

## **EFF protest in Brackenfell High School in the broader battle for SA soul**

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### **Synopsis**

This article looks at how racism continues to undermine the country's transformation agenda, taking a narrowed focus on how political parties have been receptive to the issues of race in the new South Africa. With a particular focus on efforts by the Economic Freedom Fighters to address the race challenges in South Africa.

### **Article**

Earlier today the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) descended on Brackenfell High School in the City of Cape Town in a march seeking to highlight racism at the school. This was sparked by what has been described by the school and the Western Cape government as a 'private function' involving white teachers from which black learners were excluded. This will be the EFF's second protest at the school after the first resulted in a physical confrontation with the parents, who were mostly white, as well as sturdy rebuke from some sections of the South African society.

Similar to protests in Senekal and against Clicks/ Tresemme, the EFF's protest action in Brackenfell is drawing national attention, with much consternation among some in society. Some are concerned that the protest will disrupt end-year examinations at the school, others are apprehensive about a possible breakout of violence, and yet others believe that there is no better moment to highlight the unresolved problem of racism.

While it is tempting to dismiss the EFF as either being populist or simply a bunch of hooligans, the party is part of the country's political menu on which the electorate exercises a choice. It is shaking South African polity in ways that at times leave some blacks embarrassed, given its unconventional, if not anarchic, approach to politics.

The EFF's approach can be understood within the context of the battle between two broad opposing alliances of capital/apartheid axis and nationalist/socialist axis that

have, since at least the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, been fighting for the soul of South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC) at its formation in 1912, and later the Congress Alliance in the 1950s, represented the nationalist/socialist axis. However, in the aftermath of the advent of democracy, the 'left' of the ANC and, with it the revolutionary utility of blackness, have somewhat waned leaving an ideological void in the thoroughgoing development of a revolution theory for the total dismantling of the capital/apartheid axis. The EFF does not consider ANC alliance partners, SACP and COSATU, as being 'left enough' to champion such a revolution theory.

While EFF President Julius Malema was not expelled from the ANC because of his ideological convictions, he soon identified a niche through which to launch his new political project, the EFF. Increasingly there is a realisation, more especially among poor black South Africans, that the democratic revolution of 1994 has run its course and that the country is in urgent need of a radical socio-economic change.

Given this disaffection, the EFF saw an opportunity to be exploited by invoking the revolutionary utility of blackness, emphasising the urgency of attending to the most pressing needs facing the black majority: from poverty and squalor to landlessness, economic exclusion and racism.

Underpinning this strategy is Malema's own megalomaniac quest for the presidency of South Africa. Malema is alive to the constraints of realising his dream through the ballot, not only because of his tainted history in the ANC Youth League but also because the current political architecture requires that things be done in an 'orderly' manner. So, his best bet is to exploit the *objective* national mood. His 'populist', anti-white, anti-establishment rhetoric is carefully crafted to keep this mood at a boiling point. As part of that agenda, the EFF sees pluralism and multiracialism as a dilution of their revolution.

Incidents such as the Clicks/ Tresemme unsavoury advert, the attack of a court by a group of Afrikaners in Senekal and physical attacks unleashed on EFF protestors in Brackenfell recently inadvertently play into the EFF's game plan. For the EFF, these incidents are nothing more than white arrogance that has not only pauperised black people over centuries but one that continues to regard blacks as pagan and primitive.

White hardliners are also helping the EFF by behaving in ways that undermine the country's transformation agenda, thereby confirming that the struggle to truly liberate a black person is far from over. Lobby group AfriForum, for instance, has long been writing a narrative of a new South Africa that they say is characterised by 'double standards' and 'black privilege'. At one stage the group's Ernst Roets said "... if we discuss 'blackness' we are only allowed to discuss how black people have been exploited in the past and not how black people need to change their way of thinking. Because the latter would be racist." For the majority of black people, this line of reasoning is blatantly racist. It is equal to negating the impact colonialism and apartheid have had on black people; it is not dissimilar to the scrapping by the Democratic Alliance of race as a criterion for redress.

For Malema and his red berets, the ANC has been extremely tolerant of racism in South Africa. That whites are living comfortably and have refused to change as they have been 26 years into democracy while a large section of black South Africans remain condemned to poverty, in the eyes of the EFF, shows how the ANC government is, wittingly or unwittingly, an enabler of white privilege, dominance and arrogance.

To his followers Malema is a hero worth celebrating, a brave man who will stop at nothing to ensure the full emancipation of black people. The EFF's message to its followers is this: to bring about change you need to push the establishment, and those sympathetic to it, to the limit and ultimately propel their Commander in Chief (CIC) to the Union Buildings through a popular insurrection.

What is clear is that the evolution of politics in South Africa will always invariably impose new ways of resolving protracted national questions that are often at variance with the established norms and traditions. Without condoning violence and hooliganism, one must accept that in a country where the majority of the population is the youth, many of whom are increasingly getting disillusioned with the status quo, we should expect more explosives than what we have hitherto witnessed; more so because of the challenges of post-apartheid South Africa.

The EFF is increasingly becoming more appealing to the young who are impatient and more assertive and who think they should trigger the necessary change NOW! On the

one hand, the impotence of the ANC Youth League and the diminishing national/socialist axis in the ANC is leaving many young people thinking that there is no alternative to the EFF. In it they see an organisation that can effectively address the myriad of socio-economic challenges they face today, and racism is one of them.

In its current form and character, the EFF may still be far from winning a majority at the ballot; but the revolutionary consciousness it is instilling in the black youth, in particular, is gaining traction. This will most certainly breed new forms of radicalism as the youth challenges the status quo, unless and until there is a praxis of societal transformation that is owned by, and gives practical effect to, the African majority. At the same time, it should be expected that such an agenda will be met with resistance by those who have benefited, and continue to benefit, from the status quo. In the circumstance, today's march must be seen as a microcosm of this broader battle.