

Hard Choices Ahead

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In recent weeks people have been willing to risk arrest, violence and in some cases death at the hands of our habitually brutal police force to assert a whole range of demands. These demands have included an insistence on the right to the cities, the right to an income, the right to a decent education and the right to a living wage.

The issuing of these demands has often, in direct contrast to the legalism of much of civil society, taken the practical form of the assertion of rights via direct and immediate appropriation, such as land occupations, rather than a request for an abstract recognition of rights in principle.

Given the untrammelled regularity and impunity with which state and private power undertake unlawful and in strict legal terms criminal actions against poor people, such as urban and rural evictions, this turn towards direct appropriation is eminently reasonable. Under current circumstances its blind faith in the institutions that are supposed to ensure the universal rule of law that is entirely irrational.

When protests have not sought to organise direct appropriation they have most often taken the form of active disruption of business as usual with the road blockade being the key tactic. It is also striking that when the demands issued in these protests have not been local, such as for a claim to a particular piece of land, but have instead been for a systemic state intervention, such as a guaranteed income, they have often not been issued in the language of passive victimhood preferred by civil society.

For instance the women in the South African Unemployed Movement issued a demand for a guaranteed universal income of R1 500 in Durban and quickly followed it by appropriating food in supermarkets and directing the bill to the mayor. Almost a hundred people were arrested in this very practical demonstration that the rules of our society are simply not viable for many people in the face of systemic unemployment.

Many of the protests have also had a distinctly political aspect and have included a refusal of both political and technocratic modes of authoritarianism as well as local level economic and political corruption. In some cases these political demands point quite clearly towards a much more participatory and bottom up conception of democracy than that currently held by any of the political parties.

Given that no significant political party has any reasonable proposals for addressing the social crisis in the country, the prospect of party politics, at least at the local level, being increasingly subordinate to popular power, is certainly welcome. It is possible that this could counter some of the hold that capital and its intellectuals in civil society have exercised over the setting of limits to 'acceptable' political debate.

Protestors have some important choices before them. The most urgent imperative is, of course, to assert a genuinely inclusive politics of the poor and to work against xenophobia and other chauvinisms that disgrace our society.

But there are also important questions about organisation. The last great wave of protests, five and ten years ago, each led to the formation of innovative and tenacious poor people's movements that are still vibrant today. The nature of the organisations or networks that emerge from the current upsurge will have a lot to do with its long-term political potential.

The state basically has four broad strategies with which they can respond to the popular refusal to accept the compromises of post-apartheid society. It can repress, deflect, co-opt or accept this dissent.

Repression may have considerable middle class support. State criminality and violence are close to being non-issues in the elite public sphere and much of the language in that sphere registers fairly mild disruptions to business as usual with considerable paranoia. Turning a dustbin over is received with vastly more horror than unprovoked police violence against protestors. But although there certainly have been very disturbing statements from some in the ANC in recent weeks, there has also been a marked opening in that there has been some recognition of the legitimacy of some of the protest.

Deflection is a classic tactic used by elites to redirect popular anger at vulnerable scapegoats. In the past there has, certainly at the local level, been clear signs of complicity with xenophobic sentiments within the ANC and in recent weeks there have been credible allegations of attempts to ferment anti-Indian sentiment in Durban. This danger of national or ethnic chauvinism will have to be carefully watched.

The protests are generally organised at local level and so any attempts at structural co-option would have to be worked out at that level through local party structures. But given the widespread rage at ward councillors and ward committees, it's unlikely that there would be a systemic acceptance of co-option negotiated at this level. In fact, such a project would almost certainly result in a rapid escalation of popular anger.

Mbeki's government never accepted the legitimacy of popular protest and responded with consistent paranoia and authoritarianism, including state violence. But there has, in recent days, been a distinct although not uniform opening with the ANC.

But it's not clear that the willingness to visit communities and to concede the legitimacy of some of the popular anger and some forms of protest will translate into more than a media managed image of care and concern or an actual willingness to side with the poor against other forces in society.

This is the critical question. Neither the right to the city nor viable rural livelihoods can be achieved without putting the social value of land before its commercial value. Shacks settlements will not receive life saving basic services for as long as elites are determined

to expel shack dwellers from cities. A guaranteed income is not possible while the state continues to misuse public money to subsidise private profit via elite projects like stadia. Popular social innovation cannot be recognised and supported for as long as the state and NGOs retain a monopoly on planning. The commons in Macambini cannot be protected and supported at the same time as the land is given to a Dubai developer to build a theme park. Street traders cannot be supported while the state actively sides with developers who aim to replace a market with a corporate mall.

Hard and clear choices have to be made.

The post-apartheid deal between the white and black elites was predicated on the exclusion of the majority. Service delivery and grants were supposed to buy off that majority while they were corralled in peripheral ghettos as the elites stepped into a gated glitz.

Popular resistances have ended the legitimacy of that deal. We'll have to see whether the people who have done us all that favour now get a visit and a pat on the head from Tokyo Sexwale, a beating or a bullet from Bheki Cele's people or serious engagement with their entirely legitimate claims for a place at the centre of this society.

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