

Orgy of looting and corruption has destroyed Mandela's dream

Written by Administrator
Saturday, 17 July 2021 17:33 -

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/orgy-of-looting-and-corruption-has-destroyed-mandelas-dream-2k55sl7kh>

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After decades of crony capitalism and misrule by the ANC, South Africa is sliding into anarchy, the poor are plundering what they can and pointing the finger at their leaders – who have stolen much more, says R W Johnson in Cape Town.

RW Johnson, Friday July 16 2021, 5.00pm, The Times

In 1994 the world greeted the new South Africa under Nelson Mandela with euphoria: apartheid abolished and a harmonious non-racial state determined to build an inclusive economy and society. Last week looting and destruction rolled across its economic heartland of Gauteng (including Johannesburg and Pretoria) and KwaZulu-Natal, which includes the country's two biggest ports, Durban and Richards Bay.

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So far 117 people have died, many hundreds are injured and hundreds of shopping malls, supermarkets, warehouses and factories have been burnt down. Armed vigilantes guard many suburbs. Old schoolfriends from Durban tell me they have reverted to fishing at the beach as the only way to feed their families. Those with money wouldn't dream of investing anything to restore the damage: their money is heading straight offshore.

This huge failure can only be laid at the feet of the African National Congress (ANC), now in power for 27 years. The party is deeply corrupt, its ministers inept and incompetent, and many of its policies are damaging the economy. The party is riven by factionalism with President Ramaphosa's moderates opposed by the former president Jacob Zuma's left-wing kleptocrats. The explosion of violence followed the jailing of Zuma for his flagrant contempt of court, after he had refused to co-operate with the inquiry into the looting of the state under his presidency. Nobody seriously doubts that Zuma stole millions, probably billions, of rands and he still faces charges of racketeering, money-laundering and sundry other crimes. But Zuma, still supported by his Zulu followers, threatened to make the country ungovernable if the government dared to jail him.

The rioting began as Zuma's followers, urged on by his children and, doubtless, by Zuma himself, sought to fulfil this threat. Former members of the state security services who played such a key role in his presidency helped plan the sabotage campaign — they are now on the run. Zuma has always had strong connections into criminal networks via his relatives in the taxi industry, and these have clearly been active too.

The campaign began with the hijacking and burning of lorries. The police, scared and ineffective, watched but did nothing. Next came the looting and burning of a few shops. Again the police did nothing. Word spread that you could go "shopping without money", creating huge excitement among the ranks of the millions of poor and unemployed Zulus who inhabit the townships and squatter camps around Durban and Pietermaritzburg. From there word spread

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quickly into every small town of the province.

Most of the looters were unconcerned about Zuma's fate: they simply realised that opportunity was staring them in the face. They flocked to the shopping malls and began to loot them. Quickly the spree spread to Johannesburg, home to many more Zulus, though many others joined in. Most of the looters were poor, on foot and took away their loot in supermarket trolleys, but some arrived in cars, sometimes very expensive cars. Some even came with vast trailers to haul away freezers, fridges and cookers. Huge queues of cars swamped the freeways, all heading for the malls, and other forms of criminality blossomed — protection rackets, attacks on and thefts from other motorists, anything that offered a quick buck.

In reality this had been coming for a long time. When the ANC was first elected in 1994 its posters promised "Jobs, jobs, jobs!" but little heed was paid to that once it gained office. In 1995 the average number of unemployed according to official figures was 1,698,000 or, if the total included those who had given up looking for a job, 3,321,000. That figure has grown steadily to surpass 11.4 million. Since the unemployed have no income, this has also meant a huge growth in both poverty and inequality. Indeed, South Africa is now the most unequal society in the world.

The ANC routinely deplores poverty and inequality but tries to pretend this is part of the "apartheid inheritance". This is the opposite of the truth: the governing elite is far richer than it was under apartheid and the numbers of the poor have multiplied. Ramaphosa, who started as a trade unionist, is the country's second richest black man, worth half a billion dollars — the fruits of crony capitalism — a sum surpassed only by his brother-in-law, Patrice Motsepe.

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The 11.4 million unemployed have, on average, two or three dependants, so we are talking of households comprising 30 million people — half the population. They are sitting in shacks, cold, hungry, without alcohol (banned under the Covid lockdown), insecure, with nothing to do and with no hope of a job: a picture of pure misery. These are the greatest victims of ANC misrule. Many are young and have never worked (youth unemployment is about 70 per cent) and have given up hope that they ever will. For many young women prostitution is their only income. One looter interviewed on TV admitted that he stole every day because otherwise his 15-year-old sister would “have to sleep with a grandad”.

The unemployed and poor have been largely ignored. The government is more concerned with the “haves” within its coalition — the capitalists of the BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) affirmative action programme, the public sector workers and the trade union bosses. The government's offer of an extra R18 billion (£900 million) for already well-paid public service workers came only days before the unrest and was a blatant provocation to the unemployed.

Ramaphosa spoke of the “plight” of MPs, who are among the 1 per cent best-paid people in the country.

Surveys show that South Africa's BEE legislation is regarded by foreign investors as the biggest single obstacle to investing in the country. Effectively it's a tax on investment — if you set up a company you have, in effect, to give away a quarter of your equity to partners who have nothing to offer by way of skills or capital other than an ability to get ministers to take their calls. This is straightforward crony capitalism. This legislation pushes foreign investment away, at the cost of many jobs, simply to line the pockets of ANC-connected cronies.

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A key example is the mining industry, which has been losing thousands of jobs under the weight of BEE constraints. The government is trying to force a Mining Charter, demanding ever-higher quotas, though the mining companies refuse to sign it. The result is that no new mines have been opened in a decade. Mining executives are adamant that even in the midst of a commodity price boom they can't risk increasing their exposure to South Africa, even though it has the richest mineral deposits in the world. The government has only to adopt the same mining legislation as, say, Canada to produce tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of new jobs. But it won't because it places the interests of a few BEE capitalists higher than those of the unemployed.

Similarly, government is attentive to the trade unions which represent those in work but all it has for the unemployed is crocodile tears. South Africa's tight labour laws privilege those in work, giving the unemployed little opportunity to compete for jobs. Inept policies and the weight of corruption mean South Africa is in its seventh year of falling real per capita incomes. People are getting steadily poorer and Covid lockdowns have increased the misery, costing many jobs.

If those without jobs or hope are told they can take what they like from the shops without paying, it is not surprising that they respond enthusiastically and in such numbers. They grabbed food, drink, perhaps a new fridge or TV. Ramaphosa, appearing on TV, looked beaten, offering only platitudes and "appeals for calm". This provoked derision and was ignored.

Criminals flourished amid the looting, organising massive heists of goods and used the mayhem as cover for other crimes. Zuma's henchmen tried to make the country ungovernable by targeting key pieces of infrastructure — ports and reservoirs were attacked, as were more than 120 electricity sub-stations. Attacks on vehicles on the road leading to the Sapref refinery in Durban (which produces one third of all South Africa's petrol) forced the refinery to close down, producing a fuel crisis. Shops, warehouses or factories, once looted, were set on fire. Such destruction has cost many jobs. There are many more hungry and desperate people and KwaZulu-Natal faces a humanitarian disaster. Half of all patients in hospitals there are already without medication.

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The looting started on a Friday and Ramaphosa said and did nothing until the following Monday. Ministers were silent and invisible. The minister for police, Bheki Cele, who comes from Durban, did not visit the city for nearly a week.

The police, though armed, passively watched the looters and, in many cases, operated protection rackets and demanded "favours" from the public before they would lift a finger. Cele went on TV wearing a cashmere coat and a Louis Vuitton scarf costing about eight times the average weekly wage. No wonder looters, when interviewed, said: "Ministers have been looting for years, so why pick on us?"

Ramaphosa finally ordered 2,500 troops in to support the police. They too stood passively by. The president is terrified of the optics of a black government firing on black people: the shadow of the 2012 Marikana massacre, in which 34 striking miners were killed by the police, still looms. So the looting went on, day after day.

Under pressure from business, Ramaphosa has agreed to increase the troop presence to 25,000. The government is at last pursuing the 12 key instigators of sabotage but it has caught only one. With the economy and investor confidence being destroyed in front of its eyes, the government has opted to let the mayhem burn itself out. The highway between Durban and Johannesburg, the country's main economic artery, has been closed for a week. The rail line is also cut, so the country's biggest port, Durban, is severed from the rest of South Africa.

In this law and order vacuum vigilante militias have sprung up as communities seek to protect their suburbs and their shops. Often these vigilante groups depend on white ex-members of the security forces but they include members of all races.

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Most of South Africa's Indian population live in or around Durban and they still have strong memories of the 1949 riots in which Zulus killed hundreds of Indians. This time the Indians saw trouble coming when others didn't and the Indian township of Phoenix (where Gandhi once lived) was armed to the teeth. When looters arrived to pillage their shops and homes the Indians resisted fiercely and 20 people were killed. But the little Indian settlements to the north of Durban were more vulnerable. Verulam was all but destroyed and the Indian community there, having lost all its shops, retreated to the Indian suburb of Everest Heights and forbade Africans to set foot there. Vigilantes with guns, knives and axes patrol the streets. Africans who attacked one home were hacked with axes, the pictures circulating on social media.

Food and fuel shortages are already acute in KwaZulu-Natal. No one is going to resupply malls that have been burnt or, indeed, any shop that is vulnerable to looting. The resulting hunger crisis could drive people to more desperate acts: the big worry is attacks on private homes. ATMs have been destroyed, pharmacies ransacked and drink shops pillaged so there will be shortages of medical and other supplies. The Covid vaccination programme has stopped and the frantic mixing of maskless looters is bound to produce a fresh spike. The rand has dropped sharply.

The ANC's standard election slogan is "a better life for all" but what the riots point to is the colossal failure of ANC governance. It has emphatically not brought a better life for poor Africans and one hears on all sides unfavourable comparisons with the old apartheid government: nothing like this occurred on its watch, after all. On radio, TV and social media there is a torrent of angry comment, virtually all of it scornful of the government. Ramaphosa dare not form a government of national unity as so many demand, for the ANC is deeply divided. The Zuma faction would take any coalition as a sign that Ramaphosa was inviting the whites back into power.

There is a national demand for a strong man to restore order with a firm hand. But Ramaphosa

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is weak, talks in generalities and is very slow to act. In many African countries such a demonstration of government weakness would result in a coup but South Africa's army has been cut to the bone and is probably not capable of that. So some sort of normality will doubtless resume, ministers will return to their venal ways and there will be a pretence that things are all right again.

But they won't be. The poor and unemployed are a keg of dynamite waiting to go off. The outlook is for crises of hunger and shortages of every kind. The ANC is more divided than ever and the already weak economy has taken a massive blow. Real incomes will continue to fall.

This is what the ANC has achieved after 27 years in power. No one now believes that it will deliver a "better life for all". Its ineptitude, cronyism and corruption and its refusal to avail itself of white skills and experience have fatally weakened its ability to govern and it is steering South Africa steadily towards the status of a failed state.