

BEYOND LOCAL OPTION: Coercive Co-option or Democratic Transition?

The declaration of the 1986 State of Emergency mercilessly killed the patterns and processes of grassroots democratisation that welled up from the battle zones of township conflict during 1984-86. Now, instead, we have secretive Joint Management Centres that plot and plan the sophisticated co-option of local warlords who help crush mass-based social movements and are then rewarded with office for their efforts. We have, therefore, come full circle: from centrally appointed Verwoerdian bureaucracies in 1971 (the Bantu Affairs Administration Boards), to Community Councils in 1977, to the further transfer of power to the Black Local Authorities in 1982, and now, back to square one with the JMCs in full control of townships that might benefit as Regional Services Councils (RSCs) make their paternalistic disbursements. The time has indeed arrived to search for alternatives.

There is a growing realisation that democracy is best achieved by empowering local communities by decentralising political decision-making.

This position has been argued by a range of eminent scholars. Robert Dahl, one of the founding fathers of contemporary western political science, advocates a decentralised democratised political economy in response to the legitimisation crisis of American federal democracy.¹ Analysing the crisis of East European socialism, Brus, the Polish economist, has come to a remarkably similar conclusion to Dahl when he calls for the establishment of a decentralised market socialist system — a proposal in line with current Gorbachevite thinking.² Peter Blunt has forcefully demonstrated that those Third World states most committed to pursuing the “basic needs” approach to development have also realised that democratisation through decentralisation is the best method of facilitating efficient, effective and appropriate decision making.³

The reason why democratisation through decentralisation is so widely favoured is simple: it helps local communities feel (a) that they can participate in decision making structures that are seen as accessible; (b) that these decision making structures have the power to directly affect the allocation of resources; and (c) that tangible gains can flow from participation. The result of these processes is the allocation of resources and management of social structures that is more efficient and effective because the central state can “unload” the decision-making burden **onto local and regional governments who are in a better position to take account of circumstances posed by local conditions.**

In the South African context, decentralisation is used in so many ways that, like the word democracy, it risks losing all its meaning. We must be clear, however, about how the concept is being used. The government’s local government reform strategy is framed by consociational theory. This theory propounds the view that political stability in so-called “multi-cultural societies” can only be ensured if the “autonomy” of each cultural group is respected. This means creating “own affairs” structures to facilitate the self-determination of each group at local, regional and central level. However, these cultural groups are also part of a single “nation” and “country”. It follows that structures are required to facilitate “joint decision-making” at local, regional and central level — hence we have “general affairs” authorities.

In practice, this consociational contract has given rise to our strange local government regime premised on ethnic primary local authorities and multi-racial Regional Services Councils. The consensus in a recent book that reviews this reformist option is that it does not facilitate decentralisation, democracy or substantive de-racialisation.⁴

Responding to the inadequacies of the consociational model, the federalists have argued that the **vertical** fragmentation of power cannot facilitate decentralisation because this must inevitably rest on the retention of race and ethnicity. Their solution is the **horizontal** fragmentation of power and sovereignty into so many local and regional “states”. This, they argue in varying degrees of coherence,⁵ will facilitate the determination of local and regional politics by local and regional communities without the “interference” of the central state. This recipe for “limited government” has been roundly criticised from a socialist perspective for being an ideological mask for the protection of white capitalist interests.⁶

This author has argued that substantive democratisation through decentralisation along lines spelt out in the Freedom Charter, can only take place if this is coupled to mechanisms that facilitate substantial redistribution of economic wealth.⁷

The logic of the argument thus far appears to be leading to the conclusion that what needs to be done now is the formulation of new constitutional structures for local government that conform more closely to internationally acceptable criteria. Although this is true in abstraction, it is practically unviable for a very simple reason: constitutional structures for local government cannot be devised from

below in isolation from the prevailing national constitutional, legislative and security framework. This entire national framework will not be changed in piece-meal fashion from below. The view that this is possible — at least as an interim measure — is held by those who propound the “local option”

Either because they think a true democratic and non-racial constitutional order is unattainable, or because they want to neutralise black political movements at local level to offset the threat to national political power, the propounders of “local option” argue that local power groups should be “allowed” to forge local political arrangements through an Indaba-type process.

There are two fundamental problems with this strategy. Firstly, it ignores the fact that constitutional alternatives cannot be negotiated at local or regional level. The failure of the KwaNatal Indaba and the Cape Town city council’s local initiative reinforce the view that constitutional problems and issues can only be resolved at national level by way of a negotiated settlement that must, by definition, involve the National Party and the African National Congress as the primary negotiating partners. Anything short of that will more than likely be rejected by the most significant black political, community and trade union movements.

Secondly, to succeed, the government must “allow” local power groups to proceed with the “local option”. Clearly this is extremely unlikely given, (a) the very limited autonomy of local government, and (b) the trend towards increasing centralisation of power through the National Security Management System (NSMS).

It is noticeable that talk of “local option” has died since the declaration of the 1986 State of Emergency. There is a very good reason for this. Throughout the country there is evidence the state is using the JMCs to engineer what we could call the “Western Cape option”. Using what happened in Crossroads as a model, local officials in the Western Cape have realised that local black “leaders” can be co-opted if they are given exclusive control over the allocation of resources in their own communities in return for collaboration and participation in local government structures. This exclusive control must be accompanied by the destruction of political competitors, hence warlordism is a necessary and accepted ingredient of the recipe. In the end, the state “eliminates the radicals” and draws black allies into government structures. To sustain this arrangement, repression must continue to be used against “the radicals” while significant resources are pumped through the local authorities to bolster warlord patronage networks. **It is hoped this will have sufficiently stabilised local government to enable the local authority elections to proceed in an “orderly fashion” in October.**

In short, “local option” cannot work because it impractically believes that constitutional solutions can be negotiated at local level. The coercive co-option strategy of the “Western Cape option” is also doomed because it rests on the mistaken assumption that legitimacy flows from large budgets and enough gun barrels. Does this mean that alternative political processes and values cannot be forged at local level? Before this question is answered directly, it is crucial to understand how we got to where we are now and what opportunities have been missed along the way. To do this, a thumbnail sketch of township protest is necessary because it was this that

generated the alternative political processes that could have become the basis for a democratic transition.

For the purposes of the argument, the pattern of township protest has been broken down into stages even though this was not a unilinear process nor was it undetermined by other variables that are not mentioned.

Firstly, grievances were expressed about appalling living conditions in the community. When these were not addressed by councillors, eminent persons of one sort or another would present the grievances to local officials in the form of a petition or simply a verbal articulation of problems. It is important to note that at this stage collective organisation had not yet taken place.

Second, the authorities either ignored or rebuked the petitioners, frequently on spurious grounds such as bureaucratic procedure. The most destructive response was when officials made promises that were then broken or, even worse, accepted bribes and still failed to deliver.

Third, in response to the local authority’s inadequate response, leadership groups emerge to organise the different layers of the community. This results in the formation and spread of civic organisations, youth congresses, women’s groups and other similar structures.

Fourth, campaigns involving collective action take place, e.g. mass meetings, demonstrations, stayaways, consumer boycotts and other similar strategies. Essentially what was happening here is that in the absence of the capacity to affect public opinion through the press, in parliament, through access to intellectual/research structures or through other channels, the poor communities responded by mobilising their only resource, namely their collective capacity to disturb, disrupt and protest.

Fifth, collective action in the communities is met with repression as the security forces move in. This violent response to what was perceived in the community as legitimate grievances triggered widespread anger thus leading to an escalation of protest.

Sixth, a spiral of violence erupts as the rather dignified protests of previous phases give way to running street battles between militant youths and the security forces. When this was accompanied by the detention of the civic leaders, the youth became completely uncontrollable and so the spiral of violence was exacerbated.

Seventh, decentralised defence structures are established in the community which soon transform themselves into what later became known as the street and area committees. By this stage, the rupture between state and community is virtually complete and is described by township organisations as a condition of “ungovernability” that must lead to the establishment of “embryonic organs of people’s power”

Eighth, a stalemate sets in as repressive action fails to break the resistance, and as the communities fail to find ways of getting the authorities to recognise their demands.

In most cases the conflict levelled at this point, i.e. an endemic stalemate. However, in many of the cases that I studied, it went further as elements in the local white and black establishments made tentative moves to resolve the stalemate through negotiations. The most successful local-level negotiations were those that took place where authorities had resigned themselves to the existence of mass organisation in the township and where the local black leadership felt they had the support and a mandate

from the constituencies to talk to local white leaders. I refer here to places like Port Elizabeth, Port Alfred, Uitenhage, East London, Outdshoorn, Worcester, Kirkwood, Cradock and others. These negotiations took place between local UDF leaders and white leaders ranging from local chambers of commerce, to local township administrators, to white municipal representatives, right up to NP MPs, the deputy-director general of Constitutional Development and Planning and Minister Heunis himself. Urban, as opposed to constitutional issues, were the main subject of these negotiations, e.g. upgrading, housing, educational facilities, trading rights, etc. There were cases, however, where discussions included the possibility of creating non-racial municipalities.

My basic point is simple: like in the trade union context, negotiations took place when both sides realised that negotiating was less costly and more stable than the continuation of an endemic stalemate. The negotiations did not follow the wholesale repression of the township organisations, nor had the substance of local power structures in the white community been substantially weakened.

This same story is applicable to what happened in the education sphere resulting in the end in negotiations between the NECC and the DET.

From this process flows a crucial conclusion. Once community organisations have, in effect, taken "political and ideological" control of the township, they do not have coercive control. They therefore have a choice. They can take on the state and risk a full-frontal confrontation, or reach a temporary accommodation with the state. The former option would have involved turning the townships into "liberated zones". However, in the absence of a permanent "people's army" to defend these zones along lines seen in northern Mozambique during the anti-colonial war, the communities had no chance of winning a confrontation. The result would have been the immediate decimation of their organisations.

The alternative, therefore, lay in demanding recognition as the representative of the community. This is a classic pattern of power distribution during times of intense conflict and struggle. It goes back to the Paris Commune in 1848, the Soviets in Russia in 1917, Barcelona's communes during the Spanish Civil War, and the US ghetto revolts of the 1960s (which is where the notion of "ungovernability" was first used). It is a situation that Lenin referred to as "dual power" because like the relationship between the Provisional Government and the Soviets before October 1917, the existing duly constituted state agrees to recognise a rival source of power. This arrangement is usually transitional and will only culminate in a revolution if the security

forces cease backing the state (like in Russia). However, in cases where the security forces remain loyal but are not used to totally smash the alternative power structures, "dual power" can lead to negotiation and greater democratisation as the rival points of power are absorbed on terms more favourable for the popular classes. This is what happened to the US ghettos, the South American squatter movements, the Spanish Citizens Movement during the 1970s, the Phillipino protest movements after Marcos, Solidarity in Poland, Mau Mau in Kenya, the guerillas in Zimbabwe and many similar examples.

The implications of this process for the South African context are far-reaching to say the least. It boils down to the fact that movements can only be revolutionary when they operate under revolutionary conditions. Although the social movements were smashed despite their desire to negotiate, a less repressive and a more democratic long-term alternative was available.

Given that this example has been brutally crushed, and given the progress of the State's violent, expensive and illegitimate coercive co-option strategy, I have come to the conclusion that little progress can be made at the local level at this stage. The consequences of this are far-reaching: the stakes are now so high that nothing short of a negotiated settlement at national level will succeed. The longer it takes to reach this point, the more damage will be caused as the warlords accumulate more and more power. In the final analysis, this might be leading to a situation where ever increasing numbers of black people give up hope altogether in a negotiated settlement. □

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