

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF STATE REPRESSION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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For many foreign environmental justice activists at the WSSD the aura surrounding the post-apartheid state was sullied by both the connivance of South Africa's ruling class with big business and the extent of police brutality aimed at those who expressed dissent. Among the more enlightened foreign activists any residual sentimental attachment to the party in office in South Africa was rudely erased by evidence of increasing poverty, inequality, environmental degradation and repression. The trumpeting of enshrined civil, political and socio-economic rights in the 'most progressive constitution in the world' sounded decidedly off-key.

For the ruling class, the WSSD (dubbed by many as the World Summit of Shady Deals) was in practice less about the benevolent goals of environmental justice and sustainable development (although pronounced in the rhetoric of South Africa's politicians and the expensive billboards dotting JHB). Instead it was more about showcasing SA for the benefit of the world's captains of industry, finance and their political surrogates, safely ensconced in the five star hotels of Sandton. Sort of window-shopping for international capitalists. The abiding interest of the South African ruling class during the WSSD was to reassure and pamper the bringers of direct foreign investment (despite the futility of this policy since 1994) (1). Reassurance that the party would not be spoilt came from the President, cabinet ministers and high-ranking policemen. Senior apartheid-era security policemen were put in charge. Dire threats were issued against protestors, a *cordon sanitaire* thrown around Sandton and an undeclared state of emergency imposed. The mainstream media played its role well. Scare mongering was ratcheted up. Some gullible and nervous Sandton residents who evacuated their homes for the duration of the conference should be forgiven if they thought that a ground alliance of Zimbabwe war-veterans, Al-Qaeeda terrorists and black-clad Molotov wielding misfits were about to invade the sedate and opulent streets of their neighbourhood. Senior security officials unveiled high-tech surveillance equipment and behind the scenes, NIA operatives cajoled and intimidated those planning protests. Major marches organized by social movements were initially prohibited and then allowed at the last minute. It was obvious to the powers-that-be that protestors from South Africa's dusty townships, sprawling informal settlements and impoverished rural areas were determined to exercise their hard won rights.

The repression leading up to, during and after the WSSD is chronicled elsewhere. For South Africa's activists, unlike bewildered foreign delegates, this came as no surprise. Despite the political changes, repression has continued unabatedly, from the use of soldiers, insisted upon by some cabinet ministers against the truck drivers who blockaded the Mooi River Toll Plaza in 1994, the harassment of anti-eviction, anti-privatisation groups and landless organizations around the country, the hounding of undocumented migrants and refugees, to the restrictions placed on solidarity activists and striking workers.

The aim of this article is not to describe this litany of repressive acts both by the police and private security companies at the behest of state structures. (2) Rather it is aimed at uncovering the true nature of the post-apartheid state, why and when repression will be used, how it articulates with globalisation and the response of South Africa's activists in the new social movements.

THE POST-APARTHEID STATE

In his recent book 'An Ordinary Country', Neville Alexander makes the salient point that,

...what we used to call the apartheid-capitalist system has simply given way to the post-apartheid-capitalist system. The jargon of those who make the decisions has changed (everyone has become 'non-racial' and anti-racist), a few thousand black middle class people have boarded the gravy train and are being wooed into the ranks of the established (white) elite, but the nature of the state has remained fundamentally unchanged (3).

While Alexander concedes that there are important discontinuities between the apartheid and post-apartheid state such as the extension of the franchise to all and other liberal democratic rights, as well as a few personnel changes at the top, what continues are the dominant interests that determine the strategic thrust of the South African state.

Ownership and control of the commanding heights of the economy, the repressive apparatuses of the state, despite the ingestion of former guerrillas by the army and the police, the judiciary, the top echelons of the civil service, of tertiary education and strategic research and development, have remained substantially in the same hands as during the heyday of apartheid (4).

Imperialism's gamble in the late 80s and early 90s, that the ANC would be the 'valid interlocutor' and be able to control the mass movement (at least for the foreseeable future) has paid dividends. Over the past eight years the ANC has shown itself to be adept at managing and dissipating discontent and serving the interests of the local and international capitalist class. A point well understood by the NNP leader Marthinus van Schalkwyk, arguably the most class conscious Member of Parliament. In forming an alliance 'of the center' with the ANC, van Schalkwyk has castigated the DP for not understanding who the real opposition will be in time to come. For the NNP leader it is clearly "those to the left of the ANC alliance".

Mbeki's administration also fully understands the global conditions parodied by Castells:

... nation-states must ally themselves closely with global economic interests and abide by global rules favorable to capital flows, while their societies are being asked to wait patiently for the trickle-down benefits of corporate ingenuity. Also, to be a good citizen of a multilateral world order, nation states have to cooperate with each other, accept the pecking order of geopolitics and contribute dutifully to subdue renegade nations and agents of potential disorder... (5)

The South African state is striving to gain a place for the ruling class in this 'global pecking order' by leading regional and sub-regional cartels (African Union and the SADC), employing the justifying rhetoric of 'African Renaissance' and 'Black Empowerment' (the latter conveniently displacing the tranquilising discourse of the 'Rainbow Nation'), promoting the neo-liberal framework of NEPAD, the building of its military might and the shoring-up of its repressive apparatus.

No doubt, there are many state bureaucrats who genuinely feel they can make a difference to poverty, unemployment, inadequate education, health services and the welfare system. Culpability of this state of affairs, they insist, lies with the 'legacy of apartheid' and not the political and economic choices made by the 'new' state. They argue that they are able to negotiate the best possible terms in an unequal global economic system. As Miliband has argued, leaving aside the obviously corrupt and mendacious individuals found in most capitalist societies "The

trouble does not lie in the wishes and intentions of power holders, but in the fact that the reformers are the prisoners, and usually the willing prisoners, of an economic and social framework which necessarily turns their proclamations, however sincerely meant, into verbiage". (6) Despite their often-honourable intentions, these are most likely irreconcilable with the exigencies and capacities of the budgetary, financial and labour market policy of the capitalist economy. Also, lending one's technical skills to one or other bureaucratic organ of the state is not just that, but requires (wittingly or unwittingly) a contribution to the supervision and control of class resistance. The neo-liberal features of South Africa's macro-economic strategy and the elitist nature of the many black empowerment ventures express the real interests of the dominant political elite. The post-apartheid state is primarily the guardian and protector of these dominant economic interests and the guarantor of capitalist property relations.

Our erstwhile 'left' comrades who have illusions in the post-apartheid state and liberals view the state as an agent of a democratic social order with no inherent bias toward any class or group. For them, any lapse from 'impartiality' is occasional and accidental to the state's 'real' nature. They fail to understand the elementary truism that the state in a capitalist society is not neutral in relation to different classes. This misconception is the fount from which all sorts of reformist illusions arise.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CAPITALISM

For the moment, it is true that with some notable exceptions, the post-apartheid state has remained compatible with a range of civil and political liberties. Still, these rights and constitutional guarantees are tenuous and are sometimes subjected to severe limitations and constraints. Most importantly, civil and political rights are severely circumscribed by the socio-economic and political framework within which they exist (see Oupa Lehulere's article on GEAR and Human Rights) (7). Secondly, they are often infringed in practice (try and obtain 'consent' for a march without any hassle!) Finally, in times of crisis, constitutional guarantees in liberal democratic states have not prevented oppression of particular groups and that for all "their democratic and liberal rhetoric, these regimes have shown themselves capable of massive crimes in the protection of sordid interests". (8) Yet, it is perilous and wrong to believe that 'bourgeois freedoms' are of no consequence. A socialist critique of these freedoms should be that they are profoundly inadequate, and need to be extended, enriched and expanded by the radical transformation of the context, economic, social and political, which condemns them to inadequacy and erosion. The irony is that increasingly it is the left that is fighting to defend the very democratic rights that were promoted prior to 1994 from being whittled away. Human rights under capitalism are ephemeral and can be undermined when they are inconvenient or when the ideological state apparatus no longer is adequate to confirm subservience to class rule. Mandel captures this well:

The security of bourgeois political rule requires an acceptance of economic compulsion on the part of the great majority of the population who are not capitalist. This might be possible under normal circumstances. But from time to time sections of the masses rebel against the conditions of subordination, exploitation, and oppression in which they are locked...In order to reduce the risks or to see it through explosive moments, the bourgeoisie needs both an apparatus of repression- 'la violence sans phrases'- and an apparatus of ideological indoctrination of the exploited and oppressed above all of the wage earning proletariat. The bourgeois state thus plays a vital role for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production, without which capital accumulation cannot take place. (9).

THE VELVET GLOVE SLIPS - THE IRON FIST REVEALED

Promises made by the ANC in 1994 for a 'better life for all' and renewed in 1999 have not been kept. The chronic privation of millions and the continuing rise in unemployment signals the abject inability of the state to match performance with promise. Various social reforms and 'poverty alleviation' measures (such as 'free' electricity and water for some, cramped and tiny houses which progressively crumble, vitamin enriched food) are too trivial or ineffective. In the face of mass pauperization, the spending of R70 billion on armaments and R600 million on a presidential jet, exposes the reforms as hypocritical. A political system which increasingly shows itself to be a lame version of a truly democratic order through revelations of corruption, opportunism and the ease with which rich individuals and business buys political favour does not endear itself to the populace. In these conditions the post-apartheid state leans more heavily toward coercion and police power. When the consent to be ruled is questioned and reforms do not lift the pressure on the state, then "the state must arm itself with more extensive and more efficient means of repression, seek to define more stringently the areas of 'legitimate' dissent and opposition and strike fear in those who seek to go beyond it" (10). Along this slippery road lies the transition from 'bourgeois democracy' to authoritarianism, more likely than the gradual parliamentary road to socialism, SACP ideologues are wont to make us believe.

Globalisation, Repression and the 'War on Terror'

In addition to the apartheid-era laws such as the Regulation of Gatherings Act, an array of Bills, which give the security and intelligence agencies additional powers, are in the offing. These include the Interception and Monitoring Bill, Intelligence Services Bill, the Electronic Communications Security (Pty) Ltd Bill, National Strategic Intelligence Amendment Bill and the Anti-Terrorism Bill. (11). Under the propitious conditions created by Bush's 'war on terror' and our own small bands of violent right-wingers, laws will be passed and measures instituted giving the repressive state organs many arbitrary and sweeping powers. Since the bombing of the World Trade Center, countries around the world, taking their cue from the Bush administration, have cynically used the events on the 11th of September last year (9/11) as a pretext to intensify repression against social movements and increase punitive measures against refugees, asylum seekers and foreigners generally. This also entails greater and closer cooperation between different country's intelligence and security agencies. The recent arrests of Professor Jaime Yovanovic, a Chilean anti-fascist, Ann Eveleth a Landless People's Movement activist and John Pape from the International Labour, Research and Information Group is testimony to the South African repressive apparatus' willingness to cooperate. It must be borne in mind that even before the 9/11 events, US imperialism was on the lookout to aggressively promote its neo-liberal economic agenda throughout the world while stifling domestic unrest. In a prescient article written before 9/11 the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said argued, "orthodox catchphrases of globalisation such as 'free trade' and 'privatisation' are repeated like a mantra not as they seem to be - instigations for debate - but quite the opposite, to stifle, pre-empt and crush dissent"(12). The issue of dissent is inextricably linked to the imperialist agenda of economic neo-liberalism. To impose such a programme on the world requires co-operation between nation-states to promote large-scale repression.

Stalinist History

Accelerating and comfortable in this slide to authoritarianism is the historical lack of genuine internal democracy and a particular political culture within the Congress Alliance. The now discontinued journal *Searchlight South Africa* has narrated some aspects of the internal regime in the ANC camps from 1968 in Tanzania to the mid-eighties in Angola. It is a tale of ruthless punishment of dissenters, paranoia, brutal crassness, ethnic favouritism, sexual harassment and Gulag-like existence for those who dared criticize those in authority. According to *Searchlight*, "...ANC administrative bodies ruled over its elected bodies, the security department ruled over the administrative organs, and KGB trained officials - no doubt members of the SACP - ruled over the security apparatus. Over its own members, the ANC security apparatus ruled with all the arrogance of a totalitarian power"(13). For those of us in non-Congress left organizations in the eighties a direct line of connection existed between the ANC 'reign of terror' in its prisons and the killings (often through the horrendous 'necklace' method) of activists in the period 1984-1990. This was also the period where many left unionists were purged from Cosatu affiliates. Many of those accused for the excesses in the camps in exile, implicated in the harassment of left individuals in South Africa and responsible for the purging of left unionists, took up positions of authority in the post-1994 state apparatus. The recent rabid threats against 'ultra-leftists' and the craven *mea culpa* of Cronin and other ritual recanters indicates that the arrogance of totalitarian power is alive and well in the Alliance. The attempts at covering-up the corruption involved in the arms deal in late 2000, the sidelining of Andrew Feinstein, and the bizarre incident in mid-2001 where three leading ANC men, Tokyo Sexwale, Cyril Ramaphosa and Matthews Phosa were accused by the then minister of safety and security of 'plotting' to harm the president says much about the level of democracy within the ANC.

Criminal Justice and Capitalism

Besides repression against political activists, the South African police have embraced the aggressive policing methods of the Bratton strategy (named after a New York Police Commissioner) based on the 'broken windows' theory of conservative criminologists. The theory assumes that if you take care of minor offences such as public drinking, a sense of orderly regulation is created thus preventing more serious crime. Police officers are rewarded on the basis of arrests they make regardless of the nature of the 'crime'. A number of senior police officers including the businessman Meyer Kahn have visited the US to examine their 'successes'. In the US as in SA those who suffer the most as a result of the police's zeal are the homeless, the unemployed and foreigners. Often, the practice of 'zero-tolerance' gives pseudo-scientific legitimacy to petty, xenophobic and racist police behaviour. More starkly, the hundreds of deaths of prisoners every year in our overcrowded prisons, the violence of the tens of thousands of electricity cut-offs every month in townships around the country and the brutality against 'illegal foreigners' in the privately owned (largely by prominent ANC women) Lindela prison should be seen as part of the repression against the poor and the vulnerable.

For Christian Parenti, capitalism was born of state violence and repression will always be part of its genetic code. For Parenti, the criminal justice system plays an important role for capitalism. "Too much social democracy and people stop being grateful for poorly paid, dangerous work. So too with the converse, the link between state repression, labour markets and profits is indirect but not complicated. Repression manages poverty. Poverty depresses wages. Low wages increases the role of exploitation and that creates surplus value".(14)

NIYABASABA NA?! -THE ROAD AHEAD**

In the many nascent left social movements being formed around the country and the inspirational and creative practices of organisations like the Anti Privatisation Forum, Anti-Eviction Campaign groups, the Concerned Citizens Forum, Landless People's Movement, some civic, environmental, student and youth movements, a growing group of rank-and-file unionists and solidarity groups like the Palestinian Solidarity Committee and others, a new left ethic is taking root. While still tentative, it is founded on co-ordinating activities and supporting each other in the face of state repression. These organisations of the urban and rural poor contain many who have memory of past struggles, an understanding of the international situation and strong links with left movements elsewhere. Socialists and other anti-capitalists in these organisations are rapidly shaking off the blight of a debilitating sectarianism that characterised the left previously. While debate and polemics continue, often in a harsh way, there is a realization that our modes of behavior in our structures must instill attitudes that prefigure the society we aspire to. Miliband's plea is valid more than ever: "If socialist democracy is its aspiration for tomorrow, so must internal democracy be its rule today".(15)

The support provided by a range of progressive ngos and individuals who possess technical skills must be encouraged as long as it does not jeopardise the class autonomy and independence of the social movements. Already groups like the Indymedia Center, Khanya College, the Freedom of Expression Institute, a few community radio stations and various educational centers have forged links with the new social movements. It is important though not to gloss over our weaknesses, contradictions and vulnerabilities. The lack of a dedicated focus on gender issues, on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the difficulties of winning over many more organised workers and the stranglehold over these workers by the union bureaucracy, relations with refugee communities, issues of xenophobia and the very important but mundane issues of financial resources and national co-ordination remain unresolved. Many activists have realized this and the Education and Research Committee of the APF, in Johannesburg at least, have feverishly arranged many well attended forums in the past few months. Issues and areas under on going discussion range from NEPAD, struggles around water and electricity, the impending war on Iraq, the Palestinian struggle and education rights to tactics around the '94 elections and the building of a movement toward a mass workers' party.

Given the ferocity of police harassment, timely legal defence of various sorts is sadly lacking. Activists need to know their rights and if need be institute civil and criminal action against offending parties. A constitutional challenge to laws that hamper freedom of assembly and expression is necessary. We need to also challenge vindictive actions such as that which keep our comrades in jail for weeks on end ostensibly to verify their addresses! The welfare of jailed comrades and their families are also areas of concern. Also, the state's spokespersons and its sympathetic media are increasingly and routinely trying to portray members and particularly leaders of social movements as 'maladjusted' and marginal people with a natural proclivity for maverick or criminal behaviour. Thus, abuses of the civil rights of the targeted individuals are justified and solidarity work hampered.

We need to defend our organizations in various ways. Whether this defence requires using the law courts or preventative measures against physical attacks. The latter, of course, should not promote a militaristic culture as it did in some townships during the mid-80s. Political understanding and consciousness must always be at the forefront. While it is important to take state repression, surveillance and the role of *agent provocateurs* seriously, it is equally important not to scare people away and make us paranoid. An atmosphere can be created that sows divisions and discourages activism. There is a clear need though to rely on sensible and reliable information about safety and security for comrades, without diverting from our goals.

The only bulwark against a shift to authoritarianism is the ‘countervailing power’ of left wing social movements. A task made more imperative because of the taming of the trade union bureaucracy and the co-option of social-democratic leaders into the administration of the state. Large numbers of the population disillusioned by unfulfilled promises are increasingly vulnerable to the blandishments offered by all sorts of charlatans. Alexander’s warning of the ‘ethnic danger’ in this regard makes sense. “An opening for would-be popular saviours whose extreme conservatism is carefully concealed beneath a demagogic rhetoric of national renewal and social redemption, garnished, wherever suitable, with an appeal to racial and any other kind of profitable prejudice”.(16)

Only when left movements become a ‘hegemonic’ force in the words of Gramsci, only when they become a vast popular movement can they prevent a slide into authoritarianism. In the meantime, a compelling response to state repression requires increasing the numbers and the influence of our social movements so that repression and intimidation will not reduce our size and capacity, but enlarge both. Michael Albert poses the following question in response to the violent Italian police action against protestors in Genoa: “...what choices... will best restrain the military capacities of the state by creating conditions under which should they unleash their violence it will cost them more in lost public support than it costs us in harshly broken bodies?”. And answers:

... we need to make known the state’s violence against our dissent, of course. But we need to retain our priority focus on globalisation and capitalism, and on the vastly more widespread and deeper violence of these ubiquitous systems. We have to achieve growing popular support, growing movement commitment and insight, growing awareness of what we are doing and why we are doing it, and we have to simultaneously restrain the state’s preferred repressive options. Our movement must be busy being born, not dying.(17)

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

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**** Meaning “Are You Afraid”. The first line of a militant chant which was popular in the struggle against apartheid, resuscitated in the face of state repression.**

1. Bond, P (2001) *Against Global Apartheid: South Africa Meets the World Bank, IMF and International Finance*. University of Cape Town Press. p 127.
2. The role of the red ants, white ants and now blue ants, the killing of a UDW student by officials of a private security company and the role of consultants from the old apartheid security establishment needs to be thoroughly researched. The latter appear to have maintained strong links with the state machinery; they also behave with arrogant impunity and seem immune from prosecution.
3. Alexander, N (2002) *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa*. University of Natal Press. p.64.
4. Ibid. p.64
5. Quoted in Alexander pp163-4.
6. Miliband, R (1969) *The State in a Capitalist Society*. Quartet Books. p.242.
7. Lehulere, O (1998) Gear and Human Rights – A critical analysis of Gear from a Human Rights Perspective. Unpublished paper.
8. Miliband, R. op.cit. p. 238.
9. Mandel, E (1992) *Power and Money*. Verso. p.153.
10. Miliband, R op.cit. p. 243.
11. The *Interception and Monitoring Bill* like snoop laws elsewhere attempts to give security agencies and the police the legal right to have access to all electronic and phone communications. This will allow them to intercept and access e-mails, text messages, faxes and listen in on phone conversations. Internet companies will be forced to assist – or face huge fines and even prison sentences. Police will also have the power to force the handing over of computer passwords and encryption keys. The *Intelligence Services Bill* prevents any former member from divulging ‘classified’ information that may be ‘detrimental’ to state security. The *Electronic Communications Security (Pty) Ltd Bill* will create a company that invents electronic communication systems for operatives and intends to secure all sensitive government communications. The *Explosives Bill* will allow the police to obtain fingerprints and genetic samples from any suspect without a search warrant. The *Terrorism Bill* amongst other things proscribes protests against ‘internationally protected persons’ including war criminals and war-mongers such as Ariel Sharon and George Bush.
12. *Nation* 17/11/2001.
13. *Searchlight South Africa*. See articles by Bandile Ketelo et al, Paul Trewhela and Olefile Samuel Mngqibisa in numbers 5, 9, 10 and 11 of the magazine. 1990-1993.
14. Parenti, C (2001) The “New “ Criminal Justice System: State Repression from 1968 to 2001. *Monthly Review*. July 2001.
15. Miliband, R op.cit. p. 246.
16. Ibid. p.245.
17. Albert, M (2002) After Genoa, How Do We Protest? <www.zmag.org/Znetgenoa>