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By Toussaint Losier

Amabhulu anyama

Asenzeli iworry

[The black capitalists]

[Are making us worry]

- Chorus of a contemporary protest song, sung in Xhosa

In the predawn hours of Saturday, September 13th, 2008, a devastating fire tore through the thousands of wood and zinc shacks that make up the Foreman Road informal settlement in Durban. Sparked by an unattended candle, the fire spread quickly and raged for hours.

With only one water tap serving nearly 8,000 tightly packed residents, there was little people could do but warn their neighbors and move to safety to watch their houses burn. It would take several hours to put out the fire. Among the smoldering debris, residents would later find the body of Thembelani Khweshube, 30, who had been asleep when his shack caught fire.

"I wish that somebody could save us from this misery," lamented Funeka Nokhayingana to a local reporter from the Durban Mercury amidst the charred zinc and the damp ash. "I have lost everything in the fire - my identity document, my children's birth certificates, uniforms and school books. It hurts me to raise my children in such conditions, but I don't have a choice because I have nowhere else to go."

Far from a rare occurrence, these shack fires have become an increasingly frequent phenomenon in post-apartheid South Africa, as the numbers of shack settlements have continued to grow. There have been an average of ten shack fires a day over the past five years, with someone dying in a shack fire almost every other day. In the eThekwinini municipality where the Foreman Road settlement is located, there is roughly one shack fire a day.

Not long after the wreckage had finally begun to cool, the residents of Foreman Road held a community meeting to collectively assess their situation. Rather than accepting the city's offer of relocation, residents resolved to immediately begin rebuilding their shacks using whatever materials could be salvaged from the ruins. Working with others member of Abahlali baseMjondolo (Zulu for shack dwellers), a social movement based in more than 40 shack settlements, residents put out a press statement the same day, calling for emergency food, temporary shelter and building materials. At the same time, their statement also placed the destruction of more than 70 percent of their settlement in a broader political context:

"Shack fires are a crisis. They are not something normal. The government must stop blaming the victims every time there is a fire. We have to treat the fires as a crisis. We have to act against the real causes of the fires. The main cause is that people don't have electricity. Other causes are that people don't have enough taps or any fire hydrants to fight the fires. The short term solution is to electrify the shacks and provides taps, fire hydrants and access roads. The real solution is to upgrade the settlements with proper brick houses."

But far from assisting in rebuilding efforts, municipal officials instead arrived at the settlement with bulldozers the following day. In response, the Foreman Road AbM mobilized to halt the municipality's plans, threatening to blockade the entrance to the settlement Road and calling on legal advocates to halt this unlawful action. "Foreman Road is our home," reiterated AbM after threatening to destroy any bulldozers that entered the settlement. "We are urbanites. We live and work and school here. We will not be moved. If the City will not give us building materials we will rebuild the settlement ourselves. This land is ours."

From Racial to Class Apartheid

In many ways, AbM's successful response to the threatened demolition of Foreman Road is rooted in the long history of South Africa's liberation politics. From the land occupations organized by the squatters movements of the 1940s to the rent boycotts coordinated by the civic movements of the 1980s, urban land struggles have figured prominently in popular opposition to apartheid, and before that, racial segregation and settler colonialism. Yet, AbM's calls for adequate housing and land redistribution are also very much linked to recent developments that continue to make South Africa the most unequal country in the world despite of the end of apartheid.

In 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the leading patron of the African National Congress (ANC) armed struggle, provided a moderate faction of the apartheid state with an opportunity to seek a negotiated solution to the impasse created by domestic unrest, international isolation, and prolonged economic crisis. The subsequent release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC and other liberation forces initiated a protracted process of public negotiation with the apartheid Nationalist Party, a process that would ultimately lead to the creation of a fully democratic constitution.

Parallel to these negotiations, however, were a series of informal negotiations on economic issues between key ANC members and the corporate leaders. To ensure a political settlement with the apartheid regime, ANC leaders ultimately abandoned their professed commitments to wealth redistribution and conceded to the corporate sector's call for a neoliberal macroeconomic approach to economic development as the best solution to the problems facing the country's poor.

"The terms of this settlement," argues economist Sampie Terreblanche, "were such that the poorest half of the population has, [since 1994], become entrapped in a new form of oppression: a state of systematic exclusion and systemic neglect by a democratically elected government and the modern sector of the economy respectively. It is therefore not surprising that the situation of the poorest half of the population has deteriorated over the past eight years."

Political Liberation or Economic Liberalization

On the eve of the 1994 elections, which would sweep Nelson Mandela to power as the first black President of South Africa, the non-white majority of the country faced dreadful living conditions. Whether they were in hostels or mine compounds, shack settlements or dilapidated township housing, they were often far from the cities and their places of work. With up to 13.5% of all households living in shack settlements, the country faced an estimated backlog of 3.3 million homes, impacting 15 million people. Moreover, this need for housing was growing at a rate of 200,000 units per year.

In response, the ANC-led alliance of worker and civic organizations proposed a variety of solutions, most prominently the 1993 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). In addition to other issues, the RDP called upon the government to play a key role in a massive housing program that would not only meet basic needs, but also create jobs, redistribute land, and drive economic development. RDP proposed spending at least 5% of the national budget on the construction of 350,000 houses per year to eliminate the backlog over a 10-year period.

But once elected, the ANC government failed to live up to its campaign promises, as commitments to neoliberal trade agreements and the paying-off of apartheid-era debt quickly overruled its social democratic proposals. In 1996, the ANC reiterated earlier agreements with South African capital and the International Monetary Fund by formally adopting the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy as its economic program.

Reflecting a neoliberal approach to development, GEAR has promoted market deregulation, fiscal discipline, wage restraints, and the privatization of government services. In place of redistributive policies, GEAR relies on foreign direct investment and integration into the world market to trickle down benefits to the poor and working class. As a result, the government has largely relied on bank-financing and private construction firms to meet the vast housing backlog.

Under GEAR, the provision of housing has gone from a central element of economic development to a marginal social service. In just the first five years of ANC governance, housing has become less of a priority, dropping from 3.4 to 1.6 percent of total budget allocations. Moreover, the reliance on the private sector for low-income housing construction has meant that while the government has approved 2.4 million state subsidies for low-income housing construction, most of the homes that have been built have failed to meet the government's own standards.

Following his April 2007 tour of South Africa, the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, concluded that new homes have been hastily constructed, poorly planned, and designed without any consultation with local authorities and residents. These houses were unfortunately inadequate to meet the housing needs of their inhabitants. Efforts by residents to raise concerns with their local officials have consistently proved fruitless while increasingly militant housing protests have resulted in mass evictions and arrests.

The social effects of this market-oriented approach can also be seen in government efforts to increase access to other basic service. Access to electricity and clean water has been expanded to much of the poor black majority since the country's first democratic elections, but at the same time services that were once provided to the white population through public utilities have now been either contracted out to foreign companies or for-profit model. Not only has this led to high service charges, but also the use of prepaid water and electricity meters, and mass disconnections for those unable to pay.

Popular Resistance

Over the past decade, these neoliberal policies have sparked waves of popular revolt, often during the months leading up to elections. In 2004-5, for instance, there were an average of 16 protests per day, roughly 13 percent of them illegal. In addition to raising community grievances, independent researcher Richard Pithouse notes that these protests were aimed at trying to subordinate local party structures and representatives to popular power, challenging the top-down control asserted by the ANC and other political parties.

When these protests have been channeled outside of party structures, they have, at times, provided opportunities for the development of grassroots social movements. In 2000, for instance, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) was founded in response to water and electricity disconnections. Later that year, a series of violent evictions and water cutoffs in the Coloured and African townships on the outskirts of Cape Town led to the growth of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC).

Inspired in part by Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, SA's Landless Peoples Movement (LPM) was established in 2001 to mobilize the urban and rural poor for substantial land reform. Similarly, Abahlali baseMjondolo emerged out of a 2005 road blockade by residents of the Kennedy Road informal settlement protesting their local councilor's repeated failures to provide them with formal

housing.

Based in poor and working class communities, each of these movements have had to negotiate their reliance on more well-resourced individuals and NGOs, and the attendant efforts to control the movement's agenda. In spite of their differences, each of these movements has made use of both legal and illegal action as a means to build power, not only to force a change in policy, but also radically reorient the logic of post-apartheid governance back to the bottom-up approach promised during the course of the liberation struggle.

Building a Poor People's Movement

Several weeks prior to the massive fire in Foreman Road, AbM released a new research report, "The Big Devil in the Jondolos: The Politics of Shack Fires." Confirming what residents had long known, this report cast settlements like Foreman Road as "poor people's solution to a lack of affordable housing, especially in cities." In eThekweni municipality, for instance, a third of the population, roughly 920,000 people, live in shacks. Across the country, roughly one in six of all South African households live in shacks.

In addition, the Shack Fire Report listed the lack of security of tenure, use of cheap but highly flammable building materials, limited access to water, and reliance on candles and paraffin lamps as factors contributing to the crisis of shack fires. The report also noted that since 2001, the municipality's refusal to electrify shacks has heightened the risks.

Furthermore, the report noted that the municipality had pursued a campaign of armed de-electrification against settlements, particularly targeting communities mobilizing behind AbM. For instance, when AbM convened a mass march against Durban Mayor Obed Mbala for basic services like electricity in 2007, police violently broke up their protest using rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons. Five months later, when AbM announced its plans to challenge the legality of the KwaZulu-Natal province's Slums Act, police entered the Kennedy Road settlement and cut more than 300 electricity connections. Two days after this mass disconnection, a fire in Kennedy Road destroyed fifteen shacks and left 25 people homeless, demonstrating links between electricity disconnection shack fires.

On September 22, AbM convened a City Wide Shack Fire Summit in Kennedy Road, a last minute change of venue from Foreman Road. While municipal officials failed to attend, shack dwellers from all over Durban participated as well as delegates from the AEC, the LPM's Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal branches, the Rural Network, and the eThekweni region of the South African National Civic Organizations (SANCO).

Reiterating the need for the government to address the rash of shack fires as a national emergency, those in attendance also rejected the top down approach of NGOs, academics, and municipal officials as undemocratic. Poor communities, they agreed, must be able to debate their own solutions and determine their own future. Calling for a solidarity among poor people across the country, delegates resolved to take suggestions for regular marches and a national defiance campaign against illegal electrification back to their social movements.

At the end of the summit, AbM, AEC, LPM, and the Rural Network also announced their formation of a Poor People's Alliance to coordinate their joint actions. In many ways, this new partnership is an outgrowth of a two year-old Action Alliance between the AEC and AbM.

Formed in response to their shared concerns over the dominance of left academics and NGOs in social movement politics, this alliance has provided these two movements with a base from which they have deepened their politics of popular participation and mass action from below and to the left. In July

2008, for instance, these two movements joined together to help launch an AbM Western Cape movement, to directly address the concerns of residents of Cape Town's numerous informal settlements.

“We are calling it the Poor People's Alliance so our people can identify with it,” explained AEC Chairman Ashraf Cassiem. “It is a solidarity alliance. If there is an action in one place, [we] will carry it forward in another area. It must be people-orientated. It must be action-based, as opposed to an NGO that sits in the office.”

This new alliance is also an outgrowth of a principled stance these movements have taken against party politics and electoral participation. In late 2003, the AEC joined the LPM's initial call for a nation-wide No Land! No Vote! campaign calling for a moratorium on evictions and immediate land redistribution. Grounded in widespread frustration with the limited change achieved during ten years of full democracy, the campaign called for a return to mass action in place of reliance on political parties.

In spite of the repression with which the state has responded to them, AbM joined the AEC's election boycott, helping to develop it into a “No Land! No House! No Vote!” campaign during the months prior to the 2006 municipal elections. When AEC members held an Election Day march in Cape Town, the AbM sponsored an UnFreedom Day celebration, now an annual event held on the holiday marking the country's first democratic elections.

“The community has realised that voting for parties has not brought any change to us - especially at the level of local government elections,” explained AbM President Sâbu Zikode in 2006. “At local level who ever wins the elections will be challenged by us. We have been betrayed by our own elected councillor. We have decided not to vote.”

Even though there has been no formal decision as to whether this new alliance will provide the structure for a boycott of the upcoming 2009 Presidential election, these new partnerships should provide for greater connection of urban land struggles with movements for sustainable rural development.

Government Betrayal

While controversial in the eyes of ANC allied-civic organizations and trade union coalitions, these election boycotts have tapped tangible feelings of betrayal within poor communities, while strategically undermining the ANC's political dominance in highly competitive elections in Durban and Cape Town. Moreover, these campaigns draw on a long tradition of mass non-participation in the institutions of the apartheid system to directly implicate the ANC government's adoption of the corporate sector's neoliberal agenda.

This neoliberal agenda remains largely intact in spite of the upset election of former South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma as ANC President in the party's December 2007 elections. Emerging largely unscathed from his 2006 rape trial, Zuma had been able to garner support from key constituencies within the ANC, including the ANC Youth League, the SA Communist Party, and the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU). While some of his supporters have used his bid for the party presidency to push for more redistributive economic policies, Zuma's control of the ANC has been overshadowed by continued power struggles between himself and Mbeki over control of the party.

These power struggles have continued in anticipation of Zuma's upcoming corruption trial—culminating in a court judgment dismissing the case on a technicality, Mbeki's forced resignation as South African President in September 2008, and his replacement by Zuma's deputy, Kgalema Motlanthe. In response, supporters of Mbeki have left the ANC to create a new party, Congress of the People (COPE), to challenge the ANC under Zuma in the upcoming Presidential elections in 2009.

“For us, it is of no concern that the ANC has split up,” Ashraf Cassiem of the AEC argues. “It doesn't have any direct effect because the policy and procedure of the government remains the same. It doesn't matter what platform they use, because everything remains the same. Our communities will still have to be dealing with these policies the same way we have in the past.”

Yet, the changing political landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for South Africa's militant poor. After the Foreman Road fire, local officials restricted emergency aid just to those with ANC cards. Increased partisanship threatens to further divisions among communities and co-opt local leaders. Nevertheless, LPM and AEC have already taken advantage of the installation of new pro-Zuma provincial officials to push for an increased provision of housing.

Moreover, it is unclear whether these power struggles will create openings for a shift away from the current trend of relocating shack dwellers to permanent settlements, termed Temporary Relocation Areas (TRAs), on the urban periphery, towards the upgrading of settlements and adequate public housing demanded by these movements. And with South Africa's hosting of the 2010 World Cup serving as further pretext for the creation of cities that meet the desires of the rich, the need for popular struggle grows greater each day.

Toussaint Losier is a Chicago-based writer, artist, and activist. He is currently researching the history of mass incarceration at the University of Chicago. Much thanks to Kerry Chance, David Jenkins, and Raj Patel for their input on this article.