

There Is No Silver Lining to South Africa's Zuma Insurrection

Via [Viento Sur](#)

South Africa's immense poverty and inequality have been weaponized by former president Jacob Zuma and his supporters through a massive economic sabotage campaign. Any response must address the miseries saturating the country as well as the chaos now unleashed.

South Africa is not a normal country. Almost half of the labor force is unemployed; the number rises to 76 percent for young people, who have no hope for their future. South Africa has the highest inequality rate in the world, with extreme wealth living next to extreme poverty. It is a country in which violence, state dysfunction, and broken services are normal. It is a country that [lacks a strong opposition party](#), despite the fact the ruling African National Congress (ANC) government is no longer able to govern.

For years, given these conditions, many have predicted imminent mass unrest. But it was not poverty, broken services, or unemployment that triggered the worst unrest in South Africa since the end of apartheid. Instead, it was the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma for contempt of court last Wednesday.

For years, Zuma, his children, and his criminal cronies have threatened to unleash violence and spill blood in the event of his imprisonment for one of the many crimes he stands accused of. Now, mass unrest across South Africa's two most populous provinces has caused at least one hundred deaths, over a billion dollars of damage, and the destruction of the province of KwaZulu-Natal's entire supply chain.

Hundreds of businesses, shopping malls, mosques, clinics, liquor stores, factories, vaccination centers, water treatment facilities, logistics hubs, and cell phone towers have been ransacked and burned in a campaign of both spontaneous looting and more covert and targeted sabotage. Mobs now control the highways leading in and out of KwaZulu-Natal. The Port of Durban, the busiest shipping terminal in sub-Saharan Africa, has suspended operations. KwaZulu-Natal is already facing food and fuel shortages. The medical goods so urgently needed to respond to the devastating third [wave of COVID-19](#) that is wreaking havoc across the country are in short supply or unable to be delivered to hospitals. The country's vaccination drive has been knocked off course just as it was starting to gain momentum.

The police have mostly stood aside, either unwilling or powerless, as thousands have descended on shopping malls and businesses. In response to the state's inability to halt the violence, vigilante militias have been formed by mostly white, Indian, and coloured communities to protect their neighborhoods and businesses. South Africa's powerful taxi association mafias have also stepped in to provide security at shopping malls and other locales. There have been numerous reported deaths from confrontations between "looters" and "community self-defense" groups.

The same police force, which was highly visible during lockdown when it came to arresting surfers or harassing smokers and drinkers, is not willing to or cannot stop the full-scale descent of parts of South Africa's biggest cities into lawlessness. Kilometers-long traffic jams have been spotted, as looting of shopping centers and warehouses is widespread.

Questions must be asked about the failure of state intelligence services and the unpreparedness of security forces. The security cluster has already indicated that it suspects rogue elements of the security forces are

coordinating and supporting the unrest. We know that rogue State Security service agents absconded with billions of rands, South Africa's currency, and thousands of firearms during the Zuma years. The police's failure to deal with the unrest led President Cyril Ramaphosa to call in the military, who are not trained to deal with mass unrest. Around twenty-five thousand troops will be sent to hot spots in the coming days, the largest military deployment since the end of apartheid.

Of course, not all the unrest can be accredited to Zuma. The unrest is taking place amid South Africa's third lockdown, and the government has opted to provide no social assistance to workers and the poor. To make matters worse, the government introduced harsh austerity measures, including cuts to education and health budgets, along with the social grants that are the lifeline for over 17 million South Africans. With so many South Africans desperate and angry, mass looting is predictable.

But this is not a bread riot or the "Tunisia moment" that many predicted. It is a symptom of the current crisis that Zuma shoulders much of the blame for, as well as a symptom of the ANC's failures since coming to power in 1994 to create an inclusive economy and a society that does not render much of the population surplus. There is a lack of leadership at all levels from civil society, from politicians to unions. The majority of South Africans remain impoverished, face extreme violence and social deprivation, and lack credible leadership and any hope that their social conditions can be improved.

Mass looting on this scale should be understood rather than celebrated by the Left. We need to acknowledge the underlying problems that create such looting rather than cheer it as spontaneous redistribution or popular agency. This type of romanticism is a symptom of a Left that is distant from its social base, lacking vision and a program. Absent a political direction, this type of spontaneous action tends to go toward

very sinister directions in South Africa – and in this case, it has been weaponized by the Zuma faction.

Though the events are still unfolding, and a significant amount of misinformation has circulated about them, we can hazard some initial analysis of it. This unrest cannot be categorized as a “bread riot” or a spontaneous outburst of collective rage from the oppressed. This began as a political campaign aiming to free Zuma and was launched by a set of actors including rogue security service members, Zuma’s sons and daughters, mafia elements, and other close Zuma allies – in other words, a faction of the ANC.

The campaign resembles a well-coordinated and planned type of insurgency seen during a civil war or coup attempt that targets key logistics, transport, and communication infrastructure. There are numerous reports of people claiming they had been paid to start looting or of people being bused into shopping malls to loot there.

There is also an ethnic component to this, in that Zuma and his supporters have explicitly sought to mobilize ethnic nationalist Zulu tropes in his defense. This campaign has, in the words of the justice minister, Ronald Lamola, resulted in “[economic sabotage](#)” in that it has targeted key parts of the economy. This factional violence not only follows past patterns of sabotage campaigns against transportation infrastructure, but also has taken place in the same locales as the political violence of the late 1980s and early 1990s that took as many as thirty thousand lives, as well as xenophobic pogroms in more recent years.

In [the words](#) of Unemployed Peoples’ Movement leader [Ayanda Kota](#), the protests are “organized on tribalist, male chauvinist and ethnic bases.” They also have an ugly [xenophobic character](#), and reports indicate that foreign-owned businesses and foreign traders have been targeted.

This is a clear political campaign, and therein lies its power and danger. It is targeting South African democracy itself and is being led by a faction of the ruling party that is willing to quite literally burn the country down to accomplish its aims. It is a threat to the country's future and must be countered by progressive forces.

Such unrest is sadly predictable in South Africa, given the extent of state dysfunction and mass impoverishment. COVID-19 and austerity have only worsened these preexisting social problems. Any response to mass unrest must deal with the underlying structural conditions that make South Africa the most unequal country in the world.

As recently as last week, [one report](#) predicted mass unrest in the Johannesburg township of Alexandra, one of the most densely populated areas in South Africa, with about 750,000 people living on about 800 hectares. The township is located right next to Sandton, the richest suburb in Africa.

According to [the report](#), "These cramped and overcrowded conditions, combined with a lack of planning and infrastructure development as the township grew, and high rates of unemployment and limited access to socio-economic rights make Alexandra a ticking time bomb."

Responding to these social problems requires a government that breaks with austerity to create new social programs, restore state capacity, provide security, and be led by a competent and capable civil service. But, given that the current crisis has been triggered by a political faction, social assistance measures alone won't be enough to contain the furies that have been unleashed.

The state must act quickly to restore order in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. If it does not, the violence will spiral out of control as ethnic militias and vigilantes battle with those on the street. Many will die, and there is a high chance that

ethnic and racial tensions will spill over into open violence. If the state does not restore order, people will die in hospitals lacking basic medical supplies, and people will starve. Food supplies should be urgently distributed in the region.

South Africa finds itself in this crisis due to the never-ending factional drama of the ANC. While President Ramaphosa preaches unity, his fellow party members are burning down the country. This is closer to Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Cartel's strategy of "narcoterrorism": escalating violence against the Colombian government to avoid extradition, rather than a "color revolution" or classic military coup.

While this is not an attempted coup, it is still extremely dangerous. Zuma and his allies, like good mafiosi, are likely using violence to gain concessions from the state, like protection from prosecution and continued control over their rackets. The unrest also undermines Ramaphosa's government, potentially opening the possibility of him being a one-term president (although I suspect the vast majority of South Africans will be appalled by rather than attracted to the Zuma faction).

There is no silver lining to this ugly episode, and even if the unrest calms down in the next few days, it is hard to think anything other than that things will only get worse.