

Analysis

South Africa: Durban food riots turn the wheel of history

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South Africa's social crisis has erupted as the people Cyril Ramaphosa and Jacob Zuma deem expendable, those who bear the brunt of the past and of the social costs of Covid-19, appropriate the bread of life.

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12 July 2021: A factory in the Sea Cow Lake area of Durban burns. Continuing impoverishment and stress from the Covid pandemic have led to food riots as hungry people target supermarkets. (Photograph by Gallo Images/ Darren Stewart)

At the time of writing the riots engulfing Durban and other towns in KwaZulu-Natal, and also present in parts of Gauteng and the Eastern Cape, have the kind of scale and velocity that makes definitive statements unwise. There are sure to be local differences in how things are playing out, and new developments can and will happen at any moment. The full consequences of the decision to send in the army, made just as this article went to press, are not yet clear.

But one thing is: Durban has been engulfed by food riots. New Frame spoke to grassroots activists across the city on 11 and 12 July and without exception every one of them said the riots are about food, not Jacob Zuma. It is food shops that have been consistently targeted, and food that has been appropriated at a massive scale.

Of course, the spark was lit by the displays of impunity and acts of disruption and arson carried out by Zuma supporters, but this was the spark to the tinder. With mass impoverishment, unemployment and hunger, the only surprise is that this did not happen earlier.

The scale of the riots is not the only new development. The protests that have regularly been organised from shack settlements across the country since 2004, and in Durban since 2005, have generally taken the form of road blockades – of disruption rather than appropriation. Now there is popular appropriation of food on an extraordinary scale.

Across the country the waves of popular protest from 2004 have typically taken place close to shack settlements or other places where impoverished people live, which are usually on the urban periphery. In Durban, unlike in other cities, the hilly topography has enabled land occupations in or close to spaces of elite residence, commerce and education. This has meant that in this city what has been termed “the rebellion of the poor” does not always happen in the urban periphery. But the riots currently underway have, for the first time, targeted shops and malls in the centre of middle class

areas such as Glenwood and Hillcrest.

When road blockades first began to be a regular feature of our politics, people would generally flee when attacked by the police. If there was a fightback, it usually took the form of stones lobbed from a safe distance. In recent years that has begun to change, particularly during evictions, with people using makeshift shields to hold their ground. Police officers or other armed personnel in the employ of the state have been severely assaulted when captured. Right now, people in crowds are firing back at the police. This is a significant new development.

Another new development is that in at least one area, Glenwood, these riots are starting to draw in students and people from among the middle classes. Historically, when students and a chunk of the middle classes throw in their lot with impoverished people, extraordinary social turmoil and change - for good or ill - becomes possible.

The police have lost control in many areas. Where they are present they are often reported to just be standing by while food is appropriated. In at least one case the police have taken food for themselves. It seems likely the army will crush the protests, although quite possibly at a very high social cost. But the fact that with enough people on the streets, and gathered with sufficient resolve, the police can so easily be overwhelmed will not be forgotten.

Targeting supermarkets

Some of the initial acts organised by the pro-Zuma forces were carried out with the same modus operandi on the same terrain as recent xenophobic violence, often ethnically inflected: the Mooi River Toll Plaza and hostels in Johannesburg. But at the moment New Frame is not getting reports of a xenophobic dimension to the riots. However, many activists have expressed concern that the riots could mutate into a xenophobic or ethnic form. Some have expressed the view that this may be imminent. In some areas local ANC committees are actively encouraging the riots and actively seeking to give them an ethnic inflection, presumably thinking that this will bolster the Zuma project. But with no social force with the organisational reach and authority to direct the riots, their trajectory will be determined in the moment and within the tumult.

Riots are always messy, and elite eyes will always seek to reduce a riot to an appropriated TV or an attack on a bystander. The large swatches of the media always on the hunt for sensation, and with a worldview shaped by profound prejudice towards people who are both impoverished and Black, will mask rather than illuminate the social forces, desires and moral orientations at work. But there is a very clear logic at play at the time of writing, a logic that must be acknowledged: people are hungry, they have been hungry for a very long time, the state has failed them and they are now appropriating food on a massive scale.

12 July 2021: Police stop a woman outside a supermarket in the central business district of Durban after food riots swept through the area. (Photograph by Gallo Images/ Darren Stewart)

Although other buildings have been attacked, and a mosque burnt in circumstances that are not yet clear, the primary target of the riots so far is supermarkets. There is an implicit logic to this. In South Africa, the food system is overwhelmingly controlled by supermarkets, and when most people do access some money, most of it goes into the supermarkets. They are also, of course, sites of a vast accumulation of wealth by elites.

It is not just the trajectory of the riots, and what the deployment of the army will mean, that cannot yet be determined. It is also their aftermath. Many grassroots activists have expressed concern

about how the destruction under way may affect their access to food in the coming days and the jobs of people who depend on the supermarket system. There is deep concern about escalating violence, and disgust at the political and personal opportunism that has been present.

It is also possible, though, that food riots on this scale and intensity may force a reckoning with the fact that our society is not just unspeakably unjust, it is also simply not viable.

Zuma and Ramaphosa to blame

Zuma's kleptocracy, which was violently repressive and deeply unpopular, offered nothing to the majority. In recent days and weeks, its defenders have been its beneficiaries, people in and around the kleptocratic faction of the ANC. But the idea, more or less ubiquitous in much of the elite public sphere, that Cyril Ramaphosa is a credible, or even redemptive, alternative is profoundly wrong and profoundly dangerous.

It was Ramaphosa's government that plunged already desperate people into an even more desperate crisis when the initial hard lockdown was imposed without meaningful social support. It was Ramaphosa's government that policed that lockdown with militarised and frequently lethal violence. Food is a basic human need, but Ramaphosa's government failed to support the millions of people who went hungry with anything approaching an adequate response. The Covid-19 grant was paltry, didn't reach huge numbers of people and was then - inexplicably, callously, recklessly and outrageously - removed.

Zuma and Ramaphosa are both responsible for the crisis that has now exploded into riot. Whatever the trajectory of the riots, and whether they are crushed by the army, burn themselves out in a few days or continue, cohere around a central demand and gather more force, they have happened and it is now clear that there can be no fantasies of business as usual.

Food has been central to most revolutions. It's not for nothing that, beginning in July 1917, "Peace, Land and Bread" became the primary slogan of the Russian Revolution. The French Revolution of 1789 was preceded by years of food riots. Two days before the Bastille - an armoury, political prison and symbol of monarchical authority - was stormed on 14 July 1789, 52 wagons of wheat were seized.

More recently, riots over access to food, sometimes termed "bread riots", became increasingly common around the world during the 1980s as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund imposed socially and economically devastating policies on subordinated countries. The situation was exacerbated after the financial crisis that began in 2007. The Arab Spring, beginning in late 2010 and gaining its real power in 2011, is usually ascribed to the intersection of anger about corrupt and repressive states and mass youth unemployment, but many analysts also argue that food prices were a key factor.

As New Frame noted in a recent editorial, it is difficult to think of any society on the planet that has sustained the almost unfathomable rates of youth unemployment that we have in South Africa without some kind of massive social upheaval. That reality, combined with systemic hunger, makes it clear as the rising sun on a winter's day that we inhabit what Frantz Fanon called "a non-viable society, a society to be replaced".

The riots have put a definitive end to liberal delusions. By obsessively focusing on intra-elite politics and centring corruption as our fundamental problem, those delusions mask the deeply systemic nature of our social crisis. The fantasy that a combination of the affirmation of the rule of law and

Ramaphosa's programme of austerity offer a route out of the current political crisis is predicated on the assumption that the social crisis does not need to be addressed, that it is a reality with which we can live.

Right now, the people who are very seldom included in the elite public, the people whose lives are implicitly deemed expendable by both the Zuma and Ramaphosa factions, along with most liberal commentators, are on the streets and in the malls. It should now, finally, be clear that, in the end, they will make history and that the social crisis is now so severe, so overwhelming, that the old game of imagining politics as an intra-elite contestation is over.

These are days of fire, days of danger, possibly grave danger. They are days that will exact an extraordinary social cost. It is possible that they may also be followed by a recognition that the social crisis must be addressed as a matter of extreme urgency. It is certain that these are days that will, in the future, mark a moment of rupture that delineates a before and an after.

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P.S.

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