
2 emergencies - 1960 & 1986

The state of emergency imposed nationally by PW Botha has been a vicious assault on the people of South Africa and their organisations. More than 12 000 people have been detained. Scores have disappeared, allegedly released by the police. Yet it is clear that the spirit of resistance has not been broken.

Although it is difficult, organisations are still working. The UDF is still holding its structures together, from deep inside the community to the level of the NEC. There is still national co-ordination taking place. Other organisations such as COSATU have also been able to withstand the crackdown.

The resistance of the people runs very deep. Many townships in the country remain no-go areas for all but armed convoys. Significantly, this applies also to some of the rural areas in and around the bantustans of the Transvaal. In many townships, the street committees structures remain intact and have not been broken.

New people are put forward to replace those who have been taken. The state has admitted that it is losing R 30 million a month as residents in 41 townships refuse to pay rents.

Workers in hundreds of factories and shops organised by COSATU unions have gone on strike. A central demand has been the release of their organisers or fellow workers from detention. In the schools, students have not accepted the ID system or the presence of police in school grounds. Students have successfully held numerous boycotts and stay aways. The state has responded by closing down at least 30 schools.

The apartheid government has also run into a number of legal problems with the various emergency regulations. Many of these regulations have been challenged by organisations and thrown out by the courts. This has meant that the state has not been able to turn the screws as it would like to on the people.

The state of emergency of 1986 has been more vicious than that of 1960. But has it been as effective? What is different now to then? We need to look at some of the points of similarity and some of the differences.

The apartheid government responded in both 1960 and 1986 with an emergency after there had been a period of continuous resistance on a massive scale.

In 1960 it was after a decade which saw the Congress Alliance engage in the Defiance Campaign, the campaigns against bantu education and passes; for a national wage of a pound a day for

all workers; the bus and potato boycotts; as well as the Congress of the People campaign and the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955. There had also been many strikes and successful national stay aways from work.

In 1986, the emergency has been imposed after the people have similarly engaged in mass action. After the army entered the townships of Sebokeng and Sharpeville in September 1984, people throughout the country began the process of making townships ungovernable for the state, and replacing state structures with those controlled by the people themselves. There have been large-scale boycotts of bantu and coloured education, and the consumer boycotts. The regional stay aways have been extended on a national scale as with 1 May and 16 June. There have been more strikes in the first few months of 1986 than at any other time.

In 1960, the state used the emergency to detain thousands, to leave organisations without our leaders and to break communication between activists and the people. The government banned the ANC and PAC and then followed up the six months of the emergency with four years of trials. Thousands of comrades were either jailed, banned or forced into exile. The main triumph for the state came with the Rivonia Trial, when they sent the leadership of MK to life imprisonment.

Similarly the emergency of 1986 was imposed after the apartheid regime could no longer hold off the pressure on them from people's organisations.

For the past few years, it has detained thousands under the various security laws. It has used many different tactics (treason trials, vigilantes, etc) to disrupt and break the people's organisations. When these measures did not work, the government imposed a partial emergency in 1985. Still, this has not been enough to make PW Botha feel secure. For Botha it was clear that he could only stay in power if he unleashed his armed forces.

But does this mean, as in the 1960's that the government will smash the democratic movement? Because they succeeded in the 1960's in creating a period of lull, can they do this again? There are many differences between then and now that tilt the balance in favour of the struggling people. This does not mean that the emergency does not affect the ability of the people to continue organising. It has indeed struck many heavy blows, but the objective conditions are in favour of the people in the long term.

Let us now look at some of the major differences between 1960 and 1986.

1. POLITICAL STRATEGY OF THE RULING BLOC

In 1948 the Nationalist Party came to power on the basis of its proposed apartheid programme. By 1960, the Nats had a clear political strategy. They wanted to consolidate the various apartheid laws they had begun to implement during the 1950's but which were massively rejected by the people. This policy included some of the following: the development of the bantustans; the strict imposition of influx control; the implementation of Bantu education; Group Areas removals;

the removal of "black spots" and many other apartheid measures. The government used the emergency to smash resistance so that they could impose these apartheid laws.

However, by 1986 the ruling bloc as a whole has very little coherent political strategy. It is clear that, although the government responds to popular pressure with brute force, it has no political alternative. In 1960 the emergency was imposed so that the state could implement its apartheid policies. In 1986 the emergency came because the state no longer has any clear long term political strategy to defend.

Today, many of PW Botha's closest friends have been forced to call on him to reverse the process his party started in 1960. They are now calling for the release of Mandela and other political prisoners, and for the unbanning of the ANC. The original aim of the imperialist countries' "constructive engagement" was to bargain with Botha for a few cosmetic "reforms", while completely ignoring the leading liberation movement in South Africa, the ANC. Now, even Thatcher and Reagan have been forced to retreat, at least a little, from this approach.

Within South Africa, powerful elements in the broad ruling bloc are also having to adjust. Some leading businessmen and the PFP are beginning to realise that they will have to acknowledge the major leadership and organisation of the majority of South Africans. Delegations from both these groupings have visited the ANC in Lusaka.

Obviously, today there are still major differences between mass-based organisations, committed to ending all forms

of oppression and exploitation, like UDF, and these liberal groupings within the ruling bloc. Nonetheless, there is at least an agreement that the way forward lies through the unbanning of the ANC and the release of political prisoners.

Today, PW Botha finds himself under pressure politically, even from his imperialist friends and significant sections of the South African ruling bloc.

2. ORGANISED STRENGTH OF THE POPULAR MOVEMENT

There is a big difference between 1960 and 1986 and the strength of the broad popular forces. This strength can be seen both in the larger numbers of people involved, as well as the greater experience activists and organisations now have.

In 1960, after the emergency and the banning of the ANC, the leadership of what had been open, legal organisations were forced overnight to operate in conditions of illegality. There was little experience of clandestine or underground styles of work. This often made it easy for the police to monitor and led to heavy blows to the new underground movement.

By 1986 a different set of conditions apply. Various organisations have been working underground in conditions of illegality for 26 years. (In the case of the SACP this has been

for over 30 years.) If the state were to succeed in smashing UDF and COSATU (which it can't), this might hamper the work happening at other levels, but it would not break it.

In addition, in 1986 mass based organisation is generally more advanced than it was in 1960. Already the rudimentary organs of people's power, in the form of street committees, etc, are in existence and have not been broken by Botha's armed forces. Also, and importantly, the trade unions are better organised than they were. The working class has grown substantially and the percentage of workers organised into democratic unions has increased. This puts additional pressure on the bosses and the apartheid government.

3. ACTIVISTS AND MASS PREPAREDNESS

When the state launched its attack in 1986, activists and leaders were ready and prepared. A number of precautions had been taken and built into the style of work. Networks of communication were established, making it possible for areas to co-ordinate work as well as for regions to meet and keep in touch nationally. This national contact has been maintained under extremely harsh conditions.

In the 1960's leadership, and, more especially, the broadest layers of activists were surprised and unprepared for the ferocity with which the system struck. They only then became aware of the new brutal torture and interrogation methods. These the South African police had newly learned,

especially from the French colonial police in Algeria.

4. WORLD CAPITALIST ECONOMIC SITUATION

There was a major economic boom in the whole of the capitalist world, including South Africa, from the early 1960's to the early 1970's. The repression of the early 1960's was followed by a period of rapid economic growth in South Africa. This then seemed to justify the very heavy measures in many quarters - eg various liberal groupings, big business and the international community.

In 1986, however, the world capitalist system has been in a chronic crisis that goes back more than ten years. South Africa, along with other middle size economies on the edge of the main capitalist bloc, like Argentina and Mexico, has been very hard hit. So the attempt by the state to employ mass repression has important economic limitations. There is no money for the state to push through far reaching reforms which could buy them significant middle-strata support.

But there is another important development. There are big chunks of South African big business who are very worried as to whether they will survive in the long term. Their attempts to ensure this have led some of them to consult with the ANC in Lusaka, and to disagree (in words, if not action) with the state a bit more than they did in 1960.

5. THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

The international community responded to the emergency in 1960 with a very small voice. This has changed. Today there is international condemnation of the apartheid regime. The differences among international forces centre on what strategies to employ to force Botha to alter his policies.

Many South Africans were forced into exile in 1960. They did not stop working for the struggle. They have spent years helping to build a large, anti-apartheid solidarity front in most of the Western capitalist countries. This has limited the support the government's of those countries can give to Botha. Some, like those of Reagan and Thatcher have tried every trick in the book to do this, and are still continuing to seek out new ways of doing so.

The number of countries belonging to the non-aligned bloc and the socialist bloc has increased greatly in the past 20 years. This has increased their ability to put anti-apartheid pressure on the Western capitalist countries through the United Nations.

Thus in 1986, the South African ruling bloc finds itself severely constrained because of international political and economic isolation. This makes it harder for the government to move in to smash completely the national mass liberation movement.

6. REGIONAL SITUATION

The situation in Southern Africa as a region has also altered greatly. In 1960 the Portuguese colonialists still occupied

Angola and Mozambique. Rhodesia was soon to declare itself "independent" under the minority Smith regime. Today, only Namibia, a South African colony, stands as a buffer zone between South Africa and the newly independent countries.

These frontline states are harassed and destabilised by South Africa. Today South Africa stands internationally condemned for its role in creating and supplying arms to UNITA in Angola and MNR in Mozambique, whose goal is to disrupt the lives of thousands of Angolans and Mozambicans and to prevent them from reconstructing their economies in a socialist direction. But these acts of aggression and destabilisation cost the apartheid regime a lot. The continued occupation of Namibia alone cost South Africa R 3 million a day.

The combined effects of this regional situation are to stretch the armed forces of the South African state and to further drain the economy. Thus despite problems in the frontline states, the regional situation is less favourable to the apartheid regime today, than it was in 1960.

These are all gains for the oppressed majority in South Africa. However, there is at least one negative factor which should also be looked at. The South African state is today better armed and equipped militarily than at any other time in its history. The army and police have a range of weapons and an arms industry to combat the pressure of international arms embargoes and sanctions. The South African armed forces have also gained many years of experience fighting bush wars - in Rhodesia, Namibia and along South Africa's borders. Since 1976 they have also developed experience of

handling urban insurrectionary-type struggles. On the other hand, much the same can be said for the mass of people. Between 1960 and 1986 the national liberation movement has also gained experience in a great variety of strategies and tactics. At a mass level, several generations of youth have been steeled in the most intense struggles.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have looked at some of the similarities, and especially at some important differences between the state of emergency in 1960 and the present state of emergency. We have argued that in many ways the concrete, national conditions today are much more favourable to the broad national democratic movement. It is important for us to know this, but it is also important for all of us to know that, on their own, objective conditions do not guarantee victory. The conditions are there, but it remains for all of us to use our skills and creativity to exploit them to the maximum.
