

NOTA

SOCIAL CLASS IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

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THE MAKING OF THE NATION

Mr. Nelson Mandela, who is perhaps, one of the greatest living personalities in Africa and beyond was the first President of the independent South Africa. He will go down the history trench as a selfless leader, eminent political personality, a visionary African statesman and an iconic champion of human rights, a man who tirelessly and with such a zeal and determination led the people of South Africa from colonialism into freedom and state-ship. He led the independent South Africa from 1994 to 1999. Mandela fought his entire life against Apartheid and discrimination, spent 27 years in jail for it and was even prepared to die in the process of getting it abolished.

Besides Mandela, it is almost obvious to bring on board a Mr. de Clerk. It is through de Clerk's leadership that the National party embarked on a process of change to give the non-whites more rights, something which became a precursor to unbanning of liberation movements, the release of Mandela, repealing of Apartheid legislation and engagement of all parties in dialogue for the future of the nation. De Clerk possessed not only the wisdom but also the leadership which made him to recognize that Apartheid had no future and a democratic option was the inevitable way with the culmination of the democratic elections in 1994 which saw Mandela elected as the first black president of the independent South Africa.

The post-apartheid South Africa entered into a healing process with the truth and reconciliations commission. The role played by the renowned South African bishop and Nobel peace prize laureate Desmond Tutu is of paramount importance. If South Africa was to go the revenge way, the world could perhaps be having a different tale of South Africa all together.

The Parliamentary democracy type of government in South Africa is currently governed by President Jacob Zuma, a man with fair share of corruption allegations. In fact, in 2003, during his tenure as the country's vice president, Mr. Zuma was accused of soliciting a bribe in an arms deal scandal which saw several ANC politicians and officials caught in plots with European corporations, something which perhaps serves as a confirmation of what Mandela had earlier termed a would be cancer in the ANC government. Mr. Zuma was preceded as president by Mr. Tharbo Mbeki. Mr. Mbeki became the main government policy architect and administrator during his tenure leading Pretoria into a version of neoliberal orientation witnessed in South Africa today.

APARTHEID

The end of apartheid was not only a remarkable turning point in the history of South Africa but indeed a great human achievement. However, critics say that the 1994 election of the African National Congress (ANC) majority with Nelson Mandela as the new President did not alter the enormous structural gap especially in wealth between the majority black and the minority white population of South Africa. Ironically the ANC government set in motion the so called neo-liberal policies which actuality exacerbated class inequality. The government seems to have taken the easier path

of adopting a neoliberal capitalistic policy with only minor reforms here and there and a slippery postulation of social democracy in the horizon. This is especially true because the ANC government allowed the whites to keep the best land, the mines, manufacturing plants and financial institutions for the sake of promoting what was viewed as a peaceful transition agreement negotiated between the racist white regime and the then fragile ANC government.¹

The numerous unresolved conflicts such as those over natural land reserves in the modern day South Africa are viewed as residues of apartheid. It is quite unfortunate states of affair that even during this age and time the displacement of the indigenous people by foreign settlers still continue in South Africa. Other factors causing class tensions in this African nation include; deleterious impacts of industrialization on biodiversity and general state policies which are viewed by critics as favoring genetic modification in commercial agriculture. The conceptualization of how these factories are fueling the social class tensions lies squarely on the fact that most of the industries and big agricultural farms are still in the hands of the white minority and the black majority are still reeling in poverty, making them mere workers in these industries and farms and by so doing exposing the black majority into all the health and other hazards therein.

WHY SOCIAL CLASS IS UNWELCOME

Experience seems to point at the fact that it is better to have any other conflict or war other than that of class. In as far social stratification can be termed a natural phenomena and in a slippery and often untrue manner anchored on unreligious social philosophies, the fact remains that it is very dangerous to create a society of 10 millionaires and a million poor because this kind of a society tends to operate in a manner that is coerce and at times suicidal. It is a swing between madness and suicide. The relationship between the few haves and the many have-nots can never be expected to remain stable and even if it does, then that stability can only be superficial and certainly short-lived. The atmosphere characterizing such a society is filled with anxiety and suspicion to the extent that it jeopardizes the desired national co-existence in a nation something which is tantamount to the nation's very destruction.

This kind of struggle if not addressed immediately and exploitatively, tends to linger around for a long time with the lower class harboring their undying hatred for the higher class and dwelling in the quest to unbind itself from what viewed as chains of slavery and on the other hand the elite will fight to maintain the status quo. Unfortunately the government of South Africa did not immediately and effectively deal with the social class issues that it inherited from the apartheid colonial regimes. This sin has haunted the system in South Africa to date and this brings us to the conceptualization of the social class struggle and the kind of unrest experienced in South Africa today.

IS IT BUSINESS AS USUAL?

Incidents recorded in the currently in South Africa stretching from the xenophobic unrest in the recent past to the present Marikina mines saga are deeply seated in the kind of background affixed here before. It won't be logical for any government acting

the manner in which the regime in South Africa acts, to bask in the glorious sun of defending human rights and for the needs of its poor majority. In fact, the social class struggle always tends to take different dimensions and its outlets are as diverse as its causes. The Pretoria government seems to have failed to prevent toxic dumping done by the white dominated agricultural and industrial owners and this affects the largely black dominated manual labor work. This fact as attracted civil society movements, in fact, the effort by the environmental justice movement to address these issues has led to undying and variable war with both the corporations and Pretoria.

The government is on record in the acts of demobilization of the trade unions and hostility to strikes. In the recent Marikina mines strikes the police in South Africa opened fire at the striking miners leaving at least 40 dead. Critiques have since blamed the Pretoria administration of using the force which was not only too much but also unwarranted, however, becoming critical in South Africa at the moment also seems to come with its pinch of salt. The seeming harassment of the ousted ANC youth wing leader Julius Malema is a good example. He has been quite instrumental in calls for just treatment and his undying effort to champion for the rights of the lower class especially the miners is of great echo but the manhandling of him presently demonstrate just how deep the administration can sink in decay. Mr. Malema's speeches express solidarity with the poor and in a country racked in poverty and inequality, his rhetoric has struck a chord with some.

REINCARNATION OF APARTHEID

There is a kind of replacement of racial apartheid with class apartheid. There is systematic oppression of the black majority through structural economic, political, legal and cultural practices.² The country is facing a steady growth in unemployment and it is almost obvious for anyone to think that those who fall victims of the soaring unemployment are actually the poor majority blacks as opposed to the rich white minority and this causes a lot of tension and social class unrest in the state. Given these circumstances the government's own statistics has shown that the average black African household income fell 19 percent from 1995-2002 while white household income rose 15 percent.³ The trend can't be more worrying. It is only fair to assume that inequality in South Africa has continued to worsen across the years. Notwithstanding the kind of poverty that the black majority is wallowing in, the government has recently raised water and electricity services worsening the situation

The Southern African government seems to have insufficient state capacity to solve among other issues, the social class problems.⁴ This failure to deliver by government, has led to the increase in alienation and discontentment, a vivid pointer to the occasional protests and the passive unrest of the population in the country. According to the survey done by the Liberal Institute for Democracy in South Africa, the number of black people who believe life was better during the apartheid regime is growing, in fact, more than 60 percent of those interviewed said the country was better governed during the white minority rule than it is today.⁵

2. monthlyreview.org

3. monthlyreview.org

4. Article in *Great Leap into Stagnation*, April, 2002. Courtesy of World Bank, (electronic version)

5. Article in *Great Leap into Stagnation*, April, 2002. Courtesy of World Bank, (electronic version)

The white minority in South Africa lead one of the most lucrative lives in the world whereas the black African majority is subject to pathetic living conditions. The government in South Africa seems to be utterly seduced by big business and cannot see beyond its interests.

At a time when education is becoming an increasingly important tool in unlocking the windows of opportunity, achievement at school still remains intricately interwoven to an individual's prescribed class. This is certainly a bother in a country whereby those without schooling are 78% people of lower class.⁶ Class does matter a lot in South Africa. According to Benjamin Roberts' findings, most South Africans are so much willing to identify themselves in terms of class.⁷ Traditional indicators of socio-economic position such as social class are of great importance in grasping the socio-economic stratum in the country.⁸ The interesting findings of Roberts indicate that only 45 percent of those in the upper middle and upper classes believe that there should be preferential hiring and promotion of black majority of South Africa in the lower class with a sharp contrast of those in the lower class at 77% holding the same view.⁹

In the most general view it wouldn't be incorrect for anyone to conclude that the South African society consists of racial castes ordered by the infamous Western criteria of class system. Looking at the latest class struggles in the southern Africa state, one is left wondering what might have happened with the freedom charter of 1955 in Kliptown, for instance, does the recent Marikana incidence imply the natural death of that charter? Interestingly those who used to be shot at in the past are now the ones ordering the shooting, however, this words of Desmond Tutu can't get clearer, after all, when profits are threatened the ego of humanity drives them anywhere and makes them ready to do anything in their power to salvage the situation.¹⁰ It becomes more difficult for anyone to make a distinction between what is happening in South Africa today and the Apartheid regime because what can be more Apartheid-like than shooting and killing the poor miners demonstrating for a pay rise and charging those who survived with the murders of their confreres?

PAL TURNED FOE

Instead of fighting against what they previously not only thought but also knew was wrong, apparently the former freedom fighters have joined their "enemies", taken up a luxurious life and turned literary against the masses that they ironically worked hard to liberate and promised to protect. The social class struggle in South Africa remains real and even more threatening today more than ever before, thanks to the upcoming civil societies, human rights organizations and to the education that has been availed sensitizing the oppressed lower class and giving them not only the reasons but also the power to demand for their rights. ■

6. Roberts B., *HSRC Review*, November, 2009. Vol. 7-No. 4

7. Roberts B., *HSRC Review*, November, 2009. Vol. 7-No. 4

8. *Oxford Medicine Epidemiology Review*, Vol. 26, Issue1, pp.112-123, (electronic version)

9. Roberts B., *HSRC Review*, November, 2009. Vol. 7-No. 4

10. Ulimwengu, J., *Article in The EastAfrican News Paper*, September, 2012.