

Murder of white supremacist leader Eugene Terreblanche destabilises South Africa

By Brian Smith
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Eugene Terreblanche, a white supremacist leader in South Africa, was murdered in his sleep on his farm outside Ventersdorp, 100 miles west of Johannesburg, following a dispute over wages with a young man and a youth in his employ.

The event sparked outrage from his supporters and condemnation from the ruling African National Congress (ANC) government, who fear it becoming a focus for social tensions amongst South Africa's farm labourers and broader sections of workers.

The alleged attackers, aged 28 and 15, have been arrested and charged with murder, after a machete and a knobkerrie (wooden club) were found next to Terreblanche's bed. The trial preliminaries got underway on Wednesday, just days after the murder, with the youth's mother claiming that her son had not been paid for months.

Terreblanche was leader of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement, or Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), a neo-Nazi organisation which arose in the 1970s in opposition to President P.W. Botha's plan to allow Asian and "coloured" (mixed-race) people a vote in proposed racially-segregated parliamentary chambers. Terreblanche was jailed in 1997 for the attempted murder of a black security guard, and for setting his dogs on a petrol-station attendant, and was jailed again in 2001 for the attempted murder of a farm worker whom he beat so badly in 1996 that the man was left brain-damaged.

The AWB was, and remains, a marginal group given to grandstanding and occasional acts of terrorism. Terreblanche lived in comparative obscurity and was considered an embarrassment and a buffoon by the majority of right-wingers, who ultimately recognised the need to share power with the black elite.

After the murder the AWB initially threatened

retaliation against the country's black majority. This was hastily withdrawn by a senior member following President Jacob Zuma's condemnation of the murder and appeal for "South Africans not to allow agents provocateurs to take advantage of this situation by inciting or fuelling racial hatred."

Zuma's comments appear to be targeted at elements of his own party, particularly ANC Youth Leader Julius Malema, as well as at the AWB.

Last month Malema quoted lyrics from an Apartheid era song called "Kill the Boer," (or white farmer). AWB members have blamed Malema for inciting the actions that led to this murder, though the events appear unconnected. South Africa's high court has ruled that the song is unconstitutional, though the ANC has challenged this—claiming that it is a valuable part of their cultural heritage and that the lyrics are not intended literally.

Malema represents a wing of the ANC which seeks to whip up racial conflict as a means of diverting attention from the shortcomings of the ANC government and the vast wealth made by the tiny black elite at the expense of the majority of the population.

He took the opportunity, at a rally organized by Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, to praise Zimbabwe's programme of taking over thousands of white-owned farms, saying that South Africa will follow their example.

Malema seeks for the ANC to appear more populist and to gain more support by exploiting the growing discontentment in the country. But he knows full well that the government is beholden to South Africa's western backers who do not want Zimbabwean-style land redistribution, which could undermine the stability and profitability of the country.

In fact, the ANC government has so far managed to

achieve only a fraction of the land it promised to redistribute. According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), “since 1994 only 4 percent of land, or four million hectares, has been transferred to black South Africans... At this rate the target of having 30 percent of agricultural land in black hands by 2014 is a pipedream”.

The ISS believes that the ANC leadership, is “keen not to frighten investors planned intervention in the land market”, but also points to the “purchase of food-producing land for golf courses and game farms” as a major issue.

The murder of Terreblanche has to be seen in the context of the widespread maltreatment of employees and the widening of social inequalities. In some provinces assaults against farm workers are so common that they appear to be the norm. Even when incidents manage to get to court, judges frequently reduce charges and impose lenient sentences on the farmers.

The ANC government has done little to ameliorate the brutal conditions that exist in the South African countryside. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has highlighted the appalling conditions faced by farm workers which include poor living and working conditions, extremely low wages, long hours, dangerous working conditions, victimisation of trade-union members, child labour practices, frequent evictions, physical assaults and threats, and use of the tot system (whereby workers are given alcohol as a component of their wages).

Unscrupulous farmers also resort to brutal methods to force black workers off land which the farmer desires, including victimisation, cutting off electricity and water supplies, demolition of farm worker dwellings, and compelling workers to sign agreements stating that they will leave the farm.

Approximately half of South Africans are living below the official poverty line and 42.9 percent earn under \$2 per day. This is largely due to the very low wages received by farm workers, who receive the lowest wages of any sector in the country. Rural wages vary from R800 (\$110) per month to below R100 (\$14) a month, and a minimum wage has been strenuously opposed by farm owner organisations.

A study by the University of Stellenbosch’s Department of Economics highlights the appalling conditions of South Africa’s poor, with a large

proportion of the poorest households continuing to live in informal and traditional dwellings, with one third having no electricity, and less than half of all poor households having piped water. The status quo for many, particularly in the countryside, is indistinguishable from that under Apartheid.

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