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RULE BY THE BIG STICK

State of Emergency repression in the Eastern Cape

On June 12 1986, the South African government responded to a strong, resilient upsurge in popular resistance with an intensive security crackdown. The imposition of the country's third State of Emergency was part of a determined campaign to re-orientate the political process in favour of white domination. For close on two and a half years, the state's control over the country's turbulent townships had been in severe jeopardy. A spiral of violence, beginning in September 1984 with township protests signalling intensified and broad-based resistance to apartheid, met with an immediate and heavy-handed response from the security forces. By June 1986 over 2 000 people were estimated to have died in the unrest. Yet the townships remained mobilised as community organisations explored new and audacious ways of defending themselves against repression. In the space vacated by the collapse of unpopular local government structures the grassroots, decentralised democracy of street and area committees had begun to take hold.

The nature of the state's actions since the declaration of this third Emergency suggest five broad aspects to the Emergency strategy. Firstly, the state is trying to eliminate organised resistance as a pre-condition for advancing the reform programme. To this end there has been an attempt to seriously disrupt popular opposition forces by detaining thousands of supporters for lengthy periods, often up to 18 months or more. Secondly, the state has attempted to close off the legal space in which anti-apartheid groupings have operated. The banning of meetings, the regulations controlling funerals and prohibiting calls for boycotts, strikes and the lifting of the Emergency itself, are aimed at hindering the capacity of oppositional groupings to mobilise and win further support. In addition, curbs on the press have the effect of disallowing these groupings a public voice. Intensified SADF attacks on Frontline states since the Emergency was declared, suggest a third part of the Emergency pattern is to prevent the advance of the ANC's armed struggle.

Serious disputes and divisions within the Nationalist Party have for some time echoed a wider insecurity within the white community as to the government's ability to implement an effective solution to the country's political crises. The "success" of Emergency repression in slowing and, in places, halting township violence (though not, of course, state violence) has meant a further part of the Emergency strategy has been fulfilled: the business community's support for the state has, to some extent, been restored by official "proof" that the restoration of "law and order" is a necessary pre-condition for successful reform initiatives.

Economists have claimed that the Emergency has restored confidence by removing uncertainty and that foreign investment continues. Lastly, the state has tried to re-unite the right-wing by demonstrating that it has the power, through Emergency repression, to control the African majority and that it is not prepared to bow to international pressure.

More sophisticated than the 1985 version, there can be little doubt that the third Emergency has halted — albeit temporarily — the erosion of the state's authority. Extra-parliamentary opposition has been bruised. For example, it is estimated that between 25 000 and 40 000 people were detained under Emergency regulations during the first 12 months of the third Emergency alone. Where organised mass opposition had created "people's committees" in the townships, the state has begun to impose Regional Services Councils to re-govern the areas. The state has also developed further strategies in its efforts to disrupt the pattern of black community loyalties. In the absence of authentic leaders as a result of widespread detentions, new instruments of state policy — the Joint Management Committees, the municipal police and "kitskonstabels" — have been introduced into townships countrywide.

This paper focuses on some current aspects of State of Emergency repression in the Eastern Cape, one of South Africa's most politicised regions. While every aspect of the Emergency strategy outlined above has left its impact on the region, only several are examined here. It is not the intention to downplay the existence of other forms of official or unofficial violence in the region. Rather, the primary concern is to examine those repressive phenomena which most clearly illustrate the twin themes of the Emergency's impact on South Africa's black communities: terror and disorganisation.

THE EASTERN CAPE: "LABORATORY OF RESISTANCE"

In a pamphlet issued in Grahamstown in September 1987 by a group calling itself "Victims against Terrorism", the Eastern Cape is referred to as a region "used for a number of experiments to promote the revolution in South Africa".[1] If there is some truth in this, then the region is certainly also one in which the government has experimented with its own strategies to counter revolution. The region has been subjected to extremely heavy repression in the successive waves of Emergency clampdowns. There are simple reasons for this: the Eastern Cape had advanced to a particularly high level of organisational and ideological development by the time the third Emergncy was declared.

Several key elements characterise this phase of resistance. Firstly, a clear rejection by blacks of the state's reform initiatives. Mobilisation and organisation of community residents occurred independently of the national and local political institutions so tightly controlled by the state. This does not merely relate to the fact that blacks are excluded from institutions like the tri-cameral parliament, but also that systems of local government like the town councils were seen as unrepresentative and undemocratic.

Secondly, resistance assumed regional and even national proportions, partially because of the emergence of national co-ordinating bodies like the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). There was also a more spontaneous process whereby political strategies successful in one area had an inspirational effect on other areas, building strong relationships between local black communities. In the Eastern Cape, a whole panoply of community-based organisations — women's, youth, student, civic and church groupings — were active in local townships under the broad umbrella of the UDF by the time the third Emergency was declared.

Finally, the UDF represents a broad alliance with a firm commitment to a unitary, non-racial and democratic South Africa in an open political challenge to white power and privilege.

The set of political conditions in the Eastern Cape which brought forth such strategies as rent, school and consumer boycotts as well as general wide-scale unrest were intertwined with particular socio-economic pressures. The Eastern Cape is one of the most impoverished regions in South Africa. In a recent unpublished study, Davies (1986) outlines the reasons for the crippled state of the local economy as connected to decades of governmental neglect in favour of the Ciskei/Transkei/Border corridor area, as well as an over-reliance on the motor and motor components industries.[2] Recent rationalisations in the motor industry, as a result of the recession, compounded the situation.

A schools boycott which began in early 1984 in Cradock, in protest at the dismissal of community leader and headmaster Matthew Goniwe, was the first sign of things to come. It seems accurate to say that this boycott inspired other black students in the region and later in the Transvaal to take similar action during the coloured and Indian elections for the tricameral parliament in August that year. Widespread schools' boycotts were then launched specifically as a protest against the new constitution. Frustration at unrepresentative reform initiatives like the revised constitution which seemed very unlikely to make any material or political difference to blacks' day-to-day experience found more specific expression when students took issue with their educational system as well, calling, for example, for democratic SRC's. The inevitable confrontations with security forces which followed set off a cycle of violence and counter-violence between the youth and the police in 1985.

Yet, attempts by the state to repress the student protest had the effect of mobilising support for the students and of further politicising other residents in the townships. This was to lead to a redirection of the focus of the struggle away from education and towards apartheid in general. In the Eastern Cape, this redirected energy found expression in the extensive campaign waged by the UDF against local black authorities. The youth turned their anger against the councillors and other state authorities — policemen, soldiers, informers — perceived as apartheid's agents. And since the state's most consistent response to this protest was a repressive one, it was not long before the focus of resistance shifted again to settle on the question of repression itself. Community organisation in the region and elsewhere called for the withdrawal of troops from the townships and the lifting of the ban on meetings.

1985 was also the year when black consumer boycotts of white-owned businesses brought the message of protest home to white commerce all over the country. Again, the Eastern Cape was the region where this strategy first emerged and by September it was reported that boycotts were in force in over 50 local towns, besides large parts of the Transvaal and in the Southern and Western Cape.

Some analysts claim the success of these boycotts was a major factor in provoking the declaration of the second, partial State of Emergency in the Eastern Cape late in July 1985. Yet it was in the face of the increased powers the emergency gave to the police and army that new forms of organisation began to appear. The grassroots, decentralised structures of street and area committees were formed during this emergency, designed to withstand the onslaught of repression by allowing for layers of leadership to be trained as replacements for those detained or on the run. In many parts of the region these structures began to take over certain aspects of township administration like rubbish removal and crime control, where the collapse of local government meant that these services had stopped. Thus the street and area committees had begun to function as rudimentary organs of "people's power".

In a recent study on the Eastern Cape, Roux and Helliker (1986) state that the political climate of this period was particularly conducive to the development of mass resistance; the popularity of the UDF and its affiliates was likewise significant in making the strategies of protest possible. The fact that the UDF and its affiliates managed to present themselves to local communities as respectable opponents of apartheid and, indeed, symbols of hope, was the result of the unity, action and direction they had brought to the remotest of small East Cape townships and to the region as a whole.[4]

For the South African state, this resilience was clearly unacceptable. In June 1986 the State President declared a new State of Emergency which, unlike the limited 1985 version, applied throughout South Africa. This Emergency has submitted popular opposition in the Eastern Cape to an extremely tough test.

STATE OF EMERGENCY REPRESSION IN THE EASTERN CAPE

The extensive powers of arrest and detention granted by Emergency regulations to all members of the security forces have been used far more widely in the Eastern Cape than in any other part of the country except the Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vaal triangle.[6]

Of the recorded figures which specify the age of a detainee, 47% relate to detainees under 21 years of age, and 19% to detainees between the ages of 21 and 25. Children — officially, persons under the age of 18 — have thus emerged as a major target grouping of Emergency detentions. Only a quarter of those detained are active political activists.[7]

The pattern of arrests in the Eastern Cape has been roughly thus: detentions peaked at the start of the Emergency in June/July 1986 and rose further, but more slowly, until September that year. Releases slowly started to counterbalance the new arrests through to April 1987. A lull in arrests then lowered the overall figure. On 11 June 1987, the day before the first anniversary of the third Emergency, a mass release of 60 detainees gave hope that many more would be returning home. Instead, the detainee population dropped very slightly until a handful of releases in November reduced the recorded figure to 158 detainees still inside.[8]

The full process of the state's detention strategy must be seen to include the disorientating experience of release into a politically weakened community where work, family life and political organisation have all been severely disrupted. Where the released detainee is the family breadwinner, further problems may occur when former bosses refuse to give the workers their jobs back on the grounds that they will not employ a "political".[9] And while large-scale detentions are no longer routine, the SAP continue to use this strategy to suppress the emergence of any township organisation seen to be acting in opposition to state policy.

The Eastern Cape was popularly known by activists as a "laboratory" where national oppositional strategies were first applied. Perhaps it was only logical for Botha to use this region to test one of the emergency's newest and most repressive offspring: the municipal police.

Municipal police or "greenflies" first emerged in the townships of the Eastern Cape in April 1986. Officially, the powers of the municipal police have been defined as "the prevention of crime" and "the maintenance of law and order". Although trained by the SAP, they are employed by local authorities and are directly responsible to them.

By mid-1987, however, reports from township residents as far afield as Thabong in the Orange Free State and Port Alfred in the Eastern Cape were alleging that municipal police were guilty of large-scale abuses of power in the townships, and claiming that they were chiefly responsible for changing the mood of township residents from protest to fear.[10]

A study of 260 incidents of municipal police activity carried out by the Black Sash between April 1986 and July 1987 reveals one common thread linking all cases. The municipal police form part of the state's efforts to fill the vacuum left by the decline of community organisations and to coerce support instead for "responsible" black local authorities. Municipal policemen are used to guard the homes of councillors, to act as their personal bodyguards and to carry out some of their tasks such as the eviction of rent defaulters.

A second pattern of municipal police activity shows how they act as black auxiliaries of the South African Police (SAP), especially with regard to the work of the security police. A number of cases studied describe the municipal police arresting and interrogating residents on suspicion of carrying out acts of political violence or of belonging to political organisations whose meetings have been banned under emergency regulations. In several cases the suspect has been handed over to the SAP, who have formally detained him/her. Municipal policemen who have been recruited from the same community they control are well-placed to pick up on local tensions and political gossip. In some instances this uneasy intimacy has caused deep community rifts. As an Alexandria resident put it: "The trouble is that here some of them were first comrades, with the youth, and then they joined the municipal police. So they know everything."[11]

A third trend involves co-operation between right-wing black vigilante groupings and municipal police, and the induction of vigilantes themselves into the force. "Some of these people who are now serving as municipal policemen (in Fort Beaufort) had fled the township through unrest. They were part of vigilante groups. When the system of black municipal police was created they joined in full force and now it appears they are bent on revenge," claim Fort Beaufort residents.[12]

There are several reasons why the municipal police have proved a more effective repressive medium than blunt police repression or community council ploys. Firstly, use of this force has enabled the state to withdraw SAP and SADF troops to the background in many townships, thereby seeming to accede to the "Troops Out" call voiced so long and loud by black communities. Secondly, the lure

Pic. Eric Miller – Afrapix

of steady wages within the state system has aided the process of black co-option into government services, thereby exploiting the divisions present in already pressurised communities. Thirdly, by referring to municipal police excesses in the townships as "black-on-black violence", the state has on occasion successfully been able to obscure the links between the conflicting parties and apartheid structures. And lastly, press curbs mean the activities of municipal policemen often go unreported.

The municipal police are making their own special contribution to township violence and the disruption of extra-parliamentary opposition. Alongside such methods of direct control the Emergency strategy involves the use of co-optive methods as well. The State Security Council's Emergency Management Systems (EMS) is one example. The logic behind the EMS is derived from United States military academy counter-insurgency doctrine and draws particularly on an approach termed "low-intensity warfare". Advocates of the approach describe it as "total war at grassroots level", where the emphasis is given to political rather than conventional military operations. The objective is to isolate, through close surveillance, "terrorist" or "revolutionary" elements without antagonising the rest of the population, who are wooed with promised reform. In this way state social welfare programmes take precedence over military operations, and force is considered a last resort.

In black townships throughout the Eastern Cape (and nationally) this strategy is being implemented through local mini-Joint Management Centres (JMCs), connected through regional structures to a Cabinet Minister's Committee under the chairmanship of the State President. Convened by the security forces and unaccountable to any structure beyond the shadowy State Security Council, the JMCs aim to bring together representatives from all state departments and local government authorities. Representatives from the tricameral parliament, school principals and teachers, members of parent-teacher associations and other community figures of influence are invited to join.

The JMCs are primarily concerned with gathering intelligence on political activity in their area. Such intelligence enables the security forces to better target members of resistance groupings. At the same time, the JMCs seek to identify potentially explosive community grievances. So the strategy includes both reform and repression, where failure to suppress resistance has led the state to re-emphasise cosmetic improvement in the townships while consolidating its security networks there.

Given the mantle of secrecy surrounding JMC operations, it is not surprising that there is a distinct lack of information on the government's current "upgrade" programmes in Eastern Cape townships. Residents themselves certainly know little more than what they are told by low-level state officials of long-overdue plans to pave their roads, install drainage and street lights, and build clinics and sportsfields. These improvements have been among demands made by community organisations for many years, and oppositional groupings could accurately claim their implementation as a victory. However, extra-parliamentary organisations must now tackle the question whether Emergency repression has cowed communities to the extent that township residents might choose to accept these improvements in exchange for relinquishing political demands that challenge state power more directly.

From a cursory reading of the current state of authority in Eastern Cape townships, this might indeed appear to be the case. Townships which were strongholds of the "comrades" in 1985 and early 1986, have been transformed into passive and even alienated communities, largely under the control of pro-government forces. In many instances new black local authorities have been "appointed" — rather than elected — to administer the townships, buttressed by the power of auxiliaries like the municipal police and black SAP "kitskonstabels". Repression has made it almost impossible for community organisations to hold mass meetings, while the presence of informers and municipal police make house meetings and door-to-door organising work extremely difficult. Detentions seem to be on the wane at present, but recent arrests show that the SAP are still ready to use this measure to suppress the emergence of any new organisation.[15]

In a recent article in the Weekly Mail, Patrick Laurence quotes a diplomat who remarked in an interview that the success of the State of Emergency seemingly reinforces all Botha's suppositions in declaring the Emergency. According to the diplomat, these were the State President's explicit and implicit beliefs that township revolt could be crushed by the application of greater force, that popular opposition forces could be seriously disrupted by detaining their leaders, and that the rebellion was fanned by press coverage and could therefore be contained by press restrictions.

But the ruling politicians have yet to show that the Emergency has enhanced their ability to deliver a lasting political solution. Indeed, by detaining and alienating literally thousands of community leaders, it may have made their task more difficult.[16] At a local level, the township residents of the Eastern Cape who fought the police, occupied schools, organised street committees and were detained without trial in such large numbers, must explore new ways of transcending the current stalemate. One fact remains: the exigencies of the third State of Emergency have not destroyed their struggle. Rather, the harshness of the Emergency's methods may have ensured that the struggle for a non-racial South Africa takes a more militant course.□

1. From pamphlet issued in Grahamstown by "Victims against Terrorism", September 1987.
2. Davies, W. J., A review of the socio-economic conditions in the Greater Algoa Bay area (GABA), ISER unpublished paper, Rhodes University 1986.
3. ISER working paper, Rhodes University 1986.
4. Roux, A. and Helliker, K., Voices from Rini, ISER Development Studies Working Paper, Rhodes University 1986.
5. Interview with resident of Alexandria Township, Albany Black Sash, April 1987.
6. DPSC monthly reports, 1986/1987.
7. DPSC, Special Report on the State of Emergency, Johannesburg, January 1987.
8. Albany Black Sash records, January 1988.
9. Albany Black Sash report, Grahamstown, June 1987.
10. Albany Black Sash, Unleashing the Wild Rats: Municipal Police in the Eastern Cape, unpublshed report, 1988.
11. Interview, Albany Black Sash files 1986.
12. Pamphlet issued by the Fort Beaufort Residents' Association (FORA), 1986.
15. The establishment of community advice offices in Fort Beaufort and Alexandria townships in December 1987 has already resulted in the detentions of several of those involved; while officials of a newly-established Rhodes University workers' union were arrested early in 1988 and are still detained.
16. Patrick Laurence article in Weekly Mail, June 1987.