

South Africa's Eroding 'Grand Bargain'

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On August 16, escalating unrest at the Marikana platinum mine in South Africa culminated in the police murder of thirty-four protesters. The police claimed the killings were in self-defense. However, the *Star* newspaper reports that many demonstrators were allegedly shot in the back while running away from police.

This incident, reminiscent of police brutality during the apartheid era, signals the erosion, but not yet the end, of post-apartheid South Africa's 1994 "grand bargain"--the negotiated compromise signed at Kempton Park between the Nationalist party and liberation movements. This agreement transferred political power to mostly black hands through credible, "non-racial" elections, but left the economy in those of whites and a few members of the black elite. More specifically, the anger underpinning Marikana highlights frustration over the close relationship between the black elite, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the ANC-dominated government, and white-dominated business that has been maintained at the expense of poor blacks--the vast majority of the population and the core constituency of the governing African National Congress (ANC).

Roots of the Strike

The Marikana strike pitted mine workers against the mining giant Lonmin in a dispute over wages and working conditions. The Platinum Belt in the North West Province, where this mine is located, is considered the "jewel" of the South African mining industry because of its profitability. But civic organizations highlight the squalor of the large number of "informal settlements" as much worse than in other mining areas. The strikers enjoyed wide support within the Marikana community among those not employed by Lonmin, which, at best, is not regarded as a model employer by civil activists.

The strike continued for five more weeks despite the shootings, ending on September 19, when Lonmin accepted most of the strikers' demands. The company granted wage increases ranging from 11 to 22 percent with an additional single payment to each miner of R2,000 (about \$244). Meanwhile, the strikes have spread to other platinum and gold mines. On September 26, the mining giant AngloGold

Ashanti halted its South Africa operations because most of its 35,000 employees were on strike.

The settlements and strikes notwithstanding, [South Africa's mining industry is declining](#) and increasingly uncompetitive. It now accounts directly for only about 8.6 percent of GDP plus another 10 percent indirectly, though it is still more than 60 percent of the country's exports by value. Such high wage settlements such as that of Marikana are likely to accelerate the industry's decline, at least in the short term. Already COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi is saying that the wage increase is "bad for the economy."

The anger at Marikana, however, was exacerbated by a struggle between the "establishment" National Union of Miners (NUM), allied with COSATU and the ANC, and the upstart and more radical Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). In addition to low wages and poor working conditions, some miners and their sympathizers are angry about systemic inequalities--that the small black elite is enriching itself, that whites remain privileged, and that the trade union establishment is no longer representing worker interests. The heavy-handed police response at Marikana shows them that the government is firmly on the side of the bosses.

The gulf between the ruling ANC elite (and its allies) and the poor black majority is illustrated by Cyril Ramaphosa, a former NUM union leader and a principal ANC negotiator at Kempton Park who is on the board of Lonmin; he is commonly cited as one of South Africa's black billionaires. The press reports that numerous other ANC insiders are also Lonmin share owners.

Marikana's Political Implications

Already Marikana is becoming part of South Africa's musical protest culture and is a feature of rap and protest songs. For many South Africans, it is reminiscent of the apartheid-era police massacres at Sharpeville (1960) and the Soweto uprising (1976). The latter two were watersheds in the eventual collapse of apartheid. The searing images of the Sharpeville and Soweto contributed to turning international opinion against the apartheid regime and undermining confidence in it at home. At Marikana, the images are at least as searing and have had faster distribution through television and social media. Over time, Marikana could be of similar popular significance in undermining the ANC, though not yet.

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Up to now, the South African "grand bargain" has largely preserved white privilege and opened the doors for an emerging black elite. But it also resulted in a genuinely democratic polity characterized by

credible elections. Even if the ANC is predominate—holding the presidency, all but one of the provincial governorships, and more than 60 percent of the National Assembly—there is a lively opposition and a free press that delights in exposing official corruption. The judiciary has greater independence than in any other large African country, even if the prosecutorial function is sometimes politicized.

But since the end of apartheid, material improvement for the black majority has been painfully slow, despite a small number of black billionaires like Cyril Ramaphosa. It is true that the ANC government has paved roads and provided water and electricity in some of the townships, notably Johannesburg's Soweto. But economic growth and investment has not been nearly fast enough to lift the masses out of poverty. Education, particularly, has lagged, leaving most blacks ill-equipped for anything other than unskilled labor. Accordingly, the unemployment rate is about 25 percent, rising to more than 40 percent among young males in the townships. For them, the promises of the post-apartheid era are largely empty. They are angry. Marikana is a reflection of that anger, and the police's ham-handed response makes it worse.

Like Winnie Mandela before him, former ANC Youth League president Julius Malema is seeking to harness this black popular discontent to his own political ambition. Anger over Marikana will help him. Malema is seeking current president Jacob Zuma's defeat as party leader at the December ANC convention, while Zuma is seeking Malema's political destruction.

Zuma's other two rivals for the party leadership are from the "establishment" ANC—Kgalema Motlanthe and Tokyo Sexwale. Both have "liberation credentials." Motlanthe was part of the ANC military wing during the armed struggle against apartheid and is currently the deputy president. Sexwale was imprisoned at Robben Island. Subsequently, he was premier of Gauteng province, which includes Johannesburg. He is now a minister in the Zuma government. It is too soon to count Zuma out, however. He has substantial support in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, the ANC heartlands.

The party political contest between Zuma, Motlanthe, and Sexwale at the December ANC party convention is almost irrelevant to the issues at Marikana. Nevertheless, the party convention will determine whether Zuma will remain party leader and as SA head of state. If Zuma is defeated, SA's politics are bound to change—in terms of personality, if nothing else. However, it remains to be seen whether a change in ANC and possibly national leadership will lead to a dramatically new approach to the deep social and economic problems that Marikana has exposed. South Africa's institutions of government provide a democratic framework that exists in no other large African nation. The hope must be that they are strong enough to address the anger and disappointment that Marikana has exposed, no matter what the outcome of the ANC party convention.