



A taste of the jackboot of the new ruling elite?

Ebrahim Harvey looks at the political ramifications of the demonstrations by anti-privatisation activists outside the home of former trade unionist turned Johannesburg mayor Amos Masondo.

Tempting as it is to many on the left one cannot justifiably say that nothing or little has changed in South Africa since 1994. In a general sense a great deal of positive democratic, constitutional, institutional and legislative changes have taken place under the ANC-led government. But the critical question that must be posed is: has this avalanche of changes in many fields translated into jobs for

millions out of work, decent and affordable housing for all, the uninterrupted supply of very basic social services, such as electricity, water and sanitation, for those who did have access to it and the access to it for those who did not have it before, free and/or affordable education, health and other social services. Unfortunately – and which is the biggest blight upon our democracy – one cannot answer

this question in the affirmative.

It is with this question in mind that I turn to the arrest, manhandling and jailing of many protesters outside the home of the executive mayor of Johannesburg, Amos Masondo in April 2002. Among the protesters – which included pensioners and children – were members of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), Rob Rees, an official with the South African Municipal



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Masondo in his days as a unionist.

Workers Union (Samwu) and Trevor Ngwane, expelled former councillor of the ANC and leading activist of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). The protesters wanted to present a memorandum to Masondo regarding the spate of water and electricity cut-offs poor families in Soweto and other places around the country have had to endure. This has been done by the municipal authorities, under the direction of the ministries of Finance and Provincial and Local Government. They wish to clamp down on defaulters who either receive highly inflated accounts or are unable to pay because of high service charges, rate increases and the subsequent effects of rising poverty and unemployment in the townships across our country.

To make matters worse about 60 children and pensioners, who were arrested during the process were only released upon urgent request the following day. The remainder were refused bail until they appeared in court ten days later. A press statement by Cosatu reported that the grounds upon which they were denied bail was that the police needed time to verify the addresses and refused to accept the addresses given, including the union address given by Rees. And if that was not enough Cosatu reported that a member of the APF, who went to the police station to arrange legal assistance, was also arrested though

she was not even present at the protest. All this while the bodyguard of Masondo – who had fired live ammunition into the crowd and injured some protesters – walked freely after simply making a statement to the police.

This picture is so reminiscent of the way protesters were dealt with under apartheid and is a graphic, sad and brutal reminder of the fact that though we are into the eighth year of a democracy – regarded as a ‘miracle’ – workers and the poor are denied an uninterrupted supply of electricity and water. The black ruling elite has not hesitated to act against protesters with the jackboot that we were so familiar with under apartheid.

Though small by comparison, this case perhaps more than any other prior protest against privatisation and spate of electricity and water cut-offs, has shown what the SECC, the APF and other progressive forces are up against. In an article last year, I wrote, ‘The ANC-led government will most likely be forced to suppress the fight waged by others to obtain what it has been unable to deliver.’ What should be of great concern to all who want a more fundamental social transformation – where basic needs are provided for all – is the fact that though this protest in no way threatened the authority and safety of Masondo, the protesters were shot at by his bodyguard and unnecessarily

denied bail for ten days (due to political pressure, perhaps?). Apparently, it was only after Masondo’s bodyguard opened fire on the protesters that things turned ugly. Such action is not only enough to anger opposition but to seriously undermine the positive changes, which have occurred since 1994.

Masondo was reported as saying the protesters were ‘misguided radicals’. This statement shows scant regard for the valid concerns raised by them, particularly the brutal insensitivity towards the plight of poor people who have and will continue to suffer electricity and water cut-offs across the country. The fact that Masondo is a former unionist raises serious questions for the labour movement. The list of former unionists (now in senior government positions and business) who have effectively turned their backs on the very needs of the working class they fought hard for not long ago, is extensive. Though the trend is more visible with former Cosatu unionists who, like Masondo, are leading ANC members occupying senior positions in the government, it has in fact unfolded across the entire trade union and political spectrum. This raises a critical question: what are the underlying motive forces that drive former leaders – and in many cases strong, committed and leading working class fighters – to go against the class they not only represented yesterday but were born

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into? It is the reverse of the 'class suicide' that some writers earlier referred to in terms of revolutionary intellectuals of the bourgeoisie and petit

bourgeois crossing over to the side of the working class. It is a class betrayal that no amount of hoodwinking can succeed in concealing.

What is significant is that this betrayal (notwithstanding the predictably defensive and even enraged reaction from certain quarters to this allegation) is not a detached political reaction but one firmly rooted in either orchestrating or succumbing to the fundamental compromises the ANC has made. By virtue of the privileged material and social status the new ruling elite now enjoy – in stark contrast to the gruelling poverty of most citizens, including their own supporters – they are compelled to defend the political, and in the final analysis the economic system that underlie the compromises. These trappings of power – augmented by the overwhelming political dominance of the ANC – are powerful motive forces that propelled the changes activists underwent when they moved into leading government and business positions. But we cannot omit what is perhaps the real causal basis of this distinct reactionary trend: the definite loss of revolutionary hope and morale that followed the cataclysmic changes in the former Stalinist Soviet Union and East European states, the overturn of nationalised property relations and the resultant and perhaps reluctant embrace of capitalist market forces.

How else does one explain what has happened to other former socialist unionists, such as Marcel Golding, Irene Charnley, Cyril Ramphosa and Jay Naidoo, to mention only the more prominent? Anyone with integrity who

worked in the unions and knew them will tell you that they underwent an incredible sea change. They are now ensconced at the top of the white-dominated bourgeois corporate world, in the guise of black economic empowerment. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the combined annual earnings of Golding, Ramphosa and Charnley – all from the National Union of Mineworkers – is probably more than that of hundreds of mineworkers whom they not long ago served, at a salary of five or six thousand rands per month, which is today probably not even what they pay in taxes. We need to begin to understand the underlying factors and forces that shaped these changes, little of which has arisen in debates and analysis thus far. The brief for research in this regard should be to unearth the structures and trappings of power and its material base in the wider context of globalisation, the demise of Stalinism and the resultant retreat of the left in order to understand why this radical change has occurred. This is not the Amos Masondo I worked alongside in the unions in the early '80s.

But are the forces that largely determine the neoliberal economic, public and social policies of the ANC-led government so dominant that they (the ANC) fail or refuse to see that it is policies such as privatisation (and the repressive actions we have seen in this case) that have led to a rapid decline in their support base. The fact that many members of the ANC publicly burnt their membership cards after this horrendous ordeal bears powerful testimony to their decline in real terms,

so stark that not even their bigger majority secured in the 1999 election can deny.

One would have thought that aside from the depressing poverty most township people suffer, worsened by huge cost of living increases this year, and the fact that government has promised communities a certain quantity of free water and electricity since 2000, they would have sensitively tempered their approach to these basic but combustible issues. Instead we have seen a spate of water and electricity cut-offs around the country, sometimes under armed guard. It is a profound historical irony that it was not long ago that the ANC condemned and fought the unjust policies and brutal repression of the previous hated apartheid regime. And now that they have achieved power they are acting against those who are still fighting for fulfilment of the same basic needs they fought for under apartheid and which the ANC government have been unable to satisfy to the extent demanded. This makes their rallying and electioneering slogan of 'A better life for all' and the demands in the Freedom Charter a brutal mockery. And so the struggle continues. Only this time it appears to be led not by the ANC on behalf of the masses but by the masses against the ANC government. This is not surprising. In an article written after the elections in 1999 I concluded, 'The ANC is on a collision course with its own support base and could suffer come the 2004 elections.'

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