

Elections: A Dangerous Time for Poor People's Movements in South Africa

Date posted: 12 March 2009

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History groans with the suffering caused by authoritarian individuals and regimes that were elected to power. For this reason the only useful measure of the commitment of any political project to democracy is to see how it responds to challenges to its own position and ideas.

Although certain state institutions, including universities, have become highly authoritarian, middle class South Africa generally enjoys the right to dissent that is the centre of the democratic ideal. One can write what one likes or stand and campaign for the party of one's choice without fear of an ominous late night knock on the door.

But the poor and poor people's movements and organisations in particular, face a very different reality.

In many communities oppositional politics is not tolerated at all and communities are run as 'vote banks'. It is not unusual for this intolerance to be backed up with armed force on the part of local party leaders or for them to receive the active support of the police. The chronic nature of political authoritarianism at the base of our society invariably becomes acute around elections.

Consider, for instance, what happened in Durban during the 2006 local government elections.

There were two grassroots challenges to the ANC. In E-Section of Umlazi, a group of people with solid links to MK, the SACP and civic and trade union struggles decided to run an independent candidate against the incumbent ANC councillor. In the Northern suburbs on the other side of the city, the shack dweller's movement Abahlali baseMjondolo decided to stage a boycott under the banner of "No Land! No House! No Vote!"

The local ANC described the people behind the independent candidature in Umlazi as "reactionaries hell bent on destabilising the ANC". Over a period of three months, four people involved in the campaign for the independent candidate were assassinated and another was seriously wounded in an attempted assassination.

In each case, the friends and families of the victims believed that the gunmen were working for the incumbent councillor. Furthermore, peaceful protesters were subject to arrest and gratuitous assault at the hands of the police who also shot dead Monica Ngcobo, a young women passing a protest on her way to work. A few minutes later the brother of the independent candidate was shot multiple times by the police in his home.

On the day Monica Ngcobo was shot, police spokesperson Bala Naidoo said that she had been shot in the stomach with a rubber bullet because she was throwing stones. The autopsy later found that she was shot in the back with live ammunition.

The Abahlali baseMjondolo election boycott resulted in the movement being declared a "third force hell bent on destabilizing the country". Their marches were unlawfully banned, an attempt to march in defiance of an unlawful ban was met with severe police violence resulting in serious injuries and the police were even used to physically prevent the movement from taking up an invitation to debate the eThekweni Mayor live on television.

We're now just over a month from the April elections and poor people's movements, especially those advocating an election boycott, are under attack again.

On the 8th of February the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) reported that the SAPS burst into one of their meetings in Gugulethu - attacked, tear gassed and robbed their members and arrested two of their leaders. According to the AEC, the police were ordered to attack their meeting by ANC officials including the local councillor.

Three weeks later, eight members of the Landless People's Movement were arrested on the patently spurious charge of 'public violence' in Protea South, Soweto, while walking home after presenting a petition to their ward councillor. They claimed that the councillor ordered the arrests.

The fact that these sorts of things happen in a country that claims to be a democracy is outrageous. But the fact that it is not widely seen as outrageous in the higher levels of society is equal cause for serious alarm.

Thabo Mbeki liked to speak of a second economy inhabited by the poor. No doubt he liked this idea because it was usually accompanied by the proposal to create 'ladders' by which poor people could step up into the first economy via their own entrepreneurship. This kind of fantasy has been roundly criticised with good reason. It is a way of avoiding any confrontation with the burdens of our history that has created poverty for some and wealth for others. It assumes that the faults with our society are not systemic but are rather with the individuals who have failed to succeed in the system.

But perhaps it would be useful to rework Mbeki's phrase and to speak of a second democracy for the poor. This would enable us to confront the reality that in our society many people are routinely prevented from exercising the right to dissent with threats of violence and with actual violence – often at the hands of the state.

Although there are important exceptions it is generally true that in South Africa neither civil society nor party politics have shown much concern with the widespread intolerance to independent political activity by poor people's organisations. Many implicitly accept the assumption that the poor are second-class citizens.

But those who are not moved by the idea that everyone's rights and lives carry the same weight, should ponder the fact that when elites are able to get away with oppressing the vulnerable they inevitably turn their sights on other less vulnerable people. If councillors are able to set the police or even assassins on their poor or working class political opponents it is just a matter of time before the middle class will, again, have to wonder if dissent will be met with an ominous late night knock on the door.

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