

UNDERSTANDING THE JULY MAYHEM: THE ULTIMATE DEFENCE IS THE PEOPLE IN POLITICAL MOTION FOR GOOD

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Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, speaking in 1972 to French visitors famously said 'it is too early to judge', ostensibly referring to the significance of the 1789 French revolution. This is used to illustrate China's long-term planning mindset. However, it emerged later that, either because the discussion was lost in translation or because Zhou may have been hard of hearing, he thought the question was about the 1968 French youth uprising.

South African and other pundits should be forgiven, though, for arguing that it is too early to appreciate the full ramifications of the July 2021 mayhem in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

The implications straddle many aspects of social life. They are about security of the democratic state and its capacity to protect citizens and property, the fate of constitutional democracy, the social psychology of protest, the impact of poverty and inequality, the pent-up irritation with Covid-19 lockdowns, and much more. Care should be taken, though, to avoid drawing straight lines of cause and effect between the orgy of looting and economic sabotage on the one hand and broad issues of the political economy on the other.

The uprising of July 2021 was orchestrated. Municipal IQ observes in Daily Maverick (25 July) that in normal service delivery protests, looting was recorded in only 16%, as distinct from 71% in the recent uprising. Looting, it says, is usually 'tangential to most such protests...rather than becoming the focus'.

According to the chief executive of the Road Freight Association (Daily Maverick, 29 July), the burning and hijacking of trucks on the N3 arterial route was deliberately planned, with the aim of 'causing a congestion point' and creating 'the impassibility of roads'. Further, an analysis of social media posts shows that specific activists co-ordinated the mayhem, giving instructions on which roads should be closed and which centres targeted for looting. These activists would then report back 'to the commanders when members had executed a plan'.

The government's security cluster claims that, besides the warehouses and logistics system, strategic key points such as water infrastructure and airports were also targeted for attack. The aim was to cause maximum damage including the disruption of supply chains. Some of the instigators' communication advised that people should stockpile food and water for the long haul.

All this happened after thinly-veiled threats about what would unfold if the former president was arrested for contempt of court.

Now, you do not instigate organised mayhem of this magnitude overnight. This was obviously planned over a long period of time. As to whether the contempt was deliberately engineered to generate the uprising is a matter of conjecture. So is the question of the ultimate objective, given that there are other court processes under way, and that many of the beneficiaries of corruption and state capture are due to face their just deserts. Only one conclusion can be drawn from this: the intention was to create such instability that, at least, a paralysed state would not be able to ensure rule of law; and, at most, the leadership at the helm of government would be removed.

Call it insurrection, counter-revolution or what you will; but there is no reason why a process of counter-revolution cannot take the form of, or culminate in, a mass insurrection.

Herein lies the interconnection between orchestrated events and mass psychology. It is correct to argue that levels of poverty and inequality in our society are social tinder ever ready to catch fire. Add to this the hardships arising from the multi-layered devastation of Covid-19, and the counter-revolutionaries had only to light the match.

During the anti-apartheid struggle, a tactical approach emerged after many years of debate about the balance between armed actions and mass mobilisation – that these pillars needed to feed on each other. Armed struggle in the South African setting, it was agreed, could only succeed when ‘the people are in political motion’. In similar fashion, the organisers of last month’s unrest sought to undertake organised acts sabotage while at the same time instigating a generalised uprising.

Did the instigators lose control of events? Perhaps not. General mayhem seems to have been their actual aim. The fate of the unleashed masses did not matter, as long as the plan to emasculate the state succeeded. It has been pointed out that part of the strategy may have been to provoke a bloody response by law-enforcement agencies and then use that to generate a national mass revolt.

Of course, effective intelligence and scenario planning would have limited the overall damage; and the weaknesses in this regard need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. But, with the uprising spread across many centres, the police were overstretched. No police force anywhere has the capacity to prevent attacks on shopping centres, warehouses, arterial roads and other targets all at the same time.

How was the tide turned?

While the deployment of larger numbers of defence force (SANDF) soldiers helped to stem the tide, it was essentially the counter-mobilisation of ‘people in political motion’ for good, which generated a new social psychology. The protection and cleaning of shopping malls by civil society activists and other community members, and greater appreciation of the self-injury that the looting was causing, generated a new atmosphere.

While government communication assisted in encouraging this atmosphere, weak co-ordination and poor central messaging created embarrassing spectacles of government ministers contradicting each other. If anything was needed to demonstrate that we have not yet recovered from the post-2009 mentality of departmental fiefdoms, this is it – and the sooner it is stopped, the better.

As the days wear on, it seems security force action has steadily disrupted the network of instigators. And it is also significant that the attempt by the counter-revolutionaries to rope in the Zulu monarch’s *amabutho* and the taxi industry mostly fell flat. In addition, there was no significant support from seven of the nine provinces.

As many have argued, the social tinder that was lit by the instigators reflects the levels of poverty and inequality in our society. But the point has not been emphasised enough that the victims of the looting were both large companies, mainly white-owned, and many entities owned by black entrepreneurs including malls, franchises and small businesses. It flows from this that we cannot seek to address inequality merely by co-opting a black elite into the courtyard of privilege.

Is it an act of folly, as reflected in this article, to talk about this experience in the past tense?

The plot may be wider, and much more may still be in the offing. In KwaZulu-Natal, racist and ethnic mobilisation continues, with jingoists and criminals in Phoenix and the Inanda-Ntuzuma-KwaMashu complex seeking to fan the flames of conflict. There could even be foreign state and non-state actors involved.

One central lesson from this experience is that security interventions, both proactive and reactive, have their limitations. The defence force deployment can only be temporary.

The solution lies in mobilising the people into political motion for good. They are the ultimate defenders of democracy that no counter-revolutionary can defeat. As government and social partners have agreed, this has to be combined with a wide array of immediate economic and social interventions.

But the leaders need to go beyond the dance of quick-wins. This is a moment when the country should go back to the basics and engage around macro-solutions to macro-social challenges. The 1994 political compact survived over the years because hope and trust were sustained as people's conditions of life improved and/or because they felt that tomorrow would be better than today.

Required now is honest reflection on the kind of social system that we seek to create – one that combines high rates of economic growth and a minimum standard of living below which no South African should sink. Community activists also point to one detail that needs immediate attention: social work in communities to address the collapse of family structures and the pandemic of drug abuse which render some young people open to manipulation.

As for party politics, the argument that the uprising is an internal ANC factional battle may appear attractive; but it misses the fundamental issue. The justice system has been defied and the constitutional order challenged – and this is far more important than partisan politics. It is critical to avoid the psychology of projection and ensure that the overwhelming majority become part of the people in political motion for good.

The ANC, though, cannot evade the existential question about principled unity if it hopes to lead the process of societal renewal. As history has shown, appeasement does not satisfy a voracious beast. The erstwhile revolutionaries gone bad and the bad people who have infiltrated the ANC – and their criminal hangers-on in broader society – seek to pull the organisation and the country down with them. A decisive clean-up is the only way to organisational survival.

And so, it may be too early to appreciate the full implication of the July 2021 uprising. But one thing is clear: in the same measure that South Africans were their own liberators, they are the ultimate defenders of democracy.

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