

The apartheid regime is now under its greatest-ever threat. Parts of South Africa have become virtually ungovernable. The government's reform strategy is in tatters.

Apartheid's Crumbling Bastions

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THE CURRENT UPSURGE in black revolt in South Africa is unprecedented. Never before has the country experienced such a wave of strikes, boycotts, street demonstrations, and reprisals against blacks who collaborate with the apartheid system. The present challenge to the apartheid state differs from previous crises in a number of significant ways.

First, the amount of separate protests is more widespread than ever before. Across the length and breadth of South Africa black communities of every group – African, Indian, and so-called Coloureds – have taken action. Second, the protests are better organised. Week-long boycotts of white businesses, such as the one which has paralysed Port Elisabeth, require a high degree of local unity and coordination. Rent strikes, bus boycotts, and stayaways from school need similar mobilisation.

Third, they are more political than before. Blacks have successfully destroyed the apartheid-supporting local administrations in numerous townships by persuading or forcing councillors to resign. The Soweto disturbances of 1976 hit at the symbols of white control – the attempt to enforce the Afrikaans language in schools, and the government-subsidised local beer-halls – but the new protests go to the heart of one of the key mechanisms for maintaining apartheid, the co-option and corruption of blacks to serve in local government.

Fourth, the protests are more closely linked to industrial militancy, as African workers have gone on strike or occupied workplaces in a number of areas. Fifth, they are more 'military'. The skills of making petrol bombs and building barricades have been spreading and parts of some townships or in a few places whole townships have become 'no-go areas'. The

army and police can only enter with armoured vehicles and routine foot-patrolling has become impossible. Because of the shortage of weapons available to blacks the army and police have not yet come up against sniper fire or sustained fire, but it may be only a matter of time before this happens. The African National Congress has urged black policemen to prepare to 'turn your guns against your masters' and to smuggle weapons out of the government's armouries.

Another Iran?

While the scale and sophistication of the black rebellion has increased dramatically since the last upsurge in 1980, morale on the white minority's side has never been weaker. President Botha's efforts to bring in a series of 'reforms', such as the setting up of parliamentary chambers for Indians and Coloureds, were intended to split the black community, and persuade international opinion to give Pretoria more time. They have served only to split the Afrikaaner community as it sees precious shibboleths under challenge.

The regime's response to the latest protests of imposing a State of Emergency, arresting 1,500 people in a few days, giving the police orders to shoot to kill and encouraging the growth of officially-condoned assassination teams or 'death squads' – a Latin American phenomenon new in South Africa – has shown its traditional recourse to severe repression at the slightest provocation. Some of the regime's Western backers, most notably the French government, have even begun to question the system's stability. France has become the first Western government to distance itself from Pretoria by imposing limited economic sanctions.

It is not surprising that at its recent



1985. Trade unionist, Andries Raditsela's funeral

conference in Zambia, the ANC's leading figures, dominated numerically now by members of the 'Soweto generation' who went abroad for training after the 1976 events, decided that the movement should no longer prepare only for protracted people's war. A general insurrection was a possibility, remote still, but no longer just a theoretical option at some unforeseeable date.

Some activists have compared the situation to the weeks before the fall of the Shah in Iran, if only to suggest that events in South Africa have become so fluid that all previous scenarios for change must be revised. Differences from Iran can of course easily be noted. The South African army, both its officers and its white conscripts, are still on the side of the regime, and will not switch loyalties as suddenly as the Shah's army. The South African ruling class is still solidly against power-sharing and will continue to support Botha. His is not a personal regime. Nevertheless, the range of black protest, and the isolation of the white minority could crack its willingness to resist at some unpredictable but not so distant moment. While still not high, the possibility cannot wholly be discounted.

Reforms that backfired

The effectiveness of the current protest movement has its origins in the second half of the 1970s when thousands of African workers began to form 'unregistered' trade unions. Divisions among the business community, with some entrepreneurs pushing for a more settled, trainable, black labour force instead of the migrant system, combined with the rapid growth of the economy to weaken ruling-class resistance to the formation of trade unions. In 1979

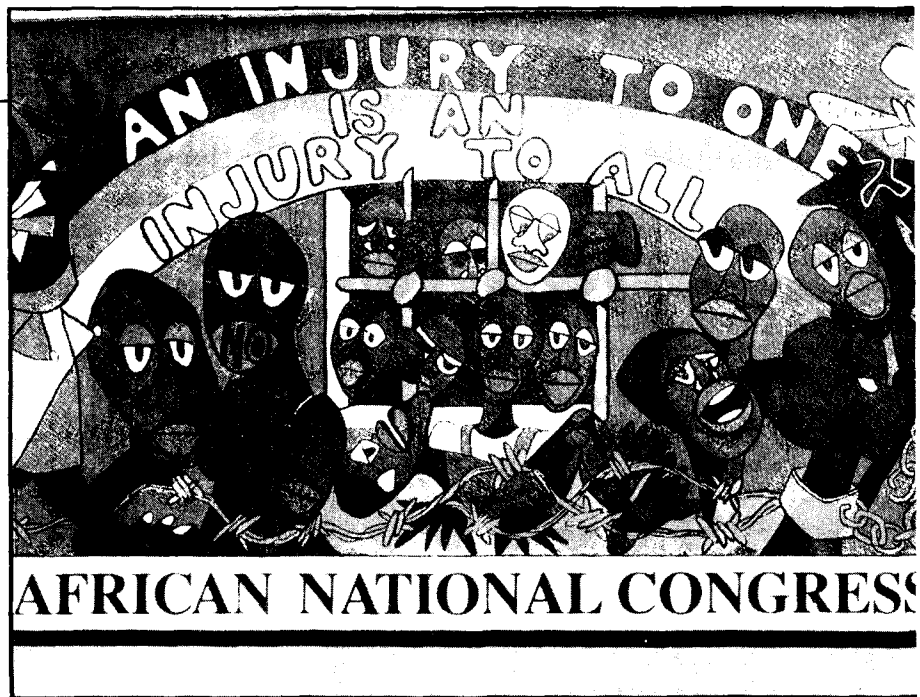
the government-appointed Wiehahn Commission recommended that in order to stabilise this trend, black trade unions should be legalised. At the same time the regime tightened up the system of 'influx control' under which the supply of labour to the economy is enforced through the compulsory carrying of passes by Africans. New rules gave security of tenure to those urban blacks who had lived for some time in the townships reserved for Africans on the edge of white cities but forced employers to dismiss workers who had no legal residence rights. They were expelled to the countryside, to the so-called 'homelands', the largely unproductive 13% of South Africa's territory which has been set aside for Africans. Whites have the best 87%. The aim was to split the black population and create a minority of relatively privileged urban blacks with higher earnings, and a stake in the system, but still no political rights.

In the early 1980s the plan began to collapse as the world recession and the collapse in the gold price hit the South African economy. Layoffs of black workers, rising inflation in the cities, and the illogicalities and barbarity of the mass resettlement of thousands in the homelands produced a general mood of frustration which over-rode the regime's efforts to split the black population.

In 1983 the Botha regime unintentionally gave a new impetus to political protest by pushing ahead with a number of administrative and constitutional changes designed further to divide the black community. A shift from the whites-only Westminster parliamentary system towards a three-chamber arrangement for whites, Indians, and Coloureds offered the African majority nothing. Under the Black Local Authorities Act which came into force in August that year all they were given was the chance for urban Africans to have local government.

The two measures reaffirmed in the most dramatic way the fact that in spite of all the talk of 'reform' apartheid was to be enshrined and made permanent for the foreseeable future. The only positive element was that in order to present the outside world with a facade of democracy the regime provided for elections under the new arrangements.

The elections became a focus for mobilising mass opposition to apartheid. It was a classic case of an imposed 'reform' which backfired, — somewhat similar to the 1972 Pearce Commission in Rhodesia, the nationwide consultative process suggested by Britain, which was meant to show that



Africans were grateful for concessions negotiated by Ian Smith and Sir Alec Douglas Home but in practice allowed the nationalist movement to mobilise resistance throughout the country.

The emergence of the UDF

To coordinate opposition a new organisation called the United Democratic Front was formed in August 1983. The UDF brought together some 400 groups (grown now to 700) comprising civic associations, trade union branches, women's organisations, cultural associations, and religious groups. It included people from the various ethnic communities. A majority of Indians and Coloureds refused to be co-opted by the Botha scheme. They felt the new Assemblies were a meaningless sop and they rejected the exclusion of the African population. The once-powerful Natal Indian Congress was revived and a similar Indian body was formed in the Transvaal. Many in the Coloured community were angered by the Coloured Labour Party's acceptance of Botha's scheme and mobilised Coloured opposition to it. The UDF decided to campaign for a boycott of the promised elections.

The first local elections to black community councils were held in November 1983, and were an immediate success for the boycott campaign. Only 60,000 people voted in Soweto out of a population of close to 2 million. The next August the turn-out in the elections for the Indian and Coloured Assemblies was less than 20%.

The result was a humiliation for the regime and a triumph for the black majority. It reinforced the authority of the UDF and its constituent organisations. They gained new strength for their local struggles against rent increases, high fares, under-funded local schools, and work-

place grievances. The diversity and density of the new political activism, the emergence of community newspapers and underground leaflets, and the number of small scale victories in trade union campaign each one adding a new sense of militancy in spite of the regime's harassment of UDF leaders, was not adequately reported in the international media, giving a false sense of quiet when the reality was an unprecedented degree of nationwide politicisation.

At each outburst of black protest the regime responded with repression, but only inspired more protest. Last August, a precursor to the State of Emergency recently imposed in 36 areas of South Africa, the police minister, Mr Louis I. Grange, tried to deal with a wave of rioting over rent and fare increases by banning any meeting of more than two people discussing politics 'or which is in protest against or in support or in memoriam of anything'. The ban covered most of the Vaal triangle, an important industrial area south of Johannesburg.

In October the minister announced that regular army units would be employed increasingly to support the police. They went into Soweto, and three Vaal triangle townships, one of them Sharpeville, the scene of South Africa's most notorious shooting of unarmed black protesters. House-to-house searches led to 35 arrests.

In response to these measures, the trade unions decided to protest. Along with civic groups they organised a two-day stayaway in most industrial areas of the Witwatersrand to condemn the arrests of community leaders and the rise in rents and utility charges. The Association of Chambers of Commerce conceded that between 75% and 100% of the African workforce

ad responded to the stay-away call. Two days later management dismissed 90% of the workforce of the Sasolberg coal-to-oil plant for supporting the stayaway. Five trade union leaders were arrested.

In March this year the police struck hard again when they stopped using tear-gas and rubber-bullets over protests in the Western Cape. They used live ammunition at a funeral procession in Uitenhage, and killed 20 people.

Since September last year more than 500 blacks have been killed, and 10,000 people detained. The State of Emergency only provides a new formal cover to a *de facto* pattern of cracking down on protest which has been in operation for several months. After the earlier arrest of the UDF's 16 top leaders, the emergency is being used to round up most of the second-rank leaders of the UDF, and as many of their local activists and community leaders as have not gone underground. The number of arrests could well go as high as 2-3,000.

The challenge facing the ANC

As the oldest African organisation, the African National Congress, the resurgence of defiant political activity inside South Africa has provided both reassurance and a challenge. Founded in 1912, the ANC was able to operate legally for many years. But when the regime cracked down on most black political organisations in 1960-1, the ANC went underground and turned to armed struggle. While the ANC must be encouraged by the new political turmoil, the danger is that it might find itself isolated because of its long years underground and in exile. On the positive side is the evidence that Nelson Mandela, its imprisoned president, has remained in the eyes of thousands of people, including a younger generation who never knew the ANC in its pre-exile days, as the representative of majority aspirations. The ANC's green, yellow and black banner appears regularly at funerals and other mass occasions.

Its strategy of 'armed propaganda', as it describes the campaign of spectacular assaults on key installations such as the Sasolberg plant or the Koeberg nuclear reactor, helped to keep the organisation in the limelight as a powerful symbol of resistance, however small its numbers of armed militants still was in the early 1980s. At the same time the ANC benefited from a shift of position in the section of the African community, led by Steve Biko, which advocated black power and black consciousness in the late 1970s, and rejected collaboration with other ethnic

groups. The regime's banning of all black consciousness organisations in 1977 and the imprisonment of some of their leaders brought them into contact with the ANC in exile or in prison, and differences between them have lessened. The ANC's class analysis of South African society has tended to prevail over the emphasis on race, preferred by the black consciousness movement. The regime's (unsuccessful) efforts to transform a system based on race differentiation into one primarily based on class have also strengthened the ANC's ideological position.

It can now be seen that the setback of last year's Nkomati accord between South Africa and Mozambique under which the ANC was forced to stop sending armed fighters through Mozambique had one good side-effect. In the short term, it

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obliged the ANC to send more cadres into South Africa and increase its operations there, so as to show that Nkomati had not been a crippling military blow, only a diplomatic defeat. In the long term it removed the psychological cushion which a foreign sanctuary and foreign bases can provide, and made everyone in the ANC aware that the armed struggle in South Africa would have to proceed differently from any previous liberation struggle in Southern Africa. Algeria, rather than Angola, was the nearest model.

The challenge facing the ANC is obvious. As a whole range of geographical fronts opens up against the regime, the ANC must try to gain a foothold in all of them. It must build up its underground cells over a vast new area of operations which will tax its reserves of manpower and its ability to recruit. If it fails, it will not be able to give the swelling popular movement the political direction it would like.

But it must also protect the local autonomy of the UDF's hundreds of constituent branches, both in order to preserve their spontaneity and guard them from complete banning. The regime is putting the UDF's leadership on trial for alleged links with the ANC, in an effort to blur the distinction between the above-ground political struggle and the armed struggle.

Black trade unions

The ANC must also engage itself with the black trade union movement which now,

for the first time in South African history, has more members than the white unions. Over 300,000 blacks are union members. Neither of the two main trade union federations has affiliated to the UDF. Some believe it is too middle-class. Others are more concerned with particular industrial grievances.

The larger, multi-racial Federation of South African Trade Unions is closer in spirit to the ANC, while the Council of Unions of South Africa is more in tune with black consciousness. But as the crisis sharpens, these differences may become less relevant, since black trade unionism in South Africa cannot be steered easily into purely economic channels. The Vaal triangle stayaway last November was both a political and economic protest. In June this year the entire workforce at a Volkswagen factory struck because management wanted to offer minibuses for the now cancelled tour of South Africa by the New Zealand rugby tour.

At its conference in Zambia in June, the first consultative meeting since 1969, the ANC debated what strategy to take towards the neglected area of the 'homelands' or Bantustans. These so-called independent territories have tended to be written off as irrelevant politically, the 'dumping-grounds' for surplus labour unwanted by the white economy. Repression has been growing there too, in some measure more severely than in 'white' South Africa, perhaps because fewer restraints operate such as press scrutiny and the desire to present a face of 'reform'. Trade unions have been banned in the Ciskei, and in 1983 the authorities there attempted to end a boycott of buses caused by higher fares by unleashing a campaign of terror in which 90 people were killed and 100 detained.

The Transkei, the first of the 'homelands', has been under a state of emergency for almost all of its existence. More than 450 people were detained there in July while the authorities in the 'white' Republic were arresting over 1,000 under their own state of emergency. The ANC conference decided to enlarge its activity in the Bantustans, partly because their nominal 'independence' makes it potentially harder for Pretoria to intervene there should a radical government emerge.

Political perspectives

The main focus for ANC growth is likely to be the urban townships. Its call for them to be made 'ungovernable' has come to pass with astonishing rapidity. Pressure on councillors to resign, plus threats of repris-

als against those who do not, have resulted in the disbanding of 36 of the 38 councils which had the largest measure of autonomy under the government's devolution scheme. Local policemen have also come under attack. More than 50 have been killed in the last year.

One of the most urgent issues is the role of the new 'people's committees' which the ANC has called on activists to set up in every neighbourhood block in the vacuum left by the collapse of township administration. These are what the ANC calls 'the embryos of people's power'. In many places they have begun to operate already. Some have political functions in making demands for rent reductions, some are little more than organisations for keeping streets clean, and some – the seeds of popular militias – are providing security for local underground political leaders.

The ANC conference in June discussed whether these people's committees should try to become administrative organs. It felt that in the absence of an early seizure of power throughout South Africa, they could not sustain themselves without a tax base. This might lead to a discrediting of 'people's power'. Instead the committees are being advised to act as political representatives of the community and enlarge their demands on municipal and wider authorities.

Faced with the increasing uneasiness of the regime, the ANC is having to confront the growing possibility of negotiations. So far the regime has resisted offering this except if the ANC calls off the armed struggle. Semi-official emissaries from Pretoria have approached the ANC's exile headquarters in Lusaka with the message. The same word has been passed from the Reagan administration via the government of Mozambique.

At some point unconditional negotiations may be on offer. The European Economic Community governments have called for the unconditional release of Nelson Mandela, and for talks to start. In advance of this the ANC has been reemphasising the Freedom Charter, which was originally drawn up in 1955 in the days when the liberation struggle still had a non-violent strategy of passive resistance. At its recent conference in Zambia the ANC opened its top ranks to all ethnic groups in South Africa, and elected one white, two Indians and two Coloureds.

Both moves are designed to stress the national-democratic character of the coming revolution. The Freedom Charter is seen as an all-embracing banner round which broad sections of the South African

population, including whites, can rally. The ANC has called on whites to resist conscription. It has reminded black traders and the black middle class that they will prosper more once apartheid is removed because restrictions on their small businesses will disappear with it. The Freedom Charter contains a general call for nationalisation of the mines, the banks, and monopoly industry, and for redistribution of the land, but says nothing about the class character of the power structure which will replace apartheid.

Civil war unlikely

For the moment the ANC's priority is to decide what tactics to adopt for extending the political scope of the present unrest. The ANC leadership has come under

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pressure from younger militants who want to take the armed struggle further into the white community. Most 'armed propaganda' attacks on economic targets or security force headquarters have so far taken place at night to avoid casualties. This has increased the chance of saboteurs being caught, especially when they have to break curfews. Some are arguing that daylight attacks, even with a greater risk of casualties, give greater protection to the mobile guerrilla units by allowing them to disappear in the crowd. There is also pressure for outright revenge, given that the police and army have shot hundreds of black protesters in recent weeks.

So far the ANC leadership has restrained its more militant cadres. The Zambia conference produced a strong vote of confidence in the old, exile leadership. Although more than half the 250 delegates represented the 'Soweto generation', they did not put any of their number on to the expanded 30-member national executive. Delegates were asked to nominate any 27 members they liked, but the younger group chose to keep the existing leadership virtually intact in what amounted to an endorsement of the ANC's successful strategy until now.

Predictions about the shape of events in South Africa over the next few months would be rash. While the regime is under unprecedented pressure from inside, it is

also facing a dramatic reduction in investors' confidence. In the first quarter of the year 2,871 million rands left the country up 50% from 1,975 millions in the last quarter of 1984, and almost ten times the 336 million rands which flowed out in the first quarter of 1984. France's move in becoming the first major Western government to take economic sanctions against South Africa, and steps in the United States Congress to take a similar line have shaken investors.

The fiasco of Botha's mid-August speech has made the regime's predicament worse. Its Western backers had hoped he would produce a laundry-list of reforms clear enough for them to argue that the government deserved to be given more time. But his narrow-minded, die-hard approach, claiming that 'white South Africa' would never commit suicide, revealed the true nature of the Botha programme. Foreign pressure for change is bound to increase, business confidence has been further dented with unprecedented calls by local industrialists for Botha to resign, and the African majority has been confirmed in its belief that even the avenue to negotiated power-sharing will remain closed unless resistance is expanded and enlarged.

The regime has faced investor panic and domestic unrest before, and managed to stabilise the situation a few months later. Even the present crisis will probably be contained. But it seems certain that a state of semi-ungovernability will prevail in most black townships for the foreseeable future. It seems certain, too, that the scale of organised armed resistance by black will grow, even though it is no match for the vast armoury of the regime. South Africa is a long way from being in a state of civil war.

The immediate key is probably in the hands of the black trade unions. In no other recent Third World rebellion has the industrial working class been as well organised and highly motivated as South Africa's black proletariat. Last autumn's successful stayaway in the Vaal triangle could herald the shape of things to come.

Wide-ranging economic sanctions, even if applied by all of South Africa's business partners, would take time to work. Their initial effect is likely to be symbolic as much as practical. The future of South Africa will not be decided by outsiders but by the African majority. The most effective sanction is the withdrawal of African labour. It would hit the regime at its weakest point, and have immediate impact. [