



WHY BALFOUR WAS BURNT: ANGER OVER NON-RESPONSIVE GOVERNMENT

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Since the local government elections of 2006 there have been an unprecedented number of social protests in various South African municipalities. Siyathemba, and the town of Balfour¹, in the Dipaleseng Municipality is one such case in point.



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Through different means and strategies, citizens have exercised their constitutional rights to association and free expression, the political right to protest and direct action, as well as the associated right to question and hold elected local government representatives to account. In many instances this resulted in protest action. However, it is unclear to what extent the protests are an attempt to demand and extract accountability, or are rather reflections of popular frustration. Or indeed, whether these

frustrations are related to government service delivery, to the state of democracy and governance in general, or simply to the increasing levels of social, economic and political powerlessness and inequality that ordinary citizens (largely black) experience in the post-apartheid era.

The residents of Siyathemba undertook their first major direct protest action in July 2009, which arose outside of any formal community or political structure or organisation. Government investigated

and discovered that, amongst other issues, residents were unhappy about a decision to include Siyathemba, in Dipaleseng Municipality, in the Mpumalanga Province rather than to leave it within the Gauteng Province.

Through interviews conducted by EISA, it emerged that this decision, which appears to have been an executive administrative decision, has had a direct impact on people's perceptions of the costs, scale and quality of service delivery, their experience of citizenship and power, and the manner in which they relate to government. People viewed themselves as powerless objects and subjects of government, rather than as citizens whose voice was taken seriously in government decision-making. As well as demanding that Siyathemba be reincorporated into Gauteng Province, people highlighted issues of unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, unresponsive and unaccountable ward councillors and a mayor who appeared to ignore their grievances, as key sources of frustration.

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In response to the ongoing protest, national government dispatched a high-powered delegation to conduct an initial round of fact-finding consultations, which was followed by a visit from President Jacob Zuma in August 2009. The presidential visit brought a sense of hope to residents that their grievances would be seriously considered and attended to. But in February 2010, the township erupted in violence once more, illustrating a continuing sense of frustration.

FANNING THE FIRES OF FRUSTRATION

On 7 February 2010, the residents of Siyathemba took to the streets in a wave of violence that culminated in the burning of a public library and municipal office in Siyathemba, and the vandalising of a community hall. Starting on Sunday morning, the protests continued throughout the day into Monday – two days before the significant 2010 State of the Nation Address in Parliament by President Zuma.

Prior to the outbreak of violent protest, youth leaders from the Dipaleseng Youth Forum called various community meetings to discuss development in Siyathemba and to evaluate to what extent President Zuma, the Minister for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (Cogta), Sicelo Shiceka, and other members of the task team, Mayor Mabalane Tsotetsi and the municipality had delivered on commitments made to the community in 2009. A majority of the forum's executive committee members belonged to the ANC Youth League and a few to the Pan-Africanist Youth Congress (Payco). It was generally agreed that there was little or no development and delivery between July 2009 and February 2010, and worse, no tangible response from the high-level task team on the issues that had been raised by the community.

A respondent reported that he knew of two visits that had been made to the area by the team but that on both occasions they had held discussions only with councillors and municipal officials, and appeared to have sidelined community structures, political organisations and members of the general public. Community members reacted in anger to what was perceived as a snub and took a decision to stage a peaceful protest march from Siyathemba to the Dipaleseng municipality offices in Balfour.

The reasons for the protest were thus mainly the failure of national government, the province and the

Dipaleseng Municipality, and especially the mayor, to respond to the concerns raised by the residents. The minimum expectation of the community was that “even if issues were not directly addressed at least channels of constructive engagement with the community ought to have been opened”. Some of the issues were cited to be of a “democratic nature”, where government officials, particularly elected ones, appeared unresponsive and unaccountable. However, levels of frustration among the community were fuelled by actual service outputs that residents had demanded. Community members cite government’s unresponsiveness and the lack of attention of the relevant institutions of state and authorities in government to the service delivery issues they raise as the primary reason for their frustrations – which constitute almost a shopping list. Service issues include the following:

- **Water and sanitation:** Drinking water is clearly in a poor state, appearing visibly brown, muddy and unclean. Yet the municipality claims that the water has been certified as safe to drink by the national Department of Water Affairs (DWA). At the same time, the municipality acknowledges that the ageing water infrastructure needs replacement. No movement on this issue is in evidence.
- **Infrastructure:** Much of it appears not to be maintained and is visibly crumbling and deteriorating. Roads, including newly tarred ones, have huge potholes. School buildings are in a state of disrepair. Government offices have crumbling walls and are dirty and unkempt.
- **High-mast streetlights.** Installed after the 2009 protests, these lights have never been operational and, as a result of poor lighting, crime remains rampant.
- **Housing.** The few low-cost houses that have been built have structural problems. In most

cases, projects that were reported to the community as being underway are virtually nonexistent. The establishment of a fully functional Home Affairs office, which was promised, has not occurred and the area is still serviced by an office that opens only twice a week.

- **Policing.** There is no police station in Siyathemba. As an example of the need for a permanent police presence in the township is the case of a woman who was raped and then told to come to the police station in Balfour to make a statement, as there were no police vehicles to fetch her. On her way she was attacked and raped for a second time.
- **Emergency services.** The nearest hospital is in Standerton, 75 kms from Siyathemba. As a temporary measure, secured through a memorandum of understanding between the Gauteng and Mpumalanga departments of health, residents of Dipaleseng municipality can now have access to the Heidelberg Provincial Hospital, which is 30 kms away.
- **Sports and recreation.** The community is demanding a multi-purpose community centre to improve access to sports and recreation facilities.
- **Unemployment.** Joblessness is extremely high. Respondents question the role of the full-time local economic development (LED) coordinator at the municipality, given the almost non-existent economic activity in the area and the lack of difference being made by this person. According to community members, local people are not considered for jobs. Large private-sector companies with local operations, such as the Burnstone gold mine, which was a target of protests on two occasions, and Karan Beef, as well as parastatals such as Eskom, appear to hire labour from elsewhere rather than drawing on the pool of available labour in the community.

Despite repeated community calls for meetings with the large concerns to discuss increasing local investment and corporate social responsibility programmes in the area, no meetings have taken place and there is no evidence of such programmes.

- **Skills development.** There is also a demand for a Further Education and Training (FET) college/ skills training centre to be constructed in the area.

DEMANDING ACCESS TO SERVICES

Despite the importance of these issues to the residents' quality of life, the re-incorporation of Balfour into Gauteng remains among the primary concerns. Residents of Siyathemba have continued to rebel against being part of Mpumalanga. They feel that the Demarcation Board did not undertake a consultation process with them before the decision was taken. They believe that there would be a positive effect on service delivery and access to services, in particular in the Lesedi and Ekurhuleni municipalities, were the municipality to be re-incorporated into Gauteng. They argue that the Gauteng provincial departments and services based in Johannesburg, 95 kms away, are much closer and less costly to travel to than the Mpumalanga provincial capital in Nelspruit, some 220 kms away. Thus, the two main considerations are, firstly, the physical proximity and accessibility of the provincial government and its service offerings and secondly, the relatively better resources and technical capacity that the province appears to offer citizens.

However, there is another aspect to this. Proximity and service delivery are closely tied to citizens feeling that they are "heard" by those in power – the government, the mayor, local councillors and municipal officials. Satisfaction with democratic

governance at the local level is premised on two factors – perceptions of government's technical abilities and resources, and its willingness to hear and speak to citizens. People in Siyathemba appear to have negative perceptions of government on both of these counts, which help to fuel the underlying sense of frustration.

While the protests were precipitated by these twin factors of dissatisfaction and propelled by the youth of the Dipaleseng Youth Forum and their leaders, in both 2009 and 2010 there was support from the majority of residents. A senior citizen interviewed said that, as far as she was aware, most people in the community supported the youth in what they were doing. They were concerned and troubled by the destruction of property and the violence of the protest, but understood the high levels of frustration in the community about the municipality's performance and with government in general. While the 2009 protests had general community support, the second flare-up was to a greater extent driven and supported by the youth, with older members of the community distancing themselves as criminal elements appeared to have joined the fray. Youth leaders remain adamant that their expression of dissatisfaction and demands for accountability were appropriate.

Instead of engaging with the community, the municipality's response was to send in law enforcement agencies, which in turn served to inflame the volatile situation further. Some residents argue that the violence was deliberately used as a vehicle to draw attention to Siyathemba, which appeared to be ignored by everyone.

Adding a further dimension was the issue of xenophobia. The Siyathemba protests followed a widespread occurrence of "xenophobic violence" across South Africa in 2008. In the Siyathemba protests in 2009 foreign nationals living in the area

were affected, and in 2010 about 100 foreign nationals were displaced from the area. This created an impression that the violence in Siyathemba was “xenophobic”² and that foreign nationals were deliberately targeted, rather than being victims in the general maelstrom of the civil violence.

Interviews with a Somali shop owner in Siyathemba revealed that in 2009 and in 2010 there were no xenophobic sentiments amongst protesters. Criminal elements, however, took advantage of the unrest and looted shops, without distinguishing between those owned by locals and those owned by foreigners. In interviews, people were adamant that there were no “demands for foreigners to leave the community”. By contrast, there is a history of opposition to xenophobia in Siyathemba and an outbreak of violence against foreign nationals was not an issue in Siyathemba during the countrywide xenophobic violence of 2008.

According to Lifu Nhlapo from the Dipaleseng Youth Forum, “people want to turn around the situation so they can advance their own interests. The foreign nationals who are victims of the march were caught in the crossfire and not intentionally targeted.” (Pfafe, December 2009/January 2010:42)

A CLASH OF PERCEPTIONS

A question worth exploring is whether there is a mindset that the state will provide on behalf of communities as opposed to promoting, instilling and/or practicing active citizenship. “Officials view citizens as unwilling and unable to solve their own problems, while citizens perceive (politicians and) government (officials) as self-serving and lacking the political will to tackle the problems facing their localities and the country.” (Nemeroff 2005:11) This perception divide in Siyathemba is pronounced, and has deepened since the February 2010 protests.

“Research and experience has shown that there is a great deal of frustration with ward councillors and other representatives of local government, who are perceived by residents as incompetent and unresponsive to their needs. Moreover, the increased levels of violence and public brutality in the protests paint a picture of a repressive state rather than an accommodating and approachable one that is willing to listen to its citizens.” (Pfafe December 2009/January 2010:43)

Democratic governance at the local level, depending on the meaning one attaches to the term democracy, determines local government’s envisaged role and function. “Because democracy’s meaning is both contestable and unstable, propositions regarding the role and function of democratic public institutions in the architecture of democratic governance will, equally, be contested. But democratic local governance regimes, in designing and defining the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed, require precise and unambiguous definitions about the roles and functional limits of institutions and the rights and responsibilities of the citizens that they relate to. It is almost trite to say that vibrant democracies require citizens that have rights and the agency to exercise these rights. It is equally trite to suggest that substantive democracies require public institutions with designated powers and functions, bound by a set of rules defining their roles and responsibilities, and the modes through which public institutions exercise their mandates. A democratic culture, on the other hand is a product of the complex interplay between the (democratic) cultural norms and (openness) values of the society, with the institutional and systemic processes and procedural rules that govern it. Citizens without rights are merely subjects. The exercise of rights

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The construction of democracy as both a system of government and a culture by and through which citizens associate amongst themselves and relate to government institutions requires checks between the able agency of citizens to exercise and advance their rights, and institutions which must help them to do so. For this, an effective system of participation, checks and balances, oversight and accountability, responsiveness and consultation are required.

In the case of Siyathemba almost all of these elements appear to be absent, with citizens appearing to express frustrations through violence because of a government and private sector that is perceived to be unresponsive. A government and private sector that appears to be unresponsive and dislocated from the communities in which they are located may over time find that government may only be able to govern effectively, and private business may only be able to operate sagaciously, through coercion and repression rather than through deriving the consent of those who are governed and those who they need a degree of influence over.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that in Siyathemba the divide between the elected representatives and community members is deepening, despite the numerous attempts at engagement initiated by the youth culminating in the

widely publicised protests of 2009 and 2010. In this narration, the voice and role of locally elected politicians is silent and invisible.

“There must be efforts made by government and society to help citizens develop alternative approaches to local developmental problems that take them beyond protest. In addition councillors and officials should be supported, not only to deliver more effectively but also in learning how to engage with citizens.” (Nemeroff 2005:11)

The re-incorporation of the Dipaleseng municipality into Gauteng should be treated with the urgency that it deserves by all spheres of government as it is one of the main catalysts of protest and will be the reason why Siyathemba residents once again take to the streets. If we are to avoid another Khutsong, this issue should be prioritised and engagement processes undertaken with the community of Dipaleseng, specifically Siyathemba.

It also appears that the political legitimacy of locally elected leaders is low and declining further and the credibility of national government decisions are increasingly called into question. The ability of “facilitative” and “consultative” leadership, through deriving citizen consent for being governed, is in peril and increasingly it appears that government (the system of execution of policy, administration and management) and governance (the relationship between those who are meant to govern and those who are governed) can only be maintained through coercion. A simultaneous decline in the popular political legitimacy of the political leadership and the credibility of government management and decision-making may have deleterious consequences for enhanced democracy, development and continued political stability.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Until early 2009, the total number of incidences of direct action on the streets (including community protests, strikes and other industrial actions) numbered 5085 countrywide. These figures and some preliminary analysis of this phenomenon can be found in Fakir, E. 2009. *Politics, state and society in South Africa: Between leadership, trust and technocrats*. Development Planning Division Working Paper Series No.1, DBSA: Midrand.

² See 8th February 2010 press statement of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) "CoRMSA Calls for Effective Intervention in Xenophobic Violence in Siyathemba"