



THE POLITIC OF BLOOD

POLITICAL REPRESSION IN SOUTH AFRICA



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COVER PHOTO

An Anti-Eviction Campaign activist gazes at the construction site of the Delft transit camp, a 'temporary relocation area' for people evicted from shacks closer to the city. March 2009.

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In his famous speech from the dock in April 1964, Nelson Mandela spoke of ‘revolutionary democracy’ rooted in precolonial forms of collective deliberation and decision making. In a speech given in April 1982, Joe Foster, then General Secretary of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), stressed the need for workers ‘to build their own powerful and effective organisation’ allied to but independent of the elite-dominated national liberation movement, and to build democratic organisation and practices from the shop floor with the aim of attaining ‘greater worker participation in and control over production’. In May 1987, Murphy Morobe, a leader in the United Democratic Front (UDF), argued that ‘By developing active, mass-based democratic organisations and democratic practices within these organisations, we are laying the basis for a future democratic South Africa’.

However, during the transition from apartheid, the dominant conception of democracy among elites followed the general arrangements made at the end of the Cold War. A struggle waged by millions for the construction of popular democratic power and participatory forms of democracy was reduced to elections, the courts, a free commercial press, and the substitution of NGOs, now described as ‘civil society’, for democratic forms of popular organisation.

Much like the situation so well described by Peter Hallward in *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, an account of the 2004 coup in Haiti, politics came to be understood as a largely intra-elite contestation. Various factions of the elite spoke in the name of the most oppressed sections of society through a

form of paternalism deeply steeped in colonial ideas about the political capacities of impoverished black people.

On 18 December 1996 Mandela promulgated a new Constitution that enshrined an expansive version of the standard set of liberal rights, including the set of rights that protect free political activity. The bulk of South Africa's middle class, including its professional intellectuals, assumed that the new Constitution meant that the country had magically transcended the colonial authoritarianism of the past; the counter-authoritarianism that had festered in the African National Congress (ANC) in exile; and the militarisation of popular politics in some parts of the country in the latter years of apartheid and during the transition.

By the time the new Constitution was promulgated, the popular democratic forms of politics that had developed in the trade union movement following the Durban strikes in 1973, and then in community-based struggles that were linked together under the banner of the UDF from 1983, had been demobilised, drawn under the authority of the new ruling party or replaced by a set of NGOs.

Independent forms of self-organisation and popular demands for more participatory forms of democracy were frequently treated as criminal, as plots by foreign powers, or as machinations by remnants of the apartheid intelligence forces aimed at restoring apartheid. Frantz Fanon warned in 1961 of the 'incapacity of the national middle class to rationalize popular action, that is to say their incapacity to see into the reasons for that action'. That warning would prove all too prescient in post-apartheid South Africa.

For the first decade or so of the new order, state repression was often not acknowledged in the bourgeois public sphere. Accounts of repression by grassroots activists were largely ignored, disbelieved, or presented as consequent to an imputed ignorance about how the new democracy worked. When repression was acknowledged, it was generally seen as a hangover from the apartheid past that would soon be resolved by the magical powers of the new Constitution.

This began to change on 13 April 2011 when Andries Tatane, a school teacher and community activist, was shot dead by the police during a protest against general social abandonment, and, in particular, the state's failure to provide water to many of the residents in the small rural town of Ficksburg. Tatane was unarmed and the crowd of 4,000 that he led was peaceful. His murder was filmed and broadcast on television news. At least twenty-five people, and quite possibly considerably more, had been killed in protests before Tatane, and at least twelve activists had been assassinated. However, the fact that Tatane's murder was captured on film and screened on national television began to generate some understanding of the reality that repression was, in fact, a constitutive feature of the new order.

The state massacre of thirty-four striking mine workers in Marikana, a platinum mining town, on 16 August 2012 laid bare the authoritarian underside of the new order for all to see. Television news bulletins around the world screened footage of the massacre taken from behind one of the police lines. That footage showed crouching miners, armed with rudimentary weapons, running towards a police line. It did not show that the miners were running because they were

under attack from another police line, including armoured vehicles, from the rear.

Initial responses to the massacre in the bourgeois public sphere took the form of the mobilisation of an orgy of colonial stereotypes about the striking miners, including declarations of irrationality, superstition, attempts to cast the strikers as pre-modern subjects unfit for the modern world, and baseless claims about malevolent 'outside agitators'. It was repeatedly argued that the police had acted in self-defence. Careful reporting by Greg Marinovich began to break down the police account of the massacre, which had initially been uncritically repeated by much of the media. Later on, further reporting and academic work began to excavate the reasons for the strike, the long political traditions on which the strikers were drawing, and the forms of organisation that they had used.

In terms of state repression, Marikana remains the bloodiest stain on the accommodation between capital and the interests of the national bourgeoisie that has shaped the post-apartheid order. But Marikana did not arrive like a thief in the night.





Police barricade the entrance to the City Hall during a march of thousands of members of Abahlali baseMjondolo protesting against political repression, Durban, 8 October 2018.

Madelene Cronjé / New Frame

A History of Violence

The last years under the apartheid regime and the period of transition to the new order were extremely violent. The urban rebellion that began with the Durban strikes of 1973, and then gathered intensity with the Soweto uprising of 1976, had drawn in millions of protagonists by the 1980s. It was subject to severe repression.

From 1984 to 1993, there was often violent conflict between forces broadly aligned to the African National Congress (ANC) and the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo), a black consciousness formation. Between 1985 and 1995, there was sustained armed conflict between Inkatha, a conservative Zulu nationalist organisation, and the UDF, and then later the ANC. Often referred to as a civil war, this conflict, cast in Cold War terms with Inkatha backed by the apartheid state, is usually estimated to have cost more than 20,000 lives. It was fought most intensely in what were then the province of Natal and the KwaZulu Bantustan (Bantustans were spaces created on the US model of reservations for the removal or exclusion of African people from white South Africa), but there was also significant violence in and around Johannesburg. One result of this conflict is that politics in what would become the province of KwaZulu-Natal in 1994 became significantly militarised under the authority of a set of local power brokers, some of whom would carry their influence into the new order.

This violence, although largely ignored by the bourgeois public sphere, never stopped. A careful 2013 study by David Bruce, a researcher, counted 450 political assassinations in KwaZulu-Natal since the end of apartheid in 1994. The violence prior to the transition to bourgeois democracy had seen hundreds and, on occasion, even thousands of men mobilised into battle. After apartheid, assassinations were carried out covertly by professional assassins and were increasingly motivated by access to state resources rather than ideological differences. The bulk of these assassinations were the result of competition for power and resources within the ANC.



Street vendors at the Bara taxi rank during a joint patrol by the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and the South African Police Service (SAPS) during the COVID-19 lockdown in Soweto, Johannesburg. 1 June 2020.

Michelle Spatari / AFP / Getty Images

The First Stirrings of Independent Organisation

The campuses of historically black universities were among the earliest sites of organised popular contestation with the new state. The Freedom Charter, adopted by the ANC on 26 June 1955, after a process of collecting and collating popular demands, had declared that after apartheid 'Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal'. However, after apartheid formally ended, the ANC followed the World Bank model and insisted that impoverished families must pay fees to access university education. Every year, from the beginning of the post-apartheid period, students facing exclusion due to their inability to pay fees would organise to remain in the universities.

There was an attempt to demilitarise police after the end of apartheid, but they continued to make routine use of colonial policing technologies such as rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades. Student protests were routinely met with police violence. In some instances, universities also brought in militarised private security companies. When there were media reports, students were frequently cast – in high colonial fashion – as irrational, threatening, and, ultimately, barbarous.

On 30 November 1998, Simon Nkoli, an anti-apartheid militant who had also been a leading figure in the movement for gay liberation, died of an HIV-related illness in Johannesburg. On 10

December of that year the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) was founded by a group of activists in Cape Town in response to Nkoli's death. The TAC campaigned, ultimately successfully, for access to medication via the public healthcare system for people living with HIV and AIDS. Like Nkoli, Zackie Achmat, who emerged as the public face of the new organisation, had a strong history in both the struggles against apartheid, during which he was repeatedly imprisoned as a teenager, and for gay liberation.

In 1999, then President Thabo Mbeki – responding to the racism that saturated much of the popular and scientific discourse around HIV and AIDS – took a catastrophic misstep and denied the scientific evidence regarding the aetiology and treatment of AIDS. As a result, the TAC waged a growing struggle against both the pharmaceutical companies and Mbeki's denialism.

The TAC aligned itself to the ANC and had strong support from the ANC-allied trade unions. It engaged in exclusively non-violent forms of protest and made effective use of the courts, public protest, and the bourgeois public sphere, where it had powerful supporters and was generally well-regarded. Nonetheless, in an overture to the paranoia that was to have deadly consequences down the road, the TAC was presented within the ANC as a vehicle for a foreign conspiracy to undermine the party's authority.

On 16 May 2000, Michael Makhabane, a student, was shot dead by the police at point-blank range during a protest against exclusions on the campus of what was then the University of Durban-Westville. The police and the then head of the ANC Youth League, Malusi

Gigaba, lied about the murder. The police, using a deeply racialised fear of car hijackings to legitimate the murder, falsely claimed that Makhabane had attempted to hijack a passing car. In fact, he and other protestors had been unarmed.

In 2000 and 2001, a number of organisations were formed that would join the TAC to become the first generation of social movements in post-apartheid South Africa. This was a period in which popular grievances – in particular the failure of the ANC to deal with the land question, urban evictions, and disconnections from water and electricity – began to express themselves outside of structures affiliated to the ruling party.

In July 2000, the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) was formed in Johannesburg to oppose a move towards the commodification of services by the municipal government. The APF brought together a mixture of middle-class radicals, students, trade unionists, and grassroots affiliates and rapidly grew into a vibrant movement with pockets of support scattered across Johannesburg.

In November 2000, grassroots activists founded the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, usually abbreviated to the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), in Cape Town to oppose evictions and electricity disconnections. The AEC, which would go on to inspire the formation of the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign in the United States, became a significant actor in parts of Cape Town and engaged in militant forms of direct action.



Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) activists march to the Gauteng legislature protesting against the re-election of Qedani Mahlangu and Brian Hlongwa into an ANC provincial committee. Both politicians were embroiled in a public healthcare scandal in which 143 people died from causes including starvation and neglect, Johannesburg, 7 August 2018.

Sandile Ndlovu / Sowetan / Gallo Images

In July 2001, left NGOs led the formation of the Landless People's Movement (LPM) as a national network of NGOs and grassroots groups concerned with questions around land. At the same time, the Concerned Citizen's Forum (CCF) was formed in response to evictions and disconnections in the Bayview and Westcliffe neighbourhoods in Chatsworth, a township in Durban. It was led by a charismatic middle-class intellectual.

In October 2000, then president Mbeki told the ANC caucus in Parliament that the CIA was part of a conspiracy to promote the view that HIV causes AIDS. This paranoia would be extended to all of the new movements that emerged outside of the ANC, a number of which acquired solid evidence of state surveillance and penetration. Jane Duncan, an academic, writes that 'The heightened activities of ... [state intelligence] agents coincided with the establishment of social movements struggling for land and against the commodification of basic services'. Since this period, there have been numerous accounts of people in community organisations and social movements being approached with offers to provide information to, or undertake work for, state intelligence.

The APF, AEC, and CCF successfully politicised the widespread existing practice of making self-organised electricity connections, and the AEC developed a practice of mounting direct resistance to evictions and returning evicted people to their homes. These actions were seen as confrontational by the state and by much of the bourgeois public sphere and were frequently presented in criminal terms. Despite its links to the ANC, its avoidance of confrontational tactics, and its support from powerful public figures, such as Archbishop

Desmond Tutu, the TAC became a target of police violence. On 20 March 2001, its members were seriously assaulted by the police in Durban, resulting in the hospitalisation of five protestors.

Arrests on charges that could not be sustained in a trial but required multiple court appearances before charges were dropped or the matter went to trial became a routine experience for activists. For instance, on 6 April 2002, a bodyguard of then mayor of Johannesburg Amos Masondo fired live rounds on a protest organised by the APF against water and electricity disconnections, injuring two people. People in the crowd attempted to defend themselves with stones and eighty-seven were arrested and were made to appear in court multiple times before an application to dismiss the state's case was finally granted on 5 March 2003.

The AEC had emerged from a long and bitter history of struggle for access to land and housing in Cape Town. This had continued during the period of the transition. On 24 June 1992, the Solomon Mahlangu and Makhaza branches of the ANC in Khayelitsha, Cape Town organised a march to protest against rent increases, accompanied by a rent strike. On 22 July, one of the leaders of the march, Nelson Sithole, was assassinated in his home by masked men asking 'Why do you tell people not to pay rent?' The assassins were assumed to be police officers.

By the time the AEC was formed in November 2000, there was already sustained conflict between residents and the local state. With hundreds of people, the majority of them women, participating in open assemblies held twice a week, the AEC became a

genuinely popular force first in Mandela Park in Khayelitsha, and then elsewhere. On 26 June 2001, hundreds of AEC members went to the office of the provincial minister of housing in central Cape Town to request a meeting. They were tear gassed and forty-four people, including children and the elderly, were arrested. As with the mass arrest of APF supporters, the implication was clear – the ANC would treat the self-organisation of the black working class outside of the ruling party as a criminal matter rather than as an opportunity to deepen democracy and build popular power.

The AEC confronted relentless repression including violent policing, more than four hundred arrests, detention without trial, and the standard claim – inevitably racialised – that ‘outside agitators’ were the real force behind the movement. Despite the repression, by June 2002, the AEC was able to largely halt evictions in the areas where it was strong.

International Summits

The World Conference Against Racism was held in Durban in late August and early September 2001. Following the global cycle of protests at large summits, which had begun with the meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in November 1999, the new social movements joined conference delegates from around the world in a large march outside the summit in Durban. At this point it was clear that there were significant political differences regarding ideas about organisational practices, strategy, and ideology between, and sometimes within, these movements. Despite these differences, the march was a success and a bigger turnout was planned for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) to be held in Johannesburg in late August and early September 2002.

In the lead up to the WSSD, activists were questioned by intelligence, threatened, and arrested. A protest to demand the release of detained activists was met with police violence. At the same time, tensions within and between the movements were growing. On 31 August 2002, thousands of people marched from Alexandra, a site of black impoverishment, to Sandton, a site of corporate power. The symbolic power of the march was extraordinary, and it was widely proclaimed as a decisive moment in a struggle between the ANC and a new independent left over who had the most credible claim to sustaining the revolutionary tradition in South Africa. In retrospect, it was the high point of a cycle of organisation and struggle – not the beginning of a new surge.

After the march on the WSSD, the AEC was hit particularly hard by a new wave of repression. Max Ntanyana, an AEC leader who had first been jailed in 2002 while he was a shop steward in the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu), was subjected to repeated arrest and bail conditions that prevented him from participating in AEC meetings. He began to operate underground. In February 2003, he was found, abducted, and tortured by the police. The movement concluded that it had been infiltrated by undercover state agents. A confrontation with a person who admitted to being an undercover police officer resulted in further arrests and a prison sentence for Zandile Mbarane, an AEC member.

In an interview with scholar Mandisi Majavu, then police station commander in Khayelitsha Captain Rasimati Shivuri explained that: 'With the Anti-Eviction Campaign, they were breaking property [laws] and so that was the invitation for the police to come and infiltrate. Obviously, we are going to come in. That's why we knew each and every move they made'.



Political graffiti in Mandela Park, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, 2006.
Toussaint Losier

The Rebellion of the Poor

The political landscape began to shift in 2004. Beginning in shack settlements in Johannesburg, and soon spreading across much of the country, a dramatic new wave of popular protest emerged, which frequently took the form of road blockades and targeted local representatives of the ruling party. It came to be referred to as ‘the rebellion of the poor’. It was not unusual for thousands of people to participate in these protests. At least three unarmed people were murdered by the police during 2004 as popular protests spiralled across the country, beginning a steady escalation of arrests and fatal police violence towards protestors that would continue in the years to come.

It was common to hear protagonists in this new cycle of struggle – who organised outside of the ruling party, NGOs, and existing social movements – declare that they would withhold their vote from the ANC in protest. A general election was scheduled for 14 April that year and the LPM, which had begun to pull away from NGO control, took a ‘No Land! No Vote’ position, which was swiftly endorsed by the AEC. This position, which aimed to withhold the vote from the ANC without awarding it to any other party, had a strong resonance with popular sentiment in the new struggles that were emerging across the country. It was received as ‘anti-democratic’ by a range of actors, including journalists, NGO professionals, and state officials and was met with a further clampdown. On election day, fifty-seven members of the LPM were arrested in Soweto. The

following day, four activists, three of them women, were tortured in the holding cells of a local police station.

The LPM, now operating autonomously from NGO control, continued on a much smaller scale but with more militant politics. The CCF had collapsed, but the LPM and the AEC were both able to make a significant degree of common cause with the new rebellion. That rebellion arrived in Durban on Saturday, 19 March 2005. Around 750 residents of the large and densely populated Kennedy Road shack settlement barricaded a major road with burning tyres and mattresses and held it for four hours. There were fourteen arrests. This was a year of escalating protest and repression. On 12 July 2005, police assaulted and then opened fire on participants in a peaceful protest led by the TAC in Queenstown, in the Eastern Cape. There were numerous injuries and ten people were treated for gunshot wounds.

In Durban, the rupture with the authority of local ANC structures in the Kennedy Road settlement led to the formation of a new movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo ('residents of the shacks'). The movement was officially formed on 6 October 2005 when a meeting of thirty-two elected representatives from twelve settlements agreed that they would not vote in the local election set for 1 March the following year, and that they would organise themselves independently of the ANC. From the onset, this new movement of shack dwellers, some of the most marginalised and dishonoured people in society, was met with extraordinary paranoia and hostility by the state, the ruling party, and significant parts of NGO-based 'civil society'. The standard colonial tropes of criminality, irrationality, ignorance,

and (white) outside agitation were mobilised with an astonishing vehemence.

The local state publicly declared the new movement, which had no external funding at the time, to be a project of an agent of an unnamed foreign government and treated it as if it were an illegal organisation. Arrests, assaults, and threats were routine. Attempts to mount legal protests were summarily declared illegal and protesters were met with severe police violence, including the use of live ammunition, when they attempted to march in violation of unlawful bans on protest.

The political temperature escalated in the run up to the local government election scheduled for 1 March 2006. Sinethemba Myeni and Mazwi Zulu, both former members of the South African Communist Party (SACP), were assassinated in Umlazi, Durban after deciding to support an independent candidate in the election.

Abahlali baseMjondolo adopted a modified version of the 'No Land! No Vote!' LPM slogan in the form of 'No Land! No House! No Vote!'. This escalated tensions enormously. Jacob Zuma had been dismissed from his position as Deputy President in June 2005. In December that year he was charged with rape, and brought to trial in 2006. He and his supporters sought to organise support by building an explicitly ethnic form of mobilisation. This project acquired a significant political intensity in Durban and made

Abahlali baseMjondolo, a multi-ethnic organisation, which also had members of Indian descent and from migrant communities, even

more vulnerable. It was seen, and correctly so, to be undermining both the credibility of Zuma's claim to represent the poor and the ethnic basis on which he sought to organise support in Durban.

There were repeated attempts to prevent Abahlali baseMjondolo from engaging the media. Shortly before the election, the movement was invited to participate in a live television debate with the mayor of Durban in a community hall. When their delegation arrived at the hall, they were denied entrance. When they politely insisted on their right to enter the hall, they were assaulted and tear gassed by the police.

The day after the election, the police shot Monica Ngcobo, 22, dead in Umlazi as she passed a protest organised by comrades of Myeni and Zulu on the way to work. The police claimed that she had been shot in the stomach with a rubber bullet. The autopsy showed that she had been shot in the back with live ammunition.

On 12 September, S'bu Zikode and Philani Zungu, then the chairperson and deputy chairperson of Abahlali baseMjondolo, were on their way to participate in a live radio interview, despite having been warned by a senior ANC politician to stop talking to the media. They were stopped, arrested, and severely assaulted in a police station. When other Abahlali baseMjondolo members rallied at the police station to protest against the arrests, they too were beaten. Soon after this, the police locked down the Kennedy Road settlement and indiscriminately fired into the settlement with live ammunition. Resident Nondumiso Mke was shot in the knee.

The AEC was still a force in Cape Town. Following the violent eviction of 1,500 families from a state housing project, an occupation was organised along Symphony Way in Delft, Cape Town, from 1 February 2007 to 19 October 2008. The occupation was subjected to repeated police harassment and violence and, after months of courageous resistance, ended in defeat. It would be the last major struggle mounted by the AEC.

In May 2008, as the economic costs of the global financial crisis hit home, popular anger exploded in a deeply reactionary direction that wracked the country in the form of xenophobic pogroms, often accompanied by an ethnic dimension, leaving sixty-two people dead. In some instances, the mobs allied themselves with Zuma. There were cases in which local ANC leaders supported or participated in the attacks. This grim development placed further strain on popular organisations that were not organised on an ethnic or national basis, or that were simply opposed to xenophobia. Local political elites used a mixture of xenophobic, ethnic, and racial sentiment to present organisations like Abahlali, the AEC, and the LPM as illegitimate.

By 2009, the number of protests was ten times higher than it had been in 2004. Close to 5,000 people were being arrested every year at protests, and the police estimated that the average size of a protest was around 4,000 people. Media reports indicate that at least two protestors were killed by the police that year. In both cases, in a telling instance of much of the media's casual contempt for impoverished black people, the names of the dead were not given in the reports.



A woman walks with her belongings past a sign as hundreds of people from various African countries are evicted from the makeshift camp they are occupying around the Central Methodist Mission in Cape Town, 1 March 2020. Rodger Bosch / AFP / Getty Images

Zuma's ascension to the presidency on 9 May of that year exacerbated the ANC's turn to divisive ethnic-based politics in Durban, and further increased the politicisation of the intelligence services. Agents were inserted into unions, popular movements, media houses, and NGOs, and these kinds of organisations were subjected to surveillance.

In Johannesburg, the APF was in decline. In Durban, Abahlali baseMjondolo, which spoke a language that resonated with the insurgent humanism and demand for the recognition of dignity often present in the ongoing rebellion of the poor, was growing. It had become highly effective at stopping evictions through the use of direct action and the courts. The local state responded by passing legislation that, much like previous colonial legislation, sought to undermine the rights of occupiers and force land owners to evict. The movement was successful in having the new legislation overturned in the Constitutional Court on 14 October 2009.

On 26 September, Abahlali baseMjondolo was attacked, in a mode of repression typical of the late 1980s, by a group of armed men identifying themselves in ethnic terms and as ANC supporters. The mob declared its intention to kill the movement's leaders and went door to door looking for specific people and destroying homes. After some hours, the attack was eventually met with a counter-response organised in ethnic terms and two lives were lost in the ensuing conflict. The attack was carried out with the tacit support of the police and the explicit sanction of senior politicians, one of whom arrived at the settlement after the attack to announce that the movement had been 'disbanded' by the state.

Twelve members of the movement, all from an ethnic minority, were arrested on a charge of murder and held in prison, where they were severely abused. For months after the initial attack the homes of the movement's leading members continued to be attacked, forcing the movement to operate underground for several months. During this period, the movement was subjected to a campaign of virulent slander. The case against the twelve arrested Abahlali members was shown to be a crude frame-up and thrown out of court on 12 July 2011.

On 21 May 2010, the LPM organised a march of around 3,000 people in eTwatwa, on the eastern outskirts of Johannesburg, against a local ward councillor who was allegedly corrupt and had engaged in brazen xenophobia and ethnic chauvinism. The march resulted in open conflict with local political elites and their supporters and brutal police attacks, including the use of live ammunition. LPM activist Priscilla Sukai was shot dead by the police. This was the last major struggle mounted by the LPM.

In 2010, the ANC, moving in an increasingly authoritarian direction under Zuma, decided to remilitarise the police, which had been demilitarised after apartheid. A specialised and highly militarised unit was set up to deal with protests. David Bruce has noted that from 2010, the use of 'brutal methods' by the police to contain protest became routine across the country, including the use of live ammunition, firing rubber bullets at close range, and deliberately targeting leaders. The general militarisation of the governance of impoverished people was not limited to the police. By this time, most of the major municipalities were using dedicated armed units

to effect evictions, and the use of rubber bullets had become routine. One study shows that between February and June 2011, eleven people were killed by the police at protests.

At the same time, the intelligence agencies were centralised into one organisation and given a new, more repressive mandate. Jane Duncan observed that ‘The political intelligence-gathering mandate has ... allowed the government to normalise spying on domestic political groupings on the most tenuous of grounds’.



Eviction of 1,500 residents carried out by the 'Red Ants', a private security company whose name comes from the red outfits they wear during these removals, in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, 12 August 2015.

Cornell Tukiri / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images

After Marikana

The massacre in Marikana on 16 August 2012 resulted in another significant shift in the political landscape, and had a major impact on grassroots and trade union politics. There was a new militancy, new land occupations across the country were named Marikana, and from late August 2012 to early December 2012, farm workers struck in small agricultural towns in the Western Cape. The police responded with severe violence, and three strikers were killed.

By 2013, it was clear that the ANC's hold on the trade union movement was breaking. The bulk of the mineworkers in the platinum belt abandoned the ANC-aligned National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) for the independent Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu). The ANC accused Amcu of being guided by 'white foreign nationals' intent on the 'destabilisation of our economy'. Although the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) – the largest and most militant union in the country – was still affiliated with the ANC-aligned Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), it was in open revolt and had called for Zuma to be removed as President.

At least twelve people were killed by the police during local community-organised protests that year. This was also the year in which Abahlali baseMjondolo suffered its first assassination. Grassroots activists began to speak of 'the politic of blood'.

Nkululeko Gwala, an Abahlali baseMjondolo leader in Cato Crest, Durban, was assassinated on 26 June 2013, hours after senior ANC leaders made public threats against him. On 29 September of the following year, Thuli Ndlovu, the chairperson of the Abahlali baseMjondolo branch in KwaNdengezi, Durban, was assassinated. A few weeks later, Mobeni Khwela, an SACP activist, was also assassinated in KwaNdengezi. Three years later, two ANC councillors were convicted of the murder of Ndlovu, a rare event in a context in which there is usually implicit official sanction for political assassinations.

On 1 March 2014, the Workers' Association Union (WAU) was launched in Rustenburg, a city in the platinum belt. It was later shown to have been a project of state intelligence. Since the early days of the TAC, the state had sought to support and engage organisations that were aligned with the ruling party while maligning and repressing independent organisations. This is unlikely to have been an isolated case of intelligence involvement in setting up organisations designed to rival popular organisations engaged in open dissent.

A general election was held on 7 May 2014. A document leaked in 2016 showed that state intelligence, fearing a 'South African Arab Spring', had planned to resort to the 'maximum use of covert human and technical means' to counter this imagined threat. During this time, at the height of the repressive kleptocracy run by Zuma, assassinations began to target activists in a wider variety of organisations.

On 6 August 2014, three Numsa shop stewards, Njabulo Ndebele, Sibonelo Ntuli and Ntobeko Maphumulo were assassinated in

Isithebe. On 7 November 2014, Numsa was expelled from Cosatu as a result of a resolution to not support the ANC in the election earlier that year. This, along with the implacable opposition to Zuma from Abahlali baseMjondolo, now the only remaining popular movement of any significant size, further weakened Zuma's claim to represent the poor and working class and opened up the possibility for trade union and community struggles to be reconnected in the way that they had been in the 1980s.

After Numsa's break from the ANC, a number of incidents were documented in which attempts were made by state intelligence to recruit Numsa members. As had long been the case with independently organised social movements, leading figures in the union were also followed and their computers stolen under suspect circumstances. In December 2014, Numsa called a press conference in response to the circulation of an anonymously authored document that, claiming to be written by 'concerned members within Numsa', professed to expose a 'secret regime change plot' by Numsa's leadership. As Numsa noted, it was similar to other documents that had been produced by factions of the intelligence services in previous smear campaigns.

In 2015, the student struggle arrived in the elite and former white universities. Intersecting with the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, it began to ask deep questions about curricula and colonial symbols. This struggle was subjected to the same police violence, as well as violence from private security companies, that had been a routine feature of life on black working-class campuses for years. There was also significant penetration of the movement by

state agents tasked with directing the movement towards a 'patriotic' agenda. But this time the repression was placed at the centre of the bourgeois public sphere.

One of the most high-profile activist assassinations in this period was that of Sikhosiphi Rhadebe on 22 March 2016. Rhadebe was the chairperson of the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC), which opposes mining on community land on the Wild Coast, in the Eastern Cape.

In Inchanga, outside of Durban, a number of people were killed as tensions escalated between the SACP, which was now critical of Zuma, and the ANC in the run up to the local government elections on 3 August 2016. The immediate trigger for the violence was a dispute over the nomination of a candidate for the position of ward councillor in the election. In the end, the SACP ran an independent candidate who won with a solid majority. The violence continued after the election; figures given for the number of people killed, the bulk of them SACP members and supporters, range from twelve to twenty-five.

In May 2018 Abahlali baseMjondolo began to confront another wave of repression in Durban. On 21 May 2018, S'fiso Ngcobo, a local leader in the movement, was assassinated. On 29 May 2018, Zikode survived a car accident. A mechanic certified that the cause of the accident was deliberate tampering with the vehicle. On 12 June 2018, the then mayor of Durban, Zandile Gumede, publicly repeated the longstanding claim that Abahlali baseMjondolo, which at this point had more than 55,000 members in good standing in



A member of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) sings during a May Day rally at Tembisa stadium on the periphery of Johannesburg, 1 May 2016.
John Wessels / AFP / Getty Images

Durban, was a front for an unnamed 'outside force'. At the same meeting, ANC councillor Nelly Nyanisa declared that 'We will deal with them' and advised, as the ANC had done since 2006, that they would refuse to engage with Abahlali baseMjondolo and would instead work with Shack Dwellers' International, a liberal international NGO.

On 28 June, Zikode was contacted by an intelligence officer and warned that state intelligence, which was now split between pro and anti-Zuma factions, was aware of a confirmed plan for a hit on Zikode's life. This was confirmed by other reliable sources. Zikode, refusing the state's offer to go into a witness protection programme in Cape Town, went underground in Durban for the second time. On 8 October, thousands of the movement's members marched through central Durban to protest against political repression. At that point, the movement had lost eighteen members as a result of assassinations, police violence, and violent evictions. The statement issued by Abahlali on the day of the march declared that:

Since our movement was founded in 2005 we have faced waves of repression including assault, arrest, torture in police custody, organised campaigns of slander, the destruction of our homes, death threats, the murder of our members during protests and evictions, and the targeted assassination of our leaders. The price for land and dignity has been paid in blood.

The assassination of trade union leaders has continued. Bongani Cola, the deputy chairperson of the Democratic Municipal and

Allied Workers Union of South Africa (Demawusa), which is independent of the ANC, was assassinated in the city of Port Elizabeth on 4 July 2019.

The intersection between multi-national mining companies, traditional authority, and political elites continues to result in sustained violence against anti-mining community activists. On 26 January 2020, Sphamandla Phungula and Mlondolozu Zulu were assassinated in Dannhauser, a coal mining town in rural KwaZulu-Natal. On 25 May 2020, Philip Mkhwanazi, who was both an anti-mining activist and an ANC councillor, was assassinated in the small coastal town of St. Lucia, also in KwaZulu-Natal. A month later, Mzothule Biyela survived an assassination attempt in the area governed by the Mpukunyoni Tribal Authority, also on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal.

Although repression continues, there is no question that the situation improved once Zuma, and then some of his key allies, were removed from office. However, the South African state remains extraordinarily and routinely violent towards impoverished black people. It is no exaggeration to describe it, in Achille Mbembe's terms, as a necropolitical formation. The police kill people, the vast majority of them impoverished and black, at a per capita rate that is three times higher than that of the police in the United States. Between April 2012 and March 2019, the police were under investigation for more than 2,800 deaths, over 800 cases of rape, and more than 27,000 cases of torture or assault.

By the end of the May 2020, the police had arrested more than 230,000 people and killed 11 while enforcing the coronavirus lockdown, which began on 23 March 2020. The army killed a twelfth person.

The lockdown, which has been particularly stringent in South Africa, has weakened popular organisations. Trade unions draw their strength from the shop floor and exercise their most effective means of disruption via the strike. With workplaces closed, retrenchments rapidly escalating, and public gatherings banned, their power is weakening. The same is true for Abahlali baseMjondolo, which now organises in five provinces and has more than 75,000 members in good standing. Their strength is drawn from their land occupations, and their most effective means of disruption is the road blockade. Their occupations have come under relentless armed attack, including, on occasion, by the military during the lockdown, and the road blockade is now as difficult to effect as the strike.

There are, plainly, figures and currents in the ruling party that have acquired a taste for the new forms of state control enabled by the lockdown, including the deployment of the army in the streets. These authoritarian currents within the ANC have significant support among the middle classes, and some influential figures in the media. In the current conjuncture, the immediate future of independent popular organisations outside of and to the left of the ANC is uncertain.





Women protest against evictions and 'relocations' to a new housing development in the Siyanda shack settlement in Durban, March 2009.

Kerry Ryan Chance





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