

## The Causes and Socio-political Impact of the Service Delivery Protests to the South African Citizenry: A Real Public Discourse

Chitja Twala

*Faculty of the Humanities, Department of History, University of the Free State,  
Bloemfontein, South Africa  
E-mail: twalacm@ufs.ac.za*

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**ABSTRACT** In the recent past (2008-2013), the African National Congress (ANC) led government in South Africa has experienced an outcry from different communities around the country, concerning a lack of provision of services. These conditions to a certain extent led to the outbreak, of what became known as the service delivery protests in South Africa. The basic services which were needed included the following: access to clean water; provision of sanitation; and the redress of housing backlogs. The study investigates the theories around the origins of the service delivery protests and their socio-political impact on such communities. The study argues that the ability by the ANC government to deliver services, particularly to those residents in the poor areas, is its basic function as part of social programmes in response to people's needs. Consequently, the study contends that the purported failure to respond to such needs, contributes to service delivery protests. Furthermore, it argues that the slow pace of providing services to the poor in South Africa has created a socio-political problems. Examining the above arguments in the context of political transition, the study looks at different debates and political strategies, and the ways in which they draw on and shape socio-political discourses of power and rights. It concludes by indicating that meaningful address of service delivery protests by the ruling party require a combined strategy with those affected. It should be noted that although the issue of service delivery protest is a local government question, it has been elevated into a national issue in South Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

In all its election promises and manifestos during the electioneering period, the ANC used the slogan of 'A better life for all' as its trump card to win the elections. Along with other such statements, this slogan indicated a keen interest from the ANC to deliver services, particularly to the poor. Political campaign manifestos after 1994 created expectations as politicians made promises most likely to satisfy voters during each new election campaign. In so doing, the politicians raised public's expectations, in some cases understood to be creating false perceptions that, following the election, communities would receive the services promised. Once these promised services were not delivered, communities began to panic and resort to protest action (Managa 2012: 2).

When the ANC took over the reins of government after the April 1994 elections; one of its challenges was to deliver equitable services to all South Africans. Understandably, the process would take some years. A new Constitution of South Africa which was adopted in 1996, guaranteed human rights and democratic governance, promised efficient delivery of services

and founded a number of reforms aimed at achieving equity, access and the redistribution of resources (Munslow and Mc Lennan 2009: 1). Furthermore, Greenstein (2006: 420) argues that the link between political and social changes has been particularly strong, due to the unique nature of apartheid as an exclusionary mechanism that allocated rights and privileges on the basis of racial group membership. To the majority of the South Africans, imminent delivery of services was demanded. The electorate never bothered about the past imbalances which were created by the apartheid government, hence the huge demands from the ANC to delivery services.

However, in the past few years notable features of South Africa's political landscapes were the high rate of local government service delivery protests. The provision of services became central to the socio-economic transformation of South Africa. The purported slow pace to provide basic services to communities by the ANC government became a prominent theme of public discourse in the country's politics. The outbreaks of these violent protests in municipalities were a sharp reminder of continuing discontent with the performance of local government.

It is interesting to note that although these protests are directed to the ruling party, in most cases the protestors never bothered to know more about the different levels of government and what is provided by each level.

Therefore, the study argues that discontent and the discomfort with the provision of basic services played a significant role in the protests that engulfed the whole country. Furthermore, the study unpacks the lessons learnt by the South African citizenry as well as the ANC's government in dealing with this challenge. In an effort to better comprehend the complex circumstances around the service delivery protests, attention is focused on the causes and the socio-political impact on the different South African communities. The purpose of this discourse is in the provision of basic needs such as proper sanitation, electricity and clean water is further examined.

### **Objectives and Research Questions**

The main objective of this study is to explore the socio-political impact of service delivery protests on the different communities in South Africa. The study is based on two main data sources. First, it uses quantitative survey data from media reports to explore the causes of service delivery protests in South Africa. This survey mainly concentrated on urban areas in which most of the local protests happened. Secondly, the study also investigates communities' perspectives and perceptions of local government councillors' roles in the escalation of the service delivery protests.

Research questions include: Why are the service delivery protests on the rise in most of the African townships? Is the ANC government failing to curb the escalation of such protests? To what extent are the politicians playing a role in this regard?

### **Literature Review**

Currently several initiatives have been launched to study the origins of service delivery protests. The history of service delivery protests has always been characterised by a deep-seated confrontation between the aggrieved communities and the relevant government officials. Several scholars, amongst them the following have written about protest impacts from a sociological point of view (Munslow and

McLennan 2009; Botes et al 2007; Atkinson 2007). However, a lacuna remains, in as far as providing a historical analysis of the socio-political impact of such protests on South African citizens. This study attempts to fill that void.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

As indicated previously, the aim of this study is to conduct empirical research on the socio-ecological impact of service delivery protests in South Africa. This was triggered by the continuance of such protests since 2004. In putting the history of these service delivery protests into perspective, data for this study was collected using both quantitative (social survey) and qualitative (exploratory) methods. The following research techniques were employed: exploratory meetings held with community members who were affected by service delivery protests; site visits were undertaken to see the damage caused by such protests. Secondary sources, such as published articles and chapters in books were consulted and provided a comprehensive analysis of service delivery protests, as well as scrutinising newspaper cuttings and media reports. Although most of the media reports were relatively superficial, focus was on the narrative of the unrest without any real background analysis, in the main they proved to be pivotal in piecing together a chronology of events, as they unfolded in most of the townships. Besides the above mentioned methods, personal and telephone interviews were also conducted with some members of the affected communities, as well as with councillors in such areas. In some cases, fieldworkers who were capable of speaking the indigenous languages in those areas were utilised to source information from the interviewees. However, it should be noted that not all information gathered was used in this study.

### **Historical Background and Theoretical Overview to the Cyclical Wave of Service Delivery Protests in South Africa**

#### ***The Meaning of Service Delivery Protests in South Africa***

In order to understand the service delivery protests as they are happening in South Africa, it is important to define their meaning. Hemson and Owusu-Ampomah (2004: 512-513) defined it

as follows: "In South Africa the definition certainly is more encompassing and includes not only the ability to provide users with services needed or demanded, but also a sense of redress; that the services should raise the standard of living of the majority and confirm their citizenship in the new South Africa. In a society of growing inequality and uneven advances in education and training, service delivery is seen, at times, as an instrument for leaping over the contradictions and ensuring a 'social contract' with the people". For the purpose of this study, this definition has been followed to the latter.

### ***Resemblance to the Past Service Delivery Protests During the Apartheid Era***

It is generally argued that the service delivery protests as experienced in South Africa under the ANC rule resembles the protest riots during the apartheid era. However, in this study the researcher argues that such an analysis is more of a simplification of the political dynamics in the country. Simpson (2010: 76-93) contends that the frequent, local government service delivery protests taking place in South Africa are almost a replica of what happened in most townships during the 1980s, when the disenfranchised majority of Africans took to the streets to protest against the imbalances of the National Party's (NP) government, in as far as the provision of services was concerned. Interestingly, Simpson's analysis forgoes to indicate the different circumstances that prevailed at the time. Munslow and Mc Lennan (2009: 1) notes that in order to redress these past imbalances, the ANC government was confronted with the challenge of transforming a racially and ethnically fragmented and unequal public service delivery system into one that would be able to meet the demands of a newly franchised citizenry for economic, social and political development. Consequently, the legacies of the NP government combined with widespread poor budgetary and financial management, a massive backlog in basic services and infrastructure, race and regional inequalities in provision and sometimes tense social relationships, tended to limit opportunities for social development and expanded delivery. Therefore, due to past imbalances created by the NP government, service delivery attempts in South Africa were politicised. Mc Lennan (2009: 19) opines that the impact of apartheid and its legacies, contributed to the lack of service delivery programmes during the ANC's rule.

During the apartheid era, several protests were reported whereby the disenfranchised majority of the South Africans challenged the imbalances of the apartheid government. This led to burning of government buildings and houses of those who were seen to be supporting apartheid.

Under the ANC's rule, the mismatch between expectations, on the one hand, and limited skills, capacity and commitment on the other dented the dream of local democracy. Interestingly, the protests registered side-by-side dissatisfaction with the quality and reach of service delivery, as well as the mechanisms of public representation of community interests (Booyesen 2009: 106). The above information is a clear indication that the ANC led government cannot continue blaming the legacy of apartheid instead of providing services.

### ***The Changing Order of Local Democracy***

A second signifier of the changing order of local democracy was the proliferation of protest. The protests were used as a mechanism to activate the councillors' performance. Since August 2004, South Africa experienced ample evidence of the spread of community protests which later became known as service delivery protests. For example, in the Free State Province, the protests first erupted at Intabazwe Township (Harrismith) in September 2004 whereby about 4500 protesters barricaded the N3 highway and clashed with police (Botes et al. 2007: 7). Their concerns were the usual ones of poor service delivery and included issues such as the lack of free basic electricity, and municipal corruption (Harsant and Ellis 2007: 7-74). The post-Intabazwe wave of protests testified to an increasing practice, perhaps cyclical, of direct action to convey messages of discontent with municipal matters. According to Atkinson (2007: 54-55), the above protest was triggered by the fact that state funding accorded to the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme (ISRDP), had been allocated to the former Qwaqwa homeland area which lies within the Maluti-a-Phofung Municipality. People in Harrismith felt ignored and excluded in the light of the large amount of funding channelled into the former homeland of Qwaqwa. In an interview with Atkinson (2009), she observed: "The residents of Harrismith were not happy with the development that was to take place in Qwaqwa. Therefore, by protesting on the N3 road, they were trying to grab the attention of those in

authority. It was unfortunate that one youngster was killed when the police opened fire to the marchers. The protests therefore spread to other areas around the country”.

### ***The Problem of Top-down and Bottom-up Processes***

According to Booysen (2007: 21), the politics of service delivery in South Africa is both a top-down and a bottom-up process. From top-down perspectives, the government determines policy frameworks and mechanisms of implementation, sets budgets and interprets mandates. Bottom-up perspectives illuminate the struggles of ordinary people for service delivery. Therefore, service recipients struggle to make their voices heard in the corridors of power that meander from local municipalities upwards to provincial premiers. On one hand, the existence of such protests was an indication that the communities in most of South Africa’s townships were driven from blind loyalty to the governing ANC, to a critical, even confrontational stance.

On the other hand, it might be argued that contrary to many perceptions, protests and their acceptance on community level appear also to demonstrate the continuous and strong relationship between the ANC and the electorate. Therefore conventional notion of multi-party democracy often did not find full application in new and post-liberation democracies, such as South Africa, was a contributing factor. Despite the ANC’s hopes of responsible branch structures, few community members obtained any satisfaction out of reporting service problems to branch meetings. Interestingly, the surveys conducted demonstrated that support for the ANC did not dwindle in the face of support of protests to subsequent elections.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Causes and Socio-political Impact of Service Delivery Protests in South Africa**

In 2009, almost 15 years after the rule of the ANC began in South Africa, Hemson et al. (2009: 151) wrote: “There is growing recognition that South Africa faces grave challenges regarding capacity within the state in relation to skills, numbers of professionals, the competence to manage complex systems and, ultimately, the ability to deliver on its mandate”. The above statement was an indication that the ANC gov-

ernment faced a mammoth task in delivering services to needy people. These protests rank alongside voting and elections, as a legitimate means to effect representation, service delivery and accountability from the government’s officials. Hereunder are some of the most important socio-ecological factors which had an impact on the delivery of services:

### ***Lack of Managerial Skills from Government Officials and Politicians***

The question of who should be appointed in senior government positions is a contested terrain in South African politics, particularly within the ranks of the ruling party. Historians and political analysts alike, argue that governance by its nature requires high-level management skills. In order to drive the operation and effect sound political management to ensure that policies developed were implemented, specific skills are needed. In most cases, the argument was premised on the assumption that service delivery was best left in the hands of professional managers who were clear about their objectives and had the technical expertise to deliver. This created two challenges to delivery; the first was that it was not possible to assume that such technical expertise always existed in the delivery system. There was also an over-reliance on consultants, a lack of application of administrative due processes and regulations, inappropriate outsourcing and poor decision-making (Munslow and Mc Lennan 2009: 9-10). According to Southall (2007: 1-24), political appointments to senior executive management positions in South Africa compromised services and suggested that it was unlikely that existing levels of technical expertise would be maintained. In one way or another, the appointments of people without the relevant expertise compromised service delivery.

The above is endorsed by Gumede (2009: 58) stating: “One problem in South Africa is that appointments to crucial posts in the civil service are still often based on political connections. This is also why it appear that the same senior civil servants rotate from one top job to another because only they can be politically trusted. This means that the best people are not always recruited to manage crucial jobs. The politicization of job appointments, moreover, leads to the estrangement of the best potential managers, economists and professionals from the government, even those who are ANC members or sympathizers”.

### ***The Problem of Politicians Who Would Not Listen to Protestors***

The protests had not only been about houses, water, taps and toilets, but also about the political process. At municipal level, protestors had regularly complained about the unresponsiveness of officials and councillors, which some politicians countered by arguing that the ANC government should not be viewed as 'service delivery machine'. Some of the protestors interviewed for this study stated that the politicians would not listen to their grievances; thus they embarked on protests. This suggests a wish to be served by those in whom public trust was placed. More generally, many of the frustrations citizens voiced about government could be addressed, if those in office were dedicated to serving (Business Day 22 March 2006).

To justify the intransigence of the politicians, particularly the councillors and how the electorate responded during the March 2006 local government elections, Booysen (2009: 113) argues that: "Councillors and the nature of representation were often at the heart of the service delivery protests. Early on, protests were offered as a way of getting municipalities to become aware of service problems. This was seen to bear fruit when, in the run-up to the 2006 election, large numbers of new candidates were brought in to replace the incumbent cohort of underperforming councillors. Subsequent to the above correction measures, the ANC candidates were required to sign a pledge of service and representation and the ANC election campaign promised to make local government work". Despite the above interventions by the ANC, this was not effective as the protests continued. Community members felt that they were poorly represented by their councillors. Atkinson (2007: 64) argues that at the heart of the ANC's approach to municipal politics lay a fundamental ambiguity. While the ANC supported the principle of local accountability, the practice of 'deploying' nationally-selected people to serve as mayors, weakens local accountability.

To justify the above statement, in an interview with Tshupo Mashiloane (2011), he stated: "It was clear that the politicians and government officials were undermining us. The ward councillors failed to provide us with the necessary services; thus, we embarked on the protests. We organized ourselves under the um-

brella of the Concerned Group which met with the government officials. It was clear from such officials that they were not taking us seriously. This was evident when they offered some of our members' positions in government. They used the tactic of 'divide and rule' in order to destabilize us".

### ***Rivalry Amongst Politicians belonging to the ANC***

In some cases there were rivalries either within the communities or within ANC branches. These rival groups used service delivery shortcomings to mobilize against local opponents. Writing for *The Star*, Ndaba stated that the ANC admitted that infighting within the organization contributed to the service delivery protests (The Star 8 August 2007). This was an indication that, to a certain extent, the ANC's community activists were the ones who were instrumental in fermenting these protests. Simon Tshabalala, a councillor in Warden had the following to say: "One problem that worsens the whole question of service delivery is the fact that politicians who are disgruntled within the ANC mobilize the communities to be against those elected into office. I think this is jealousy and personality factions rather than ideological difference within the ruling party". It was interesting to note that from this ANC itself, there were people who propagated these activities.

### ***Rapid In-migration of Poor and Unskilled People from Farms***

Grassroots research carried out in 2006 by the Centre for Development and Support (CDS) at the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein, gave voice to the grievances and anger behind the protests. An examination of Phumelela local municipality was undertaken. Phumelela municipality, with a population of more or less 50 000 consists of three small towns in the north-eastern Free State, namely: Memel (Zamani Township); Warden (Ezenzeleni Township); and Vrede (Thembalihle Township). As with many other towns, this municipality had to deal with the rapid in-migration of poor and unskilled people from farms and villages to small towns. This placed increasing demands on services with little, if any contribution to the local tax base. For example, in 1991, the area was two-thirds rural to one-third urban; by 2001 it was already about 60 percent urban. These stresses came at a time of

stagnant economic growth (1996-2004); negative trends in key employment sectors; 38.6 percent unemployment; and 78 percent of people living in poverty. The complaints of the residents during the protests in the area included: inadequate, dirty water supplies; the persistence and poor management of the bucket system; sewerage flow into streets; poor garbage collection; interrupted power supplies; and poor roads. These inadequacies were compounded by allegations of nepotism, corruption (in respect of allocation of housing subsidies) and arrogant, incompetent and indifferent behavior by councilors and officials. This combination of poverty, economic stagnation and inadequate service delivery formed the background to the protest action. The main protagonists were groups of unemployed and school-age young people, calling themselves 'concerned youth groups'.

### ***The Impact of Corruption***

Corruption has been described as the abuse of public office for private gain. This refers to gain of any kind: financial, or in status and it can be gained by an individual or a group, or those linked with such an individual or group (Drury et al. 2006: 122). Apart from bribery, it could include patronage, nepotism, embezzlement, influence peddling, the use of one's position for self-enrichment, or bestowing favours on relatives and friends. Corrupt acts leads to the marginalization of some key stakeholders in communities and in most cases during these protests, government officials and politicians are fingered as corrupt people who want to enrich themselves by looting state resources. In order to eradicate this problem, Hoffman (2011: 96) contends that "South Africa's public administration is required to be governed by the democratic values and principles enshrined in the Constitution ... The centrality of all of these values and principles should be considered afresh, and constructively, because they hold the key to improving service delivery and, with it, the lot of the people still in search of a better life."

### ***The Escalation of Violent and Criminal Acts***

The intensification of the service delivery protests led to violent and criminal actions taking place in the affected communities. Socially and politically, the protests were accompanied

by acts of vandalism and xenophobic attacks. In some communities members argued that the foreign nationals were taking up job opportunities which were supposed to be exploited by South Africans, subsequently leaving them unemployed. Furthermore, they argued that the limited services provided by the government were to be shared with the foreign nationals. Members of the communities claimed that in some townships, the low-income houses which were built by the government were owned by these foreign nationals and this had a negative impact on their social conditions and on South Africans. Consequently, many complex problems emerged during such protests. The protests became platforms where the affected communities could vent their anger (Monson and Arian 2011: 26-55).

Violent protests could be defined as those whereby some of the participants engaged in physical acts that either caused immediate harm to persons or were likely to result in substantial harm. Thus, in addition to the more obvious indications of a violent protest; for example, the intentional injuring of police, foreigners, government officials; the burning down of houses or other structures; the looting of shops; instances where rocks were thrown at passing motorists; tyres burned to blockade roads, other similar acts were included as violent protests. Moreover, the regularity with which protests become violent could be as insightful an indicator of discontent, as the frequency of protests (Karamoko and Jain 2010/2011: 10-11).

### ***The Refusal to Pay for Services Rendered***

All too often, angry and frustrated protestors felt compelled by official inertia or lethargy to take the law into their own hands when expressing their dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in local governance. It was not only those who chanted slogans in the streets and constructed barricades of burning car tyres who were involved, but some law abiding middle-class ratepayers saw fit to illegally withhold the payment of municipal rates, in an effort to attract the attention of, and extract some remedial action from municipal authorities. The latter were allegedly blamed for the dereliction of their duties and obligations, regarding the provision of services to ratepayers (Business Day 26 November 2009). Service delivery protestors and rates boycotters needed to understand that unless they employed legally justifiable means to make their

point, they became part of the problem and not the solution.

### ***Police Brutality in Dealing with the Protestors***

Instances of protestors organizing marches to the homes of municipal managers, handing over memoranda detailing lists of grievances, or peacefully assembling in public areas are designated as nonviolent protests. However, violent interventions by police officers often incited violence during service delivery protests. In some instances, police would randomly open fire on protestors and at other times would fire at assembled groups of people who were not actively involved in the protests. A cogent example of this was the death of Andries Tatane in Ficksbug, a tragic example of the ensuing chaos, when a seemingly peaceful protest was met with an aggressive police response. Tatane, a community leader, participated in a demonstration against the Setsoto Municipal offices concerning the community's service delivery grievances. The media reported that Tatane was beaten and apparently shot by police officers after asking them not to use water canons to disperse elderly onlookers (The Citizen 15 April 2011).

### **The ANC's Attempts to Deal with the Protests**

Underneath are some of the attempts the ANC embarked upon in trying to deal with the escalation of the service delivery protests in South Africa.

#### ***Minimization of the Poverty Rate***

In many of the protests, the high rate of poverty amongst South Africans, particularly those in the townships, was the concern. The following provinces in South Africa are mostly rural, hence the high poverty rate, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. Although others are not rural, poverty is rife due to high levels of unemployment and illiteracy. In most cases, these social problems become contributing factors to protests. Since 2010, the ANC's government tried by all means to engage with the communities in addressing the above mentioned problems.

#### ***Dealing with the Frequency of the Protests***

The frequency of service delivery protests occurring across South Africa fell dramatically from June 2010 to 2011. This contributed to high

poverty rates. In 2007, the country experienced an average of 8.73 protests a month. In 2008, that figure rose to an average of 9.83 protests per month. In 2009, however, the average number of protests ballooned to 17.75 per month, nearly double the figure from the previous year. These protests remained a frequent occurrence in the beginning of 2010 (January-May), as an average of 18.00 protests per month took place across the country. With the hosting of the FIFA World Cup in June 2010, the protests fell dramatically and remained relatively subdued with only 6.14 protests per month for the remainder of the year. Protests continued to decline during the first five months of 2011, with an average of only 8.80 protests per month. The information for 2011 was captured only from January to May (Jain 2010). In short, the data produced by Municipal IQ, a local government data and intelligence service, reported in its 'hotspots monitor' that although 2011 had been relatively quiet a significant number of the 2011 protests had occurred in metropolitan areas (The Star 10 October 2011).

To show the escalation and impact of the service delivery protests in South Africa, for the first time in 2011 the Western Cape featured the greatest number of service delivery protests, accounting for 22.73 percent of South Africa's total. This outcome resulted from a dramatic 89 percent fall in the number of protests in Gauteng, rather than an increase in the frequency of protests in the Western Cape. The Eastern Cape followed with 18.18 percent of South Africa's protests. With only 6 protests in 2011 from 53 in 2010, Gauteng accounted for 13.64 percent of the nation's protests. The Free State featured 13.64 percent of the country's protests, while KwaZulu-Natal and the North West Province featured 9.09 percent and 6.82 percent respectively. Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and the Northern Cape were minor contributors to protest activity, featuring 6.82 percent, 4.55 percent and 4.6 percent, respectively.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the relative successes of the post-apartheid South African Government, the country still faces serious challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality. These were some of the key factors which culminated in citizens taking to the streets to express their dissatisfaction over the problem of poor service delivery. Conflict and protest have both negative and

positive consequences. On the positive side, the protests served as a loud 'wake-up call' for the public sector politicians and officials to take service delivery problems seriously. One of the socio-ecological impacts was that schools were affected thus impacting negatively on the pass rates of the affected schools.

Some of the problems highlighted above were, in one way or another, caused by the lack of cooperation between municipalities and provinces, which had tended to compete for resources. To a certain extent, this propelled the ANC into weighing up the options of scrapping local government and replacing it with one sphere of governance in South Africa. However, this would be tantamount to tampering with the country's Constitution. It is clear from the above that the ANC wanted to consider at least two options: firstly, to fundamentally re-engineer the inter-governmental fiscal system to ensure that weaker municipalities received a greater share of national funds; or secondly, to give serious consideration to re-demarcating municipalities that were not viable or sustainable. One lesson from the service delivery protests is the need to give ordinary citizens shared responsibility in shaping a new model in which ward committees are adequately resourced and not just another site for ANC infighting.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study highlighted the challenges faced by the ANC. Without doubt, if properly implemented the ANC's policies can in one way or the other solve these challenges. It is clear from the above that there are those officials who are not destined to work as to the prescripts of their jobs, thus contributing in fuelling the spread and escalation of the service delivery protests. It is upon the leadership of the ANC to speedily resolve the problem in order to normalize the situation.

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