Land-Based Social Movements In South Africa: AbM and the EFF

by Tan Yulin

Recent Developments

In 2020, the African National Congress (ANC) government drafted the Expropriation Bill, aiming to advance land reform within the existing constitutional framework through ordinary legislation. The bill progressed smoothly, completing its legislative process by March 2024, and was signed into law by President Cyril Ramaphosa in January 2025. The Expropriation Act permits the government to seize land without compensation in specific circumstances, sparking significant discontent among affected interest groups.

On May 12, 2025, 59 white South African "refugees" arrived in the United States via Washington Dulles International Airport. U.S. State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce stated that more such "refugees" would be welcomed in the coming months. During a White House press briefing that day, journalists questioned why the U.S. government prioritized white South Africans over refugees fleeing famine and war. President Trump responded that the decision was due to "racial genocide" in South Africa, claiming that "white farmers are being brutally killed, and their land is being confiscated." However, he provided no evidence to support these claims.

The Historical Evolution of the Land Issue and The Background of Expropriation Act

In 1913, the white-dominated South African government passed the Natives Land Act, confining black South Africans to "reserves" comprising just 7% of the country's land and prohibiting them from purchasing or leasing land outside these areas. This forced mass displacement of black communities to barren regions, while white South Africans, constituting only 15% of the population, controlled over 87% of the land. The act laid the foundation for the apartheid system and sowed the seeds of enduring social conflict.

In 1948, the National Party institutionalized apartheid, further stripping black South Africans of land rights and restricting their access to housing, employment, and education. Under the "Bantustan system," black people were stripped of citizenship and relocated to ten designated "Bantustans" (black homelands), further compressing their living space.

During the height of apartheid, the 1975 Expropriation Act was enacted, allowing the

government to acquire land based on a "willing buyer, willing seller" principle. White land ownership was safeguarded, enabling rapid development of large-scale, mechanized agriculture and other industries, yielding substantial economic gains. White farms became increasingly commercialized and modernized, while black settlements lagged economically, creating a stark disparity. Many black South Africans sank into poverty, reduced to cheap labor toiling on white-owned farms, in mines, and in the daily service of white households.

In 1994, apartheid ended, and African National Congress (ANC) leader Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first black president. The ANC government introduced the Restitution of Land Rights Act to address historical injustices through land restitution and redistribution, aiming, with World Bank support, to transfer 30% of white-owned agricultural land to black farmers by 2000. Yet, this mission remains unfulfilled to this day.

The Restitution Act faced fierce resistance from white farmers. The ANC continued to rely on the 1975 Expropriation Act's "willing buyer, willing seller" model, purchasing land from white farmers for redistribution to black farmers. Limited government funds and inflated prices demanded by white farmers slowed progress and created persistent challenges. In some Bantustans, land scarcity and lack of farming expertise among black recipients led to mismanagement, leaving vast tracts of land fallow. By 2007, South Africa had shifted from a net agricultural exporter to a net food importer, with nearly one-fifth of its population facing hunger.

By 2018, white control over land remained largely unchanged. Reports indicated that white South Africans, comprising 8% of the population, still owned two-thirds of the country's farmland, with average incomes at least three times higher than those of black South Africans. Widening inequality fueled escalating tensions, leading to violent land seizures targeting white farmers in several provinces.

Recognizing the urgency of addressing the land issue, President Cyril Ramaphosa, upon taking office in 2018, proposed amending Section 25 of the South African Constitution to facilitate land reform. Section 25 prohibits arbitrary deprivation of private property, allowing expropriation only for public purposes with compensation. This provision has been seen as a structural barrier to land reform and economic transformation. However, a constitutional amendment, requiring a two-thirds majority in parliament, stalled after three years of preparation and failed to pass the National Assembly.

Aware of the difficulty and low likelihood of amending the constitution, the ANC opted for ordinary legislation, which requires only a simple majority in the National Assembly and approval from five of nine provinces in the National Council of Provinces—a threshold the ANC could achieve with its parliamentary strength. While global attention, including from then-U.S. President Trump, was focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. election, the ANC drafted the new Expropriation Bill to advance land reform within the existing constitutional framework. Proposed in October 2020, the bill passed the National Assembly in September 2022 and was approved by the National Council of Provinces in March 2024, with minor revisions to terminology (only the opposition-dominated Western Cape province dissented).

Notably, the ANC strategically timed and structured the legislative process for maximum efficacy. By avoiding constitutional amendments and pursuing ordinary legislation, it lowered the approval threshold. Crucially, the bill was passed by both houses of parliament before the May 2024 South African general election. This timing was pivotal: in December 2023, former President Jacob Zuma and radical left-wing ANC members formed the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party, splitting the ANC and ensuring it would lose its parliamentary majority. Had the bill's vote been delayed until after the election, a new opposition-dominated parliament would likely have rejected it.

Land Movement Organizations and Social Activities

1. Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) Movement

The Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) movement, meaning "residents of the shacks" in Zulu, emerged from a 2005 road blockade protest near the Kennedy Road shack settlement in Durban, South Africa's third-largest city. It later expanded to densely populated areas like Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town. AbM is the country's largest national shack-dwellers' organization, advocating for the basic rights of marginalized communities and promoting a bottom-up democratic political philosophy. The shack-dwellers' movement represents the most significant and sustained social movement among South Africa's grassroots since the end of apartheid in 1994. As of October 2022, AbM claimed over 115,000 registered members across 81 branches in four provinces: KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Eastern Cape, and Gauteng.

S'bu Zikode, AbM's founding leader, was elected chair of the protest movement at age 30. Born in a Durban suburb, he moved to Kennedy Road in 1997. Before leading AbM, Zikode worked at a nearby gas station but was fired in 2007 for organizing protests. Now a prominent public figure, he frequently appears on television, radio, and in newspaper columns. Over years of activism, Zikode developed a Fanonian leadership approach, emphasizing that leaders should facilitate the people's self-awareness rather than directly commanding them[1].

1.1 The Autonomous Politics of AbM

AbM's political structure revolves around elected bodies in each settlement, with open meetings held at set times to deliberate and build consensus through inclusive discussion. This embodies a transparent, face-to-face democracy. Elected leaders are tasked with sustaining this decision-making process. The movement also holds frequent rallies, often drawing hundreds of participants. While the slow pace of deliberation can lead to missed opportunities, it has enabled AbM to maintain full ownership of its movement, securing sustained public support despite interest from the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

AbM's early decision to reject participation in party politics and elections was critical for internal unity and resisting external co-optation. For Zikode, "party politics" and "people's politics" are fundamentally distinct: "We realized that politics is like a coffin—it will suffocate you." Despite pressures and inducements, AbM has preserved its autonomy, belonging neither to political parties nor NGOs but to those resisting colonialism. Some authoritarian critics have labeled it a criminal threat to white hegemony.

The movement focuses on self-governance and external resistance, such as road blockades to counter harassment. It collaborates with allies like journalists, lawyers, scholars, and religious leaders, using legal avenues—media, protests, and courts—for advocacy [2].

Zikode believes this fosters collective self-awareness, preventing external actors from defining or controlling the movement. Practically, AbM established the Kennedy Road Development Committee as its democratic governing body. Weekly collective meetings determine all decisions, including financial ones, with social donations primarily funding legal battles and transport costs. Neither individuals nor leaders receive personal compensation.

While AbM has attracted attention from prominent scholars and intellectuals, they have not shaped its trajectory. Members independently organize reading groups to study works on spatial power by thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, but these are not scholar-led. A key slogan, "Talk to us, not for us," encapsulates their ethos.

This commitment led to the founding of the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo, where members and local communities study theory,

analyze the structural roots of their struggles, and systematize their actions to create and document their own history.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, AbM prioritized rebuilding severed social connections. They launched the "Food Solidarity Project," establishing community kitchens and distributing free food to major shack settlements through local branches. Unlike the government's "South Africans first" rhetoric, AbM emphasized inclusivity, prioritizing support for African migrants during the crisis.

These migrants, many undocumented or refugees from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, and Angola, face growing hostility amid South Africa's widening inequality and rising unemployment. Over the past decade, xenophobic violence has surged. AbM consistently opposes such acts, organizing joint protests with migrant communities to support African immigrants.

In its reflections on xenophobic violence, AbM has argued that contemporary xenophobia partly stems from the binary identity frameworks (black vs. white, local vs. foreign) inherited from apartheid. Foreign black migrants should not be scapegoated for South Africa's social woes. In this regard, AbM embodies the spirit of Pan-Africanism.

In 2009, AbM achieved a significant victory when it successfully challenged the KwaZulu-Natal Slums Act, deemed unconstitutional, in court. However, the movement faces two persistent challenges: judicial enforcement and violent repression.

First, repression includes police, private security, and hired assassins. In 2009, AbM leaders were expelled from Kennedy Road, their homes destroyed by armed groups linked to a local nationalist party alliance, with police complicity, over months. Over 20 leaders have been assassinated, including two in Marikana in 2003 and one in KwaNdengezi in 2014. These unresolved murders created a tense atmosphere. In 2014, AbM collectively resolved to vote against the ANC, raising the political cost of repression and refusing to align with any party.

Second, internal tensions arise from a prisoner's dilemma: local parties, under the guise of national development, demolish homes for redevelopment projects. These structures, often shoddily built, collapse within years, justifying further reconstruction for profit. This cycle, driven by local parties and state power, forces some members to seek party support, creating conflicts between individual interests and collective goals, leading some to defect to political parties.

2. Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) Party

Among the most prominent populist forces, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is a radical, far-left, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist social movement and political party. Founded in 2013 by Julius Malema, former chair of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League, after his expulsion from the ANC, the EFF seeks thorough economic emancipation through the nationalization of white-controlled land, mines, and other resources, aggressively advocating for "expropriation without compensation." It is currently the fourth-largest party in South Africa's National Assembly.

The EFF's direct achievements in land redistribution are limited, as it is not the ruling party and lacks policy implementation power. However, its radical advocacy has influenced ANC policy shifts, notably sparking the 2018 constitutional amendment discussions. In 2018, the EFF collaborated with the ANC to propose revising Section 25 of the Constitution to permit land expropriation without compensation, laying the legal groundwork for the 2025 Expropriation Act. Through high-profile political actions, such as parliamentary protests and public rallies, the EFF has kept the land issue in the public eye, indirectly shaping the national agenda [3].

AbM

Key Achievements

- Land Occupations and Protests: Since 2005, AbM has organized numerous protests against forced evictions and land dispossession, successfully halting or reversing some demolition plans.
- Legal Victories: AbM has won several court cases challenging government evictions, securing shack-dwellers' residency rights.
- International Attention: AbM's actions have garnered support from global human rights organizations, amplifying its voice internationally.

Funding Sources

AbM maintains strict financial independence, rejecting support from the government, political parties, or large NGOs. Its funding comes from

- Membership Fees: An annual fee of 7 South African Rand (approximately $1 USD) per member.
- Small Donations: Occasional contributions from individuals or progressive donors.
- Self-Funding: Collective expenses for transport, printing, and bail are covered internally. AbM tightly controls expenditures, ensuring all funds support collective activities and safeguarding its autonomy from external influence.

Organizational Structure

AbM employs a highly decentralized, grassroots democratic structure including

- Regular Meetings: Weekly settlement meetings discuss and decide on actions.
- Representation: Each settlement elects delegates to broader regional and national meetings.
- Recall System: All leaders are subject to recall, ensuring power remains with community members.
- Internal Committees: Youth, women's, and church subcommittees promote diverse participation. This structure prioritizes direct democracy and community autonomy, ensuring every member's voice is heard.

Struggle Strategies

- Occupations: Establishing temporary shelters on vacant land to demand housing solutions.
- Legal Advocacy: Challenging unjust evictions and relocation policies through courts.
- Protests and Demonstrations: Organizing rallies to voice discontent with government policies.
- International Connections: Building ties with global human rights organizations and media for support.

EFF

Key Achievements

- Electoral Performance: Since its founding in 2013, the EFF has achieved significant results in national and provincial elections, becoming the third-largest party in parliament.
- Policy Advocacy: Through parliamentary debates and legislative proposals, it has advanced issues like land expropriation without compensation, mineral, and banking nationalization.
- Public Influence: Media campaigns and rallies have heightened public awareness of economic justice and social equity.

Funding Sources

- Parliamentary Allocations: As a parliamentary party, the EFF receives government funding.
- Electoral Funds: Support derived from election-related financing.
- Party Dues: Contributions from members.
- Corporate Donations: Contributions from business figures like Patrice Motsepe. The EFF maintains relative transparency, regularly reporting finances to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC).

Organizational Structure

The EFF operates a highly centralized party structure such as

- Central Command Team (CCT): The highest decision-making body, setting policy and strategy.
- Branch Network: Nationwide branches manage local organization and activities.
- Regular Meetings: Periodic gatherings ensure policy and activity implementation.

Struggle Strategies

- Parliamentary Advocacy: Pushing policy changes through debates and legislative proposals.
- Street Protests: Organizing demonstrations to express dissatisfaction with government policies.
- Media Campaigns: Leveraging media platforms to promote party ideology and policies.
- Alliances: Collaborating with other left-wing parties and organizations to drive social change.

References:

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3. “Economic Freedom Fighters,” , December 11, 2019.