

South Africa

Reform or Revolution

Fifth Estate Collective

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South Africa—the rock of colonial racism—has finally begun to crack under the repeated blows of the general and sustained uprising of its black and colored population.

Perhaps the most telling sign that the end of formal apartheid is near is the sudden conversion of South African business leaders to its abolition. Their late September newspaper ad campaign contending “There is a better way,” demanded an end to racial segregation and “peace talks” with black leaders, and breaks significantly with the intransigent Afrikaner commitment to legal and formal white domination. Only a month previously, South African President P.W. Botha pledged no compromise with the black revolt.

More farsighted, both South African and world capitalist circles hear Botha’s shrill call as a bunker mentality which recalls the last days of the Shah of Iran and Nicaragua’s Somoza. The anxious eyes of Western banking and industrial interests have already signaled their concern that South Africa remain a source of cheap labor, strategic minerals and profitable investment for the West, and South African capital is simply falling into line.

It is hoped that reforming the worst feature of South African capital—its institutional racism—will provide stability and waylay the impending chaos. As it is, even without the mass protests, many economists consider apartheid regressive because it impedes economic growth within the country’s largest population sector, slowing overall development. In other words, “liberalization” would be good for business’ by encompassing those previously excluded from all but the most meager margins of the national economy.

Only An Extreme Case History

Stability is the key word in the minds of all reactionaries from Johannesburg to Washington: world capitalist circles fear that South Africa could fall to a militant nationalist regime and become another wild card like Lebanon or Iran, disrupting profits not only nationally, but spreading regionally as well. Their nightmare of a black revolution sweeping across Africa must intensify as they consider it spreading to its next most logical places: the racist metropolises in England, France and the U.S. From Soweto to London to Detroit, black rage and the desire for freedom and dignity could explode beyond all the barriers which presently hold it in check.

South African apartheid is, in any event, only an extreme case history of the operations of capital everywhere. South Africa, as Chris Shutes has written, “reveals not the excesses of global Power, but its naked and brutal truth.” In South Africa, blacks are forced to live in concentration camp-like townships or impoverished “homelands.” Their movement is restricted, they must carry passes, can own no property in most areas, cannot associate freely, and suffer profound, institutionalized oppression. World capital would like to reform apartheid along the lines of oppression in the West: blacks would have formal, legal rights, but still remain crushed under the weight of racist discrimination of a more subtle, but equally brutalizing mode. Capital was unconcerned about apartheid until its role came into question by the might of the workers and poor of South Africa. Now, even Reagan and other racists

see the need for their pals in the Afrikaner Nationalist Party—direct heirs of the Third Reich—to reform in order to stop explosions not only in Capetown, but in Washington DC.

No Illusions About the ANC

Reform may forestall increasingly radical developments, but it can only delay the revolt of people throwing off centuries of oppression. South Africa is bound to fall in the next few years. The most astute among the Powerful have already recognized this, and are seeking a smooth transition so that business may continue—if not exactly as usual—at least still favorably for their profits. It is this desire for a continuity of rule—of capital, not apartheid—that suddenly has changed the beneficiaries of racism into its most ardent foes and finds them scrambling to announce their “liberal” intentions publicly and even, perhaps most importantly, meeting with the exiled African National Congress (ANC) of the imprisoned Nelson Mandela.

Yet neither the ANC nor the bankers has control of the revolt in the townships and the homelands. The English newspaper *The Guardian* reported, “The new anger seems to have taken the ANC and the UDF (United Democratic Front—a multi-racial coalition of some 600 organizations) by surprise so that they, like the authorities, are finding it hard to control.” And, the London Economist reported, that “many people close to the scenes of unrest say that both movements were surprised by the fury of the violence and found themselves a step behind the rebellion. “ The ANC announced at a recent press conference in Zambia that it was preparing to act as an “alternative source of power” in a transitional regime, which probably explains why nervous capitalists were so anxious to meet with it.

There should be no illusions as to what kind of state would be organized by the ANC: a nationalist, bureaucratic one-party government similar to so many other nationalist regimes throughout the colonial world. The color barrier will be erased, and perhaps the whites will be driven out, as most were in Angola, or given a shrinking role in power, as in Zimbabwe. Even President Botha’s recent hypocritical warning of “chaos and poverty” could come about. The slaughterhouses of Uganda, the Mercedes waBenzi socialism of the Kikuyu, politicians in Kenya, the corruption and military coups in Nigeria and Ghana, the starvation and chaos in Mozambique, all confirm devastatingly that nationalist revolution only creates the conditions for police states and the continuance of the world economic market.

Yet the daily resistance to the state by South Africans and their generalized desire for a new life confirm that more is possible than a simple realignment of Power. An authentic revolution will bring down South Africa, but it will also shake world capital, and in particular the U.S. Empire, to its foundations. And shaking the Empire could lead to new breaks, new radical possibilities elsewhere. A real struggle for freedom and dignity of people of color is taking place in Africa. But we must recognize the proper lessons to be gained from it, that in Detroit and Soweto the enemy is the same—not only racism, not only pass laws, not only discrimination, but the industrial capitalist system which has brought it all about and which feeds off the blood of people everywhere. Their fight is ours.

Let us hope that they can shatter the many obstacles placed in their path by both right and left, and make a revolution which abolishes not only apartheid but capitalist social relations and the industrial state. By transcending nationalism and politics, they can fight for a truly free society.

And their struggles can teach us to face our own. “All this world is like a ghetto called Soweto.” FREEDOM!

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