the pretext of combating “organised crime” and “gang violence”.

Without clarifying the duration, scope, destination, or size of the troop deployment, Ramaphosa said that he had directed police chiefs and the army to draw up a plan on where “our security forces should be deployed within the next few days in the Western Cape and in Gauteng to deal with gang violence and illegal mining”.

He added, “Organised crime is now the most immediate threat to our democracy, our society and our economic development,” telling parliament that “Children here in the Western Cape are caught in the crossfire of gang wars. People are chased out of their homes by illegal miners in Gauteng”. He concluded, “I will be deploying the South African National Defence Force to support the police”.

This Wednesday, Acting Police Minister Professor Firoz Cachalia confirmed the operation had been extended to the Eastern Cape province, where students have been mounting protests.

South Africa has one of the highest homicide rates in the world, with approximately 60 deaths each day, including killings in turf wars between drug gangs and mass shootings linked to unregulated mining in Johannesburg's Gauteng province. But this crisis is the direct outcome of decades of mass poverty, chronic unemployment and record levels of social inequality that have been overseen by successive governments led by the ANC.

In 1994 the ANC campaigned on its Reconstruction and Development Programme, promising that political freedom after half a century of white supremacist rule

under the Apartheid government would bring about social and economic transformation. It pledged large-scale job creation through public works and industrial policy, the building of one million houses in five years, universal access to water, electricity, healthcare and education, and major land reform to reverse apartheid dispossession.

The ANC framed growth and redistribution as inseparable, committing to reduce extreme racial inequality through progressive taxation, expanded social spending and a developmental state. In his May 1994 presidential inauguration speech, Nelson Mandela linked democracy directly to ending poverty, declaring that freedom would be hollow if South Africans remained “landless, homeless and unemployed.”

Three decades later, social reality stands in stark contrast to those promises. Two thirds of South Africa's population live in absolute poverty, with roughly one third unemployed. According to Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Employment Statistics, total employment declined by 79,000 year-on-year between September 2024 and September 2025.

Conditions are set to deteriorate further. The imposition of US tariffs, particularly the 30 percent rate initiated in August 2025, poses a serious threat to South African exports, reducing GDP growth by up to 0.69 percent and endangering between 30,000 and 100,000 jobs in the automotive, agricultural and metal sectors.

South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. The richest 10 percent of the population controls more than 80 percent of total wealth, while the bottom half owns virtually nothing. Some estimates indicate that the top 1 percent alone holds around half of the country's wealth. This staggering concentration of wealth exists alongside mass deprivation, exposing the profound failure of ANC-run, post-apartheid capitalism to deliver meaningful social transformation.

Ramaphosa's decision must be understood above all as

a response to the intensification of the class struggle across the region. Over the past two years, a new and politically radicalised generation has emerged in Africa.

Tens of millions have taken to the streets: in Kenya, Angola and Nigeria against tax hikes and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed austerity; in Cameroon, Mozambique and Tanzania against rigged elections and police repression; in Morocco against the neglect of healthcare and education while the state pours resources into football stadiums; and in Madagascar and South Africa against corruption and chronic shortages of power and water.

Many of these protests have been met with brutal military-police violence, resulting in the deaths of thousands.

The ANC government has also been emboldened by developments internationally. The Trump administration in the United States has repeatedly threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act, which would permit the military to function as a domestic police force to suppress protests and strikes.

Initial signs of mass opposition have already emerged over the past weeks. In many neighbourhoods of Johannesburg, residents have taken to the streets, blocking roads in protest after being left without water for over two weeks this month, with similar shortages affecting Durban, Pretoria and parts of the Western Cape.

Protests have erupted across universities over accommodation shortages, fee increases and inadequate transport. Students at Nelson Mandela University in Gqeberha have blocked traffic into the campus since February 12, while students from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology gathered outside Cape Town City Hall during the President's address, some carrying their luggage to highlight the threat of homelessness. They denounced the acute shortage of student housing and the restrictive funding rules of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, which require students to pass 60 percent of their course load to qualify for accommodation support.

On Monday protests spread to the University of Cape Town, where students blocked campus entrances while calling for an end to fee blocks and financial exclusions that prevent students with debt from registering.

These protests, and the conditions that gave rise to them, echo the experience of the youth-led uprisings seen elsewhere on the continent. The deployment of the SANDF is a pre-emptive measure by the ruling class, aimed at preparing the military apparatus to suppress

mounting anger among workers and students over unemployment, austerity and collapsing public services. The normalisation of military involvement in domestic policing is a stark warning to the working class.

There is no democratic faction of the South African ruling elite which will oppose this turn. The deployment has been supported by the entire ruling class, including the opposition.

The Democratic Alliance (DA), the second largest member of the GNU, released a statement “welcom[ing] the deployment of the SANDF”. Though the DA statement acknowledged that this would “not solve the crisis” of crime, its representatives in the Eastern Cape province led the calls on Ramaphosa to deploy the military there as well, in order to tackle “the ongoing gang crisis in the Northern Areas of Nelson Mandela Bay”.

Speaking to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema said, “We are happy that the army is coming. We are going to restore law and order”. Malema is an entrepreneur who has made millions out of corrupt dealings.

The turn toward military policing signals the inability of the existing political order to resolve the social crisis by democratic means. The defense of democratic rights therefore requires a political struggle by the working class against the capitalist class and its political representatives through the development of independent mass organisations, mobilizing in workplaces and neighbourhoods on a socialist program.

Central to such a counter-offensive is the building of a new revolutionary leadership, a section of International Committee of the Fourth International.



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