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## Imraan Buccus Insight

# New administration must take action on construction mafia

A little over a week ago Matthew Horwill, coastal manager for the Stefanutti Stocks construction company, survived an assassination attempt in Pinetown, KwaZulu-Natal.

It is widely believed that the hit was carried out by, or on behalf of, the so-called "construction mafia".

Few people outside Durban understand just how bad the situation is with regard to such politically connected forms of gangsterism.

Most of the companies shaken down by these mafias do not go to the media or police. They either take their chances and walk away, or they pay up.

In the past these mafias have been associated with the "radical economic transformation" (RET) faction of the ANC.

Now they more often overlap with the MKP. In most cases they operate with impunity — police in the province simply do not act to enforce the law.

This interweaving of crime and politics is extremely dangerous, for obvious reasons.

For decades grassroots activists in KwaZulu-Natal have been targeted for assassination by the so-called "housing mafia", which operated through the RET faction of the

ANC, and now the construction mafia is also carrying out hits.

If the gangsterisation of politics and politicisation of gangsterism is not dealt with decisively, KwaZulu-Natal will be on the path to become much like Mexico or Colombia.

The national media do not seem to have grasped how serious the situation is, and national politicians don't seem to take it seriously either.

If MKP had been able to form a government in KwaZulu-Natal, the province would have been thrown into crisis, with a fully institutionalised synthesis of politics and gangsterism.

This would have been disastrous for the economy, escalated the existing middle-class flight from the province, and put grassroots activists in even more danger than they already are.

It is outrageous that MKP is often referred to as "left wing" in the media when it is so clearly a collection of corrupt and disgruntled individuals.

It is also outrageous that talk-show hosts keep giving a platform to malign actors without ever asking them critical questions. This is appallingly unethical pseudo-journalism.

As a man of the left I am not a

fan of either the DA or the IFP, but like most left-leaning intellectuals I recognise that an MKP government in KwaZulu-Natal would be catastrophic for everyone, especially the poor and the working class, and make democratic organisation impossible. Indeed, much democratic activity in Durban is already incredibly dangerous.

The coalition government that has been established in KwaZulu-Natal can at least try to roll back the influence of some of the corrupt networks, rebuild some basic functionality of the state and keep space open for democratic organisation.

Martin Meyer, the new MEC for public works in the province, has kicked off his term in office with a clear commitment to take on the construction mafia.

Dealing with this will require strong support from the national government.

The national government may need to bring in police units from outside the province, equip them and incentivise them to arrest the construction mafia kingpins.

It is not too far-fetched to worry that this could end up in a sort of low-grade civil war, as

has been the case in the past.

National government, and national intelligence and policing, need to take this threat extremely seriously.

In the past President Cyril Ramaphosa has not intervened in the gangsterisation of politics in KwaZulu-Natal.

This simply cannot continue in the seventh administration. It would be a gross dereliction of duty for his administration to allow the situation to worsen.

If the state does act against politically connected mafias, including those that include politicians and police officers, there will eventually be a huge push back.

The usual tactic of misrepresenting violently predatory forms of politics as being part of "radical economic transformation" will be used.

There will be a huge social media campaign, and ethically compromised public figures such as Andile Mngxitama will try to give legitimacy to a deeply reactionary, toxic and authoritarian form of politics.

For all these reasons, and more, the new provincial and national governments will have to have a real strength of purpose and communicate clearly what they are doing to address

the issue, and why.

Their strongest asset in this battle will be the ordinary citizens of KwaZulu-Natal, who are disgusted by the corruption and violence that plagues the province and yearn for peace and economic prosperity.

Ultimately the national government will have to understand that KwaZulu-Natal needs to be brought back into line with norms and laws that govern the rest of the country or it will become a separate space outside those norms and standards.

Ramaphosa's strategy of not confronting the gangsterisation of politics in KwaZulu-Natal has not worked.

It has just allowed that gangsterisation to become entrenched, a process that reached its nadir when former eThekweni mayor Zandile Gumede tried to formally entrench the mafias into the city's procurement processes.

The situation in the province is serious, but we should remember that it was arguably worse in the early 1990s when the ANC and Inkatha were at war.

That war was largely stopped, and an era of relative peace enjoyed, because there was po-

litical commitment to build peace.

That commitment included bringing in dedicated police units from outside the province.

We need a similar political commitment now. Our best hope will come from real commitment from Ramaphosa. Hopefully, now that MK is out of the ANC tent, he may be willing to act.

If he is not willing to act, civil society and the media will have to build as much pressure as possible to force him to act.

No country in which hits are taken out on business leaders and grassroots activists are regularly assassinated can flourish.

The only future under these circumstances is general decline, divestment, impoverishment and middle class and business flight. The same is true of a province.

The situation in KwaZulu-Natal is extremely serious, and we need a serious response from Ramaphosa and the seventh administration.

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