

South Africa: Drop all charges against comrade Ayanda Kota!

Friday 13 January 2012, by [DLF \(South Africa\)](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2012).

DEMOCRATIC LEFT FRONT

13 January 2012

PRESS STATEMENT: DROP CHARGES AGAINST AYANDA KOTA AND CALL FOR PUBLIC ACTIONS AGAINST STATE/POLICE REPRESSION OF ACTIVISTS

The Democratic Left Front (DLF) calls for the immediate release and dropping of all charges against comrade Ayanda Kota, the Chairperson of the Grahamstown-based Unemployed People's Movement. Kota is also a founder and member of the National Committee of the (DLF). Kota will appear at 9am this morning at the Grahamstown Magistrate's Court to answer to charges of theft and assault of police. He has been in police custody from yesterday afternoon.

According to a UPM press statement issued yesterday, a certain Constable Zulu and other members of the South African Police Services (SAPS) savagely assaulted Kota at the Grahamstown police station. This assault took place in front of several witnesses including Kota's 6-year old son. Kota was at the police station in response to charges laid against him by a controversial academic from Rhodes University. Ostensibly, Kota had not been returned a book he had borrowed from this academic. She then proceeded to lay a charge of theft against her. The police added the assault charge.

As stated in separate statements by the UPM and by the Rhodes University-based Students for Social Justice (SSJ), Kota's treatment at the police station is consistent with increasing police repression against activists of social movements involved in social mobilisation challenging the neo-liberal and anti-poor policies of the ANC-led state. As the SSJ statement said "We have seen this behavior in Durban, when the ANC led an attack against Abahlali basemjondolo members in the Kennedy Road Settlement. We have seen this behavior when ANCYL members attacked DL and UPM activists (including Ayanda) at the international day of climate action during COP 17. We have seen this behavior when Rehad Desai was assaulted in front of Zuma". At its most tragic, this led to the killing of Andries Tatane by the SAPS during a protest in Meqheleng in April last year.

The state's increasing use of excessive force is reminiscent of the old apartheid police style tactics to suppress dissent and maintain social control. The more than 50 social movements that mobilise under the DLF umbrella have a list of at least 14 others whose deaths have been reported in the media since 2000 (seven of whom had their lives ended in 2010 and 2011). In addition, a much greater number of people have been traumatised by the use of rubber bullets fired at point blank range, and by improper use of live rounds, tear gas and water cannon. Taken as a whole, it is clear that there has been widespread intimidation of people wishing to take up their constitutional right to protest, and that this threatens our hard-won democracy. The DLF is extremely concerned about the sustained actions of Jacob Zuma's ruling elite to enhance the coercive capacities of the state.

The DLF is not surprised by yesterday's actions of the SAPS against Kota. For a number of months

now, Kota has reported suspected surveillance of his movements and family home by the local SAPS. The DLF also recalls that over the last two years, several UPM activists including Kota have been subject to problematic arrests, false charges, intimidation and harassment from the local SAPS. These SAPS actions were in cahoots with local ANC politicians and councilors following sustained UPM social mobilisation in support of demands for service delivery and accountability by the Makana Local Municipality which is mired in inefficiency, failed service delivery and corruption.

The DLF strongly condemns the SAPS for its treatment of Kota. This attack on Kota is an attack on constitutionally protected human rights and the very essence of democracy itself. This attack is an attack on social movements and the DLF itself. No amount of police brutality will solve the mass misery and poverty inflicted on our people by the pro-capitalist ANC government. This attack is a direct call to all poor and working people to intensify their actions of disciplined social protest and mobilisation against the anti-poor policies of the ANC government and municipalities as well as against police brutality.

For all the above reasons, the DLF endorses the SSJ call for an investigation of, and action against those SAPS members responsible for yesterday's assault on Kota. We also join the UPM and SSJ call on the Makana municipality and the ANC to condemn this action against Kota in the strongest possible terms.

This is the time to mobilise affected communities and organisations to bring evidence of police brutality into the public sphere. Poor and working people subjected to police brutality and other repressive action must be able to speak out and act on the violations of their rights. Such action must also send a strong signal to the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD), the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) and the Public Protector to undertake official investigations in terms of their constitutional and legislated mandates on cases of police violence directed at citizens engaged in protests. The DLF calls on the ICD, the SAHRC and the Public Protector to undertake statutory investigations of police brutality in a responsive and pro-active way that can also ensure that police brutality is exposed and declared a violation of, and a crime against the constitutional rights to speak and associate freely.

Beyond what these statutory institutions can do, the DLF also reiterates another call it made last year: the call for a People's Tribunal Against Police Brutality. In the view of the DLF, such a Tribunal must hear evidence from affected communities, thus providing a voice for working class experience and anger whilst also building solidarity between organised workers, poor communities and others committed to human rights, social justice and freedom of expression. Such a Tribunal can also lay the foundation for a mass campaign that can mobilise poor and working people to speak out and act against police brutality, and challenge the increased militarisation and centralisation of power in an increasingly unaccountable security cluster of the state.

Finally, the DLF is extremely concerned at the failure of the Rhodes academic to take political responsibility for her action to lay charges against Kota. No matter whatever unhappiness and ill-feeling she has against Kota she is a politically mature and experienced enough individual who knows the struggles of the UPM and its harassment by the local SAPS. We are however not surprised by her actions as she has sustained an almost sadistic individual campaign against the UPM ever since it did not agree with her political views regarding participation in the May local government elections. Yesterday afternoon, our comrade Jane Duncan (a DLF national committee member and fellow academic at Rhodes University) spoke to this academic to no avail. In our engagement with her, it became clear that the actions of this individual unwittingly aid the efforts of the local ANC and SAPS to demonise Kota and his other UPM comrades. None of this will take UPM attention away from its programme of action.

ENDS

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