

“While the ANC retains a firm grip on power, factionalism within the party, corruption, and an increasing distance from ordinary people undermine its ability to deliver on its promises.”

Why Protests Are Growing in South Africa

ELKE ZUERN

Nineteen years after the end of apartheid, South Africa's newest national heritage site, Freedom Park, is opening this spring. The site is designed to represent the ideals of the post-apartheid nation. The museum there, //hapo (in the Khoi language, two forward slashes denote a dental click similar to the sound used to urge a horse), is named after a Khoi proverb: “//Hapo ge //hapo tama /haohasib dis tamas ka I bo” (“A dream is not a dream until it is shared by the entire community”).

Yet, in the short drive from the main road to the gate of Freedom Park, the visitor passes a group of backyard shacks tightly packed into a small space. Backyard shack dwellers in South Africa pay monthly rent to live in incredibly cramped conditions without private toilet facilities or access to water other than a common tap. The inhabitants of these shacks are clearly not sharing the same dream as the VIPs who will attend the opening ceremony of the new monument park, which cost roughly \$100 million.

Indeed, deep inequalities created by centuries of colonial rule, segregation, and apartheid, continue to afflict the country. Despite an extensive welfare state and an established democratic system, the majority of South Africans have been left behind in the new nation. In response, popular discontent is swelling. In 2012, already significant levels of protest in poor townships hit new highs.

DAUNTING LEGACY

It is difficult to overstate the economic challenges facing South Africans due to the legacy of apartheid. Although per capita GDP growth has improved from a period of contraction in

the 1980s, annual rates of growth have remained relatively low, averaging 1.6 percent from 1995 to 2012. And this modest growth has been highly skewed against the poor. The World Bank reported last year that the top 10 percent of the population receives 58 percent of the country's income, while the bottom 50 percent receives less than 8 percent.

Labor and capital shares of the economic pie have also changed over time to the disadvantage of workers. A 2003 United Nations report found a clear shift in the distribution of income from 1995, when wages and salaries made up 50 percent and profits 27 percent of gross national income; in 2002, wages and salaries were down to 45 percent and profits up to 30 percent. Thus, while per capita growth did improve, a larger percentage of this growth went to capital at labor's expense.

A quick look at mean incomes across population groups shows the profound and continuing impact of apartheid. Although South African incomes have grown since 1995, they have grown at a faster rate for whites than for black Africans. From 1995 to 2008, white mean per capita income grew over 80 percent, while African income grew by less than 40 percent. Poverty remains overwhelmingly black: In the poorest quintile of households, 95 percent are Africans. Members of this segment of the population struggle to feed their families, allocating more than half of their total expenditure just to food. At the other end of the scale, almost half of the wealthiest 20 percent of households are white, even though whites make up less than 10 percent of the total population.

FAILED POLICIES

The African National Congress (ANC), which has led the government since 1994, has consistently pledged to pursue both economic growth and redistribution. In its first election campaign it promised an initiative, the Reconstruction and

ELKE ZUERN, a professor of politics at Sarah Lawrence College, is the author of *The Politics of Necessity: Community Organizing and Democracy in South Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

Development Program, that would focus on redistribution. Within a few years, however, it had transitioned to a more neoliberal agenda called GEAR (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution), while continuing to offer at least rhetorical assurances that it would work to address South Africa's great economic inequality.

Despite the government's promises, the policies of GEAR clearly have prioritized growth and limits on public spending while pursuing the privatization of several industries. Critics have repeatedly accused the ANC of "talking left and walking right" as economic inequality and unemployment have reached new highs.

If joblessness is defined to include frustrated job seekers among the unemployed, South Africa's unemployment rate rose from 29.3 percent in 1995 to 42.1 percent in 2003. It remained well over 30 percent in 2012. Under the narrower definition, which includes only those who actively looked for work in the four weeks before the survey, the country's jobless rate at the end of 2012 was 24.9 percent—still considerably higher than unemployment at the end of apartheid, and the same as that reached in the United States at the height of the Great Depression in 1933.

While the government's economic policies did initially create a more attractive climate for investment, they have failed to prevent a disastrous increase in unemployment or substantially raise wages for many workers. The popular responses, ranging from township protests to extensive strike actions, have deterred much of the investment that state economic policies were designed to attract.

ANC DOMINANCE

South Africa's system of governance is best understood as a dominant-party democracy because the governing ANC has achieved repeated and overwhelming victories in national and most provincial and local elections. The ANC's ascension to power occurred through popular support rather than intimidation or fraud, but the danger in any system marked by repeated single-party success is that it will lead to reduced checks on the power of the winner and fewer opportunities to test opposing ideas and policies.

Under former President Thabo Mbeki's leadership, the ANC took on the great challenges of post-apartheid governance. To do so, it centralized power within the government and the party, and suppressed dissent within both. South Africa's closed-list proportional representation system also

works to strengthen the power of party leaders, since they have extensive control over party members in the parliament, undermining constituent representation in the system as a whole.

At the local level, the participatory demands championed by the domestic antiapartheid movement are reflected in the formal institutions of the state, but the implementation of these ideals is weak. South Africa's constitution stipulates that local government should "encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government." The 1998 Local Municipal Structures Act goes even further, calling for the creation of community-staffed ward committees "to enhance participatory democracy in local government."

Despite the creation of these institutions, many activists contend there is no "real" democracy at the local level. Popular surveys have consistently demonstrated higher dissatisfaction with local than with provincial or national government. The national ministry responsible for local government, politicians across the political spectrum, local activists, and the media have repeatedly expressed concern over the state of local government, describing it as inefficient, ineffective, and often corrupt.

As a result, significant pressure for the enforcement and expansion of economic as well as political rights has come from outside the formal institutions of the state. National elections in 2004 took place amid popular mobilization demanding that government pay more attention to the needs of the poor. In response, government budgets allocated increased funding for infrastructural investment and social welfare (including support grants to children, the disabled, and the elderly), as well as for education and health care.

As the University of Cape Town's Jeremy Seekings reported: "Expenditure on social assistance almost doubled from about 2 percent of GDP in 1994 (and 2000) to about 3.5 percent in 2005." Officials insisted that the new spending was not a response to increased social mobilization, but was rather part of a long-term plan. It was striking, however, that greater resources were allocated just as resurgent popular movements were gaining domestic and international attention.

THE WELFARE STATE

Two competing discourses predominate regarding the state of poverty in South Africa. On one hand are the activists who support new social movements that address a range of pressing issues

from home evictions to access to clean water and electricity. The activists point to neoliberal economic policies that have benefited capital over labor and the wealthy over the poor. The shrinking portion of national income attributed to wages and the country's continuing extraordinary levels of economic inequality support this view.

On the other hand, South Africa boasts the most extensive welfare state on the continent. And state policies since the end of apartheid have reduced poverty. From 2000 to 2009 the percentage of the population attempting to survive on less than \$1.25 a day was cut roughly in half. There has also been a significant decrease in the percentage of the population living on less than \$2 a day.

The majority of South Africans are able to get by on a day-to-day basis only as a result of the welfare state. The World Bank reports that noncontributory and means-tested financial transfers make up over 70 percent of the income of the bottom quintile. This is up from only 15 percent in 1993 and 29 percent in 2000. Including social grants, all income groups saw an increase in income from 1995 to 2005. Without the grants, the poorest two-fifths of the population would have seen a decline in their income. South African census data also offer some evidence of positive results. Since 2001, electricity usage for cooking, heating, and lighting has increased, as has access to piped water and toilet facilities.

For many positive indicators, however, there is a negative flip side. Despite very high levels of primary school enrollment among the poor—a major pillar of the state's redistribution strategy—South Africa lags in student completion of primary school on time and in early childhood development programs. The World Bank reports that black Africans make up 80 percent of the country's population but only 61 percent of the children likely to finish primary school on time.

Although access to piped water and toilet facilities has improved, significant disparities remain in access to safe water and improved sanitation. Access to paid work is also grossly unequal, with young workers and residents of townships, informal settlements, and rural areas facing enormous challenges in finding employment. Even among workers who do have jobs there are striking disparities in earnings based on race, gender, location, and union membership.

Poor residents are evicted in large numbers, and are often forced to live without electricity.

The continuing racial profile of inequality in South Africa led Mbeki to describe the country as composed of two nations: a white and relatively prosperous one, and a larger black and poor one. This understanding offers a partial picture of inequality corroborated by the data, but it fails to acknowledge a growing black elite that has joined the wealthiest quintile.

In his extensive study of inequality in South Africa, the economist Sampie Terreblanche argued that “more resources and opportunities were, in all probability, transferred from white people to the top 20 percent of the black population . . . through [black economic empowerment initiatives] and affirmative action than were transferred to the poor segment of the population through social spending and poverty alleviation.” Inequality is a great concern both across former apartheid population groups and within them.

GETTING ORGANIZED

Ideally, democracy would help mitigate both the underlying material inequality and the inequalities of opportunity that result from it. South Africa's 1996 constitution explicitly recognizes social and economic rights in the Bill of Rights. Citizens have the right to adequate housing, health care, education, and social security, though this is subject to the availability of resources. With the introduction of GEAR in 1996, a politics of cost recovery was introduced, reducing subsidies and requiring consumers, even in desperately poor communities, to pay close to the full cost of services such as electricity and water. Also, banks and municipalities were able to quickly evict poor residents from their homes after relatively short periods of nonpayment and low arrears.

The responding social movements that began their rise to prominence in the late 1990s drew on the promised constitutional rights to make their claims. These movements encompass a variety of actors, including the Treatment Action Campaign, the Concerned Citizens Forum, the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the Landless People's Movement, and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign. Other groups, such as Abahlali baseMjondolo (“the people who live in shacks”), have since also become central actors in this resurgence.

The movements' demands range from medication for HIV/AIDS patients to land reform and redistribution. They have worked to resist housing evictions and the privatization of electricity and water supplies. Their actions have publicized both citizens' socioeconomic demands and the state's responses to them.

By 2002, up to 2 million people had been evicted from their homes for nonpayment. In 2006, an estimated 1.1 million people were affected by electricity cutoffs annually. These figures underline the great proportion of South Africans who face a service and housing crisis. Poor residents are evicted in large numbers, and those who remain in their homes are often forced to live without electricity, at times even without water.

In Soweto, citizens responded by forming the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) in 2000. At this time, most Sowetans simply could not pay their electricity bills. An estimated 89 percent of households were behind in their payments. The supplier, Eskom, was increasingly addressing this state of affairs by cutting electricity supply to individual homes or even

entire areas of the township. The SECC campaigned for a monthly flat rate (of roughly \$6.50) for electricity in Soweto, but local governments failed to address the SECC's demands, and residents continued to complain of grossly inaccurate bills, disconnections, and corruption. The SECC responded with Operation Khanyisa ("switch on"), offering free illegal reconnection for residents whose service had been cut. Within six months, the SECC claimed to have reconnected 3,000 households under the slogan "Electricity is a right, not a privilege." Since then it has launched similar campaigns against water cutoffs and the eviction of homeowners for defaulting on mortgage and rent payments.

The SECC's actions pose a significant challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the ANC government. Despite the government's rhetoric, which brands the SECC as dangerously radical and ultra-left, the movement has worked to connect material demands to a discourse of democratic rights for all.

LOCAL BATTLEFIELDS

Alongside new social movements such as the SECC, so-called service delivery protests also

began to draw national attention in 2004. By the start of the current decade, these more spontaneous, less organized protest actions had dramatically eclipsed the new social movements in media coverage. The demands made by the protesters have included, but are not limited to, delivery of services from electricity and water to waste removal. Protesters also decry the lack of accountability of local councilors and their often alleged corruption.

Service delivery protests exploded after Jacob Zuma's election to the presidency in 2009. According to data collected by Municipal IQ, an organization that monitors local governments, the first seven months of the Zuma administration saw more service delivery protests than the last three years of the Mbeki administration. This was at least in part a response to Zuma's presumed greater responsiveness to the protesters' demands.

Thandakukhanya, in Mpumalanga Province, was the site of one of the first large protests after Zuma became president. In a memorandum sent to the provincial premier, David Mabuza, the "Concerned Group" stated its purpose: "to request the office of the premier to facilitate an urgent investigation to our local Mkhondo municipality in connection with the . . . high rate of alleged corruption happening within the municipality."

Echoing many other such demands, the memorandum called for "proper consultation in terms of resource distribution and infrastructure" and recommended that local councilors be suspended pending the outcome of investigations. In June 2009, Mabuza promised to attend an open forum to respond to the community's concerns, but argued he could not suspend the councilors until investigations had been conducted. On the agreed upon date, the premier failed to visit the township, but sent representatives to meet with community members.

The next month, residents staged a march during which the Concerned Group was unable to control the situation, as some protesters burned tires and blocked roads. Cars belonging to the municipality, a health clinic, and a public library were burned; two protesters were killed, reportedly by police and security forces.

Similar demands not just for "service delivery" but also, importantly, for government accountabil-

Inequality remains stark, both across racial lines and between the new black elite and the majority.

ity were repeated in townships across the country in 2009. In Thokoza and Diepsloot in Gauteng, Khayelitsha in the Western Cape, Duncan Village in the Eastern Cape, and elsewhere, citizens took to the streets. As the protests grew, two areas received the greatest media attention: Siyathemba and Sakhile, both in Mpumalanga.

Protests in Siyathemba township outside Balfour began with a march to the local municipal offices. When the government failed to respond, a community meeting was held, but clashes erupted between the police and residents after the police fired rubber bullets and tear gas in an attempt to disperse the crowd. Some protesters also blocked roads and looted foreign-owned shops.

In response to the protests and the destruction that ensued, President Zuma surprised residents by briefly visiting Siyathemba and promising to listen to their concerns. In Sakhile, described as a “battlefield” by the local press, residents then promised to continue their protests, including the barricading of roads and the burning of government buildings, until the president also came to resolve their complaints.

Sakhile residents demanded the “right to elect their own representatives,” instead of ANC party structures determining candidates for local office. They also called for an inquiry into alleged corruption. Protests and the police response led to significant destruction of property, and at least 14 people were injured. Although Zuma did not visit Sakhile, ANC officials did come to the area and, in a surprise move, fired the municipal mayor and her entire committee.

In response to the protests in Siyathemba and Sakhile, the Zuma administration signaled a willingness to listen. The ministry of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs issued a report arguing that the protests indicated an “escalating loss of confidence in governance.” The report asserted that “a culture of patronage and nepotism is now so widespread in many municipalities that the formal municipal accountability system is ineffective and inaccessible to many citizens.” The ANC subsequently began an audit of local councilors, but the audit remained internal to the ANC and excluded local communities.

UNCIVIL SOCIETY

Although these protests and others like them drew important attention to demands for accountable government, most were able to attract notice only by blocking roads and destroying prop-

erty and through the escalating police responses, which included rubber bullets and tear gas. The news media ran pictures of burning tire blockades, damaged public buildings, and police taking aim at protesters.

This immediately raised the question of the “civility” or “civic-ness” of the protesters. How could protesters destroy public buildings when they claimed to be agitating for better public-service delivery? How could they press for more responsible government when they were proving to be irresponsible themselves? Trevor Manuel, the national planning minister in Zuma’s cabinet (and previously a leading antiapartheid activist who was detained for long periods in the 1980s), condemned the protesters’ actions, arguing that a behavioral change was necessary to make progress.

This argument, that citizens must be more civil and support state-based initiatives, has long been employed to challenge the legitimacy of popular demands. It suggests that the public must defer to the expertise of technocrats and policy makers. It also deliberately ignores the question as to what opportunities ordinary citizens have at their disposal for participation and engagement with their elected representatives.

In its review of four protests in mid-2009, the Center for Sociological Research at the University of Johannesburg found that each protest “only occurred after unsuccessful attempts by community members to engage with local authorities over issues of failed service delivery.” Residents first sought to employ institutional routes to petition government, but officials failed to meet with local residents, or listen to their concerns, or work to address them. In each case, protest actions began with organized nonviolent marches. Those that later turned to violence tended to do so as a product of interactions with local authorities, particularly the police.

Ideally, residents’ questions and concerns would be addressed by an effective public administration overseen by accountable elected officials. But every study of local government in South Africa, both by government and nongovernmental actors, has demonstrated that this often does not happen. In this context, the discourse of “civility” suggests that citizens should accept a lack of accountability when their petitions are ignored and government offices offer no response to residents’ questions and concerns. It is exactly the perceived “uncivil” actions that draw attention to claims for democ-

racy that are easily sidelined when presented via institutional means.

In 2012, service delivery protests reached a new high. While Municipal IQ counted 10 such actions in all of 2004, and 107 in 2009, in 2012 173 protest actions were recorded. Violence has also increased. By 2012, more than three in four such protests were marked by violence. This raises significant concerns for democracy, service delivery, and the future of South African governance. Surveys conducted by Afrobarometer indicate that protesters are almost twice as likely as people who did not protest to report feeling that their parliamentary representatives and their local councilors listen to people like them. But if protests are increasingly marked by violence, and they are seen as important in having one's voice heard, the political process itself is becoming violent.

Perhaps even more worrisome is that a significant number of these actions are led by members of the ANC, who use the protests as opportunities to further their own political careers or to bargain for tenders. Community residents often knowingly participate in protests led by ANC members with personal agendas. Residents still hold out the hope that these actions might also draw attention to their demands. But if protests are led by ANC members rather than community groups, once the local elected officials in question have been dismissed and the protest leaders have realized their goals, there is no organizational structure to press for the demands of ordinary people.

THE DREAM DEFERRED

In Balfour and Siyathemba, where Zuma's visit seemed to promise improvement in township life, little has changed in the three and a half years since he went there. Deteriorating services and high unemployment remain prevalent. After Zuma's visit a task force was set up with the intention of making Balfour a model town. While some new streetlights have been installed, residents still complain of unrepaired sewage facilities and cuts in water services for days at a time.

Municipal service bills, moreover, are often not sent, and the charges are seen by many as arbitrary. As a result, many residents estimate what they should pay or do not pay at all. And the municipality lacks the capacity to collect. Some residents also claim that factionalism in municipal government impedes reform. While it is not clear

to what degree this is responsible for Balfour's failures, court cases affecting municipalities across the country suggest that local political disputes have become a significant brake on delivery of services and democracy.

At the national level, the state is not performing much better, even when it comes to collecting basic data about what is happening in the country. The auditor general reported in March 2013 that more than three quarters of provincial and national government departments lack trustworthy statistics, either for their spending or for targets such as numbers of pupils in school or government-owned houses allocated to people on waiting lists.

South Africa has made notable progress since the end of apartheid, and protesters have helped make this happen by pushing government to respond to the desperate needs of the majority. But today South Africa stands at a crucial decision point. While the welfare state has made a significant difference in the lives of the poorest, unemployment is still crushingly high. Inequality remains stark, both across racial lines and between the new black elite and the majority who remain in poor housing and struggle to feed their families.

While the ANC retains a firm grip on power, factionalism within the party, corruption, and an increasing distance from ordinary people undermine its ability to deliver on its promises. As a result, protests are spreading, and many of them are characterized by violence as a product of frustration and desperation. Violence attracts the news media. When protesters die at the hands of the police, it often leads to lengthy investigations. But thus far, it has not brought about the changes that protesters have hoped for.

The ideal of a dream shared by all members of the South African community continues to be undermined by unemployment, inequality, persistent poverty, and failures of democracy at both the local and the national level. South Africa succeeded in ending apartheid through a combination of popular protest and innovative leadership. Hopefully some of the VIPs on their way to the opening ceremony at Freedom Park will look out the windows of their SUVs at the evidence of deprivation and hardship, and will be inspired to find new ways to realize the dream of greater equality for all South Africans. ■