

Potent brew that led to South Africa's urban uprising: Pandemic, recession and a crisis of social reproduction

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Release date: 21 August 2021

In the discourse on the recent uprising of the impoverished, consideration of the inequality deepening the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is largely absent. The exacerbation of already unsustainable levels of inequality by the pandemic coupled with a global recession provided the volatile ingredients. Jacob Zuma was just the trigger.

With rare exception, the popular media has often reduced the past few weeks of unrest to sensationalist reportage. Describing the unrest events as “insurrection”, “civil war”, “anarchy” and “riot” risks eclipsing the full picture of 21st-century urban uprisings, of which this is an example.

I use the term “urban uprising” to describe a moment of rapid collective action in an urban context, which may include violence, looting and torching. The South African uprising was much more than Zuma's imprisonment, which was the trigger for an uprising against poverty and inequality, not its cause. For the uprising's cause, we need to look deeper.

South Africa, like many other countries, was in recession when the pandemic struck, forcing the Great Global Lockdown. The immediate human and economic cost of Covid-19 was severe, accentuating the disparities in inequality and societal fragmentation. This was evidenced in the problems experienced by the impoverished in relation to health, technology and employment.

Economic activity for the entire year decreased by 7% in 2020 and the extended unemployment rate increased to 43.2%. Consequently, 11.1 million people are now unemployed. With nearly half the adult population of South Africa living in poverty, social reproduction has reached crisis proportions. The pandemic has exacerbated many of these underlying fault lines of inequality and poverty in the country which have their roots in the neoliberal macroeconomic policies adopted since 1994.

Yet, in the current discourse on the uprising of the impoverished in South Africa, consideration of the inequality deepening the impact of the pandemic is largely absent. The exacerbation of already unsustainable levels of inequality by the pandemic coupled with a global recession provided the volatile ingredients for the uprising. All that was required was the spark, ostensibly by a small group of Zuma supporters attacking symbols of white monopoly capitalism, and the powder keg exploded.

This process is not unique to South Africa. We can recall, for example, that the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in 2010 sparked the wave of protests that came to be known as the Arab Spring.

Similarly, the killing of George Floyd, which accentuated racial disadvantage during the pandemic, made the uprising under the banner of the Black Lives Matter social movement the most explosive protest in US history.

Marxist “long wave” theorists have long established a notion of “cycles of class struggle”, characterised by periods of acute social instability following a long-term decline in capitalist

growth and manifested in global protests and class struggle which intensify alongside the economic decline.

When the long wave of capitalist contraction began from 2000, Europe was engulfed by a series of urban uprisings. The first occurred in a working-class immigrant community in Paris in 2005 which later spread to 300 cities in which 9,000 vehicles were torched, including dozens of buildings, daycare centres and schools. A three-week state of emergency was declared and 2,900 arrests were made.

In Denmark in 2007, a four-day uprising against forced removals occurred which involved clashes with the military and the police. Similar kinds of urban uprisings took place in Greece in 2008 and in Sweden in 2009 and 2013. The recent South African uprising can be placed among these global urban uprisings.

A series of riots in England in August 2011 has particularly interesting parallels to the South African case. Throughout the boroughs, shops, pubs, banks and even residential properties were ransacked and torched. In England, malls were targeted and 2,500 shops and businesses were looted, with the participants targeting consumer goods such as flat-screen televisions and branded clothing, homing in on shops such as PC World and mobile phone outlets. In other words, it was a class attack on the symbols of privilege and affluence.

Similarly, in South Africa 3,000 shops were looted during the protests, while 200 banks and post offices were vandalised. A distinguishing factor from South Africa is that in the English uprising fewer participants took necessities such as basic foodstuffs, but focused on high-value goods. Thus, although the targeting for the looting of big capitalist consumer chains is a new feature in South Africa, it is by no means globally unique.

Another key distinguishing factor is that of those arrested in England and brought before a court of law, 50% were black, 27% were white, 18% of mixed "race" and 5% Asian, while in the South African case the participants of the uprising are overwhelmingly black African. As in the case of the police in London who had contained disturbances in the initial phase of the unrest, there was also a weak response by the South African police when masses of people started looting. It is plausible that authorities in both countries were caught off guard or assessed that a major repressive crackdown would have resulted in massive casualties, with the unintended consequence of a sustained uprising.

Why did participants in the urban uprising in both England and South Africa loot high-value goods? In both cases, the participants in the uprising were young and old, female and male, with the majority from the impoverished segments of society. While the extent of the middle class participating in the looting in South Africa is yet to be established, in England 3% of those arrested were from a middle-class background. The increasingly multi-class character of the uprising in both cases attests to the growing resentment towards neoliberal economic policies.

Neoliberal economic policies manifest in stagnant wages, rising inequality in incomes and cheaper and accessible credit had run their course. Structural unemployment in the working class combined with increased indebtedness of the middle class has, in the long term, created conditions of social alienation in which the public display of opulence by the elite is a visibly glaring contradiction.

Notwithstanding, the trigger was a definite perceived social injustice by most participants in the uprisings which served to justify their actions to fulfil a dream of having their basic needs met, defined in the context of the 21st century.

Uprisings such as these cannot mechanically be called up at will. They are a product of deep societal processes and are not to be emulated. They are short-lived events in which the participants do not have foresight as to their grave consequences, and they will periodically occur in this manner in the absence of progressive organisation and leadership.

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