

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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