

Ordinary people walk

Should mass action be reviewed as the legitimate protest of democratic civil society or the provocative methods of reckless leaders? RUSSELL ALLY brings some hindsight to bear on this question.

BRING up the question of mass action and you are bound to get an impassioned response. This is only to be expected. In a concentrated form, the mass action campaign of the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance expresses the tensions of a country in political transition from racist authoritarianism to some form of democracy.

At the end of the day, however, the principle of mass action is bigger and more important than the arguments of either the present promoters of the mass action campaign or its detractors. Mass action quintessentially is about the ability of people to demonstrate freely and openly, and to express their dissatisfaction with those who are in power.

Because the ANC-SACP-Cosatu alliance is at the head of the mass action campaign, this fundamental principle is often overlooked. But mass action is not the preserve of certain political organisations, nor does it only involve large-scale mobilisation for the so-called big political issues.

Mass action is also about groups of residents getting together to protest against the lack of facilities in their communities. It is about homosexuals demonstrating against discrimination and sexual harassment. It is about marches to protest against the abuse and exploitation of the environment. Indeed,

in many ways it is possible to judge just how democratic a society is by the extent to which the people of that society are free to protest, which includes the right to challenge those in power.

For die-hard, racist conservatives, however, mass action confirms all their worst fears and prejudices about black majority rule. Hordes of unruly, violent blacks on the march can only signify one thing: the country is on the precipice of anarchy. And there can only be one solution to this awesome *spectre of black defiance: bring out the army, declare a state of emergency. In sum, enforce law and order.* This response is predictable and not all that interesting.

'Mass action is about the ability of people to demonstrate freely and openly'

Much more interesting is the response of De Klerk and his National Party. Having ostensibly embraced democracy, the Nationalists have, of course, to pay lip service to the right of protest. But what they find totally baffling is why this right needs to be exercised. After all, has the NP not indicated its willingness to negotiate a new democratic constitution for the country? Has the NP not abolished apartheid and committed itself to a new non-racial South Africa? Why then the need for mass action? The dismay of the Nationalists at this display of ingratitude on the part of the alliance would

be amusingly serious.

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tion, and unavoidably retards the negotiation process. Such statements provide the public face of liberal concern.

Underneath, however, lies a deeper and more powerful anguish. If the Nationalists believe that they best understand the "native mind", then what drives the liberals is a fear of the masses themselves. Liberals are generally more comfortable dealing with those whom they perceive to be the leaders of the masses, than with the masses themselves.

Thus, for Stanley Uys in *The Star*, "unless elites on either side arrange (a settlement), as they usually do in history", there is little hope of reaching a new dispensation for South Africa. Democracy, it would appear to some liberal commentators, is fine so long as it can be doled out in carefully measured doses and does not upset or interfere with elite bargaining.

To be fair, some liberal commentators give qualified backing to mass action campaigns, but they stop short of extending their support to actions which directly challenge certain homeland leaders. Ironically, then, where the need to demonstrate against undemocratic practices is greatest, many liberals turn their backs on mass action, depicting this action as provocation.

And what about the homeland leaders who will not permit mass action in their territories? Created in complete violation of all principles of democracy, these homeland governments cannot tolerate or countenance practices which bear even a remote resem-



blance to democratic norms.

Moreover, given that their power rests precisely on coercion, they, not unsurprisingly, resort to brute force to protect their fiefdoms. Is this not all the more reason for those who believe in democracy to support campaigns against them - especially in the light of the recent revelations of massive corruption? Not supporting a challenge to these bully-boys means that the victims of these brutal regimes become the villains when they stand up to protest.

Conservatives, nationalists, liberals and homelands leaders alike, of course, reserve the label of arch-villain in all of the events surrounding the mass action campaign for the ANC-SACP-Cosatu alliance. In a volatile political climate, where society has become deeply polarised, the alliance is expected to provide responsible leadership and not add to the country's woes by raising the political temperature.

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