

## **Local government elections and rethinking the crisis of local democracy**

**By Imraan Buccus**

Since 2006 an unprecedented wave of popular protest has ebbed and flowed across the country.

A number of protesters have been victims of police brutality by the police and, recently, a number of ward councillors have been up in arms about lists as we approach the elections.

In recent years protests have given rise to movements that have become an important part of the national political landscape.

The Ministry for Safety and Security reported that there were more than 6 000 protests in 2006 and one academic has calculated that this makes South Africa "the most protest-rich country in the world".

However, despite the incredible scale of these protests, analysts have battled to properly understand them.

The starting point of almost every intervention in the ongoing avalanche of commentary about these protests is that they are "service delivery protests". This assumption is shared across government, the academy and NGOs. Some commentators are an exception though.

I would venture to point to the fact that most protests have targeted local councillors and the essence of the problem is that councillors are being used to communicate government views downwards rather than to communicate community views upwards.

While all the experts are having their say, the people organising and participating in these protests are very seldom given a chance to speak about what they think, what they are doing and why.

Democracy is not rule by experts. That is oligarchy. Democracy is rule by the people.

If we pay attention to the thinking of people organising and participating in these protests, one thing becomes immediately clear. And that is that these protests are in response to a crisis of local democracy rather than a crisis of service delivery.

It is true enough that in most instances failed service or misguided delivery is where things begin to go wrong. But even here the problems with service delivery are often due to a lack of democratic public participation in decision-making.

For instance if people are not consulted about whether it is in their interests to be moved from urban shacks to peri-rural RDP houses, protest is likely even though service delivery is happening.

But time and again people organising these protests explain that they didn't take to the streets because of failed or misguided service delivery.

They explain that they took to the streets because there was no way for them to get to speak to government, let alone to get government to listen to them.

For as long as government officials continue to assume that a mandate at the polls gives them a mandate to act in a unilateral and top-down manner for five years, these protests will continue.

Ordinary South Africans had a taste of popular democracy in the great democratic upsurge of the 1980s and expect the post-liberation democracy to take the same popular form - to be ruled by the people rather than ruled by experts.

The government is certainly correct to take the view that something must be done about these protests.

These levels of intense social conflict are potentially very damaging to society and could, for instance, be extremely embarrassing - especially if the eyes of the world remain focused on an action replay of the 1980s with burning tyres, teargas, rubber bullets and pitched battles between the very poor and the police in our streets.

Already both police and protesters are taking an increasingly hard-line stance with very negative social consequences.

These protests are clearly about a crisis of local democracy. It is the nature of local democracy that needs to change.

The government needs to take public participation seriously and to recognise that ordinary people have every right to be part of the deliberations and decision-making that will affect their lives. And commentators and experts, be they in the media, NGOS or the academy, need to learn that they should listen carefully to the voice of the poor rather than just make easy assumptions about what they think people are saying.

Experts would like this crisis to only be about service delivery because then the response to the crisis would be to bring in more expertise. But a crisis of local democracy means less reliance on experts and taking the intelligence and experience of ordinary people more seriously. It means fewer Powerpoint presentations and more community meetings.

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