

THE EPOCH TIMES

PREMIUM AFRICA

US Warns of Civil Unrest in South Africa; Business Leaders Predict 'Arab Spring'



Job seekers stand outside a construction site in Eikenhof, south of Johannesburg, South Africa, on June 23, 2020. (Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters)

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March 8, 2023 Updated: March 14, 2023

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JOHANNESBURG—Political analysts and diplomats in South Africa say that relations between the African National Congress (ANC) government and officials in Washington are deteriorating quickly.

A measure making its way through the U.S. House of Representatives seeks a review of the Biden administration's relations with South Africa, in light of its recent military drills with Russia and China.

Now, the United States is warning of the possibility of "civil unrest" in South Africa, further angering President Cyril Ramaphosa's administration. Officials in Pretoria are engaging with Washington about the alert, Communications Minister Mondli Gungubele says.



A police car in South Africa. (Rodger Bosch/AFP via Getty Images)

"We do not have any information to indicate there's going to be any kind of civil unrest in our country. We will talk to our American partners because such alerts have the potential to cause serious problems in the country," he told The Epoch Times.

Analysts, civil society groups, opposition parties, and business leaders say that South Africa doesn't need the United States to "create serious problems" in the country; its own government is doing that for them.

"The ANC has put us in big trouble," said Zwelinzima Vavi, general secretary of the powerful Southern African Federation of Trade Unions, which has millions of affiliated workers.

“We are now a failed state,” he told The Epoch Times. “There are few countries right now in a worse state than South Africa; only war zones, maybe.”



Once a staunch supporter of the ANC, Vavi now says he’s “fed up” with decades of ruling party corruption, mismanagement, and incompetence.

“When you have 82 people dying in your country every single day through violence; 135 women raped every single day; when people are being held up in their homes and robbed in broad daylight, and your criminal justice system’s no longer capable of responding because it’s dysfunctional; when police say only 11 percent of people accused of rape are ever convicted ... then your state’s no longer capable of defending its own citizens.

“It can’t even perform the most basic functions.”

As Vavi noted, South Africa has some of the world’s worst crime numbers. Gangsters rule many communities.



South African President Cyril Ramaphosa in a file photo from Feb. 18, 2022. (Johanna Geron, Pool Photo via AP)

The cost of living is spiraling, yet the government continues to increase the prices of services it often can't deliver, at the same time as its officials are implicated in corruption and other crimes. Long, daily electricity and water breakdowns are common.

The state itself has noted that almost 11 million young people who should be working can't find jobs, amid one of the world's highest official unemployment rates, at 35 percent.

These are the conditions creating the "extreme tension" in the country, said Vavi, not foreign governments or what the ANC has often claimed are "Third Forces."

South Africa's third-largest political party, the ultra-leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), led by Julius Malema, will spearhead a national shutdown on March 20.

While police minister Bheki Cele has warned protesters to "stay within the parameters of the law," or face "the might of the state," Malema told The Epoch Times that he and his party are unfazed.

"We're not scared of state power. Let the state come with its power; we'll come with mass power. There will be no school, no university, no factory, no bus, and no taxi unless they're taking protesters to the picket lines. South Africa will come to a standstill."

Malema said he would lead a march of thousands of citizens to the government's seat of power, Pretoria's Union Buildings.

"We'll do this peacefully. It's our right. Let them try to stop us. They will not. If they want to violate our rights, they'll find us ready. No one's going to intimidate us. If Ramaphosa doesn't resign on March 20, then what will happen will be announced on March 20."



The ultra-leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema plans to head a protest march in Pretoria, South Africa. (Courtesy of EFF)

But it isn't only the United States or political firebrands such as Malema who are warning of possible tumult in Africa's second-largest and most industrialized economy.

Busisiwe Mavuso, CEO of Business Leadership South Africa, told a recent forum in Johannesburg that the country could face "mass action" similar to the "Arab Spring" demonstrations that toppled governments in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011.

She says she fears for the future unless the government begins delivering proper services, repairs broken infrastructure, ceases corruption, creates employment, and curbs crime.

Mavuso's public criticism of the ANC is rare for South Africa's business community, which usually meets behind closed doors to vent concerns with the ruling party. But with profits declining rapidly, mostly because of ongoing power outages and a stagnant economic climate fomented by failed policies, top businesspeople are ignoring protocol and breaking ranks.

One of Africa's richest individuals, investment banker Rob Hersov, recently participated in a march to Luthuli House, the ANC's headquarters, in Johannesburg. The son of a mining magnate returned to South Africa six years ago, after establishing businesses across the globe, and partnering with media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, among others.

"I'm standing here today because I'm not afraid of those criminals in Luthuli House, who have stolen your future!" Hersov bellowed into a megaphone during the protest. "All South Africans, stand together and rid this country of the biggest disgrace on the African continent, the ANC!"

He then led the crowd in a chant: "ANC voetsek! Voetsek! Voetsek!" ("Voetsek" is a strong Afrikaans word that means "Go away!")



Police walk past a shop looted in protests in Durban, South Africa, on July 11, 2021. (Siyabonga Sishi/Reuters)

Hersov told The Epoch Times that he's "heartbroken" by what the ANC is doing to his homeland, with services in cities and towns crumbling.

"I love this country. I love South Africa; I'm a patriot!" he said. "I spent 31 years overseas. My New Zealand wife and I have decided we're not leaving; we're going to stay and help fix this country. But to do that, we all have to rid ourselves of the ANC."

Hersov says criticism of Ramaphosa and the ANC is useful only when it's backed by action and solutions. So, he said, he'll be doing his best leading up to next year's elections to convince people to "vote according to what they see in front of them."

"I think the next phase of my life is to focus on helping South Africans by saying and doing what other South Africans can't afford to say and do."

Hersov said exercising democratic rights is the only path to "freedom from ANC hegemony."

"It's very easy to say, as most businessmen do in this country: 'We do a lot of behind-the-scenes discussions, we work through councils and organizations. We have private meetings with Cyril Ramaphosa; he promises to do the right thing.' It's a complete waste of time!"

Instead of just talking and hoping for the best, Hersov said, he'll be funding campaigns encouraging people to vote. Successive elections in South Africa have resulted in record-low voter turnouts.

Hersov is convinced that the ANC is panicking ahead of the 2024 elections because its corruption is obvious, and it's the party that destroyed the national power regulator Eskom. An infrastructure meltdown means that Eskom is forced to ration electricity through a process it calls load-shedding, which leaves South Africans in the dark for 4 to 12 hours every day, and sometimes longer.

Hersov said he's "sick" of the ANC's failure to take any responsibility for the "giant stuff-ups" it creates.



Former President Jacob Zuma addresses the press at his home in Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa, on Aug. 6, 2021. (Shiraz Mohamed/AP Photo)

“So what the ANC government’s trying to do is say, ‘We must all get together to fix load-shedding.’ They created load-shedding! Jacob Zuma has the reputation of being the most corrupt, useless president we’ve ever had. But Cyril will be the president who let the lights go out in this country. He’s a huge failure.”

Alan Pullinger, CEO of FirstRand, one of South Africa’s largest financial corporations, was next in line to criticize the administration.

Speaking to shareholders on March 2, he said the ANC's open support for Russia "could have extremely negative consequences for the country, which benefits far more from trade with and investment from the USA, UK, and Europe than from Russia."

Pullinger said some of South Africa's major trading partners are "voicing increasing concern" about the government's "close relationship" with Moscow.

He reminded the ANC that "the country's banking sector, and this includes our central bank, crucially relies on access to the US dollar, global clearing and settlement, which is a privilege and can be revoked at any time. For all of these reasons, FirstRand does not share [the] government's enthusiasm for Russia."

Meanwhile, Ramaphosa's Cabinet reshuffle on March 6 would serve only to "frustrate" citizens further, said Sandile Swana, a governance and risk analysis expert.

The president retained ministers implicated in corruption and other financial crimes and added one more, a minister of electricity, tasked with ending the energy crisis, but who's a personal friend of Ramaphosa's, and not the electricity generation expert he'd promised earlier. He's also accused of awarding irregular contracts when he was a city mayor.

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