

# Civics: Local government from below

*JO-ANNE COLLINGE looks at moves to form a national civic organisations, amidst pressures on civics, during this period of transition, to become part of new local government structures*

**C**hallenges, challenges. From the reformist National Party government, pressing its plans for all-race local government and urban land control. From the violence raging between supporters of political parties, especially Inkatha and the African National Congress. From the water and electricity cuts effected by (usually white) town councils as service bills remain unpaid and often unpayable.

This is the context in which some 600 to 700 civic associations, represented by regional federal structures, will come together mid-year to form a national civic organisation. The formal launch is to be preceded by a national consultative conference to be held in Bloemfontein on May 10-11.

The pressures of transition have underscored the urgency of co-ordinating the civic movement and defining a unifying strategy. Perhaps nothing has illustrated the necessity to clarify means and ends more pointedly than the advent of the Witwatersrand Metropolitan Chamber. Half of the Johannesburg civic associations opted to participate in this multi-racial council-based forum, while the other half very publicly stayed out, protesting from the sidelines. Both groupings of civics maintained they were remaining true to the core principles of their movement. Both were convinced that the strategy they had selected best served these principles.

## **An autonomous civic movement**

Along with the challenges of the political transition, the pressures to negotiate on service provision to entire communities and to confront bitterly divisive violence have shaped thinking on the long-term nature of civics. At present the balance seems irrevocably tipped in favour of founding a national civic movement which avoids party-political affiliation.

Coordinator of the National Interim

Civics Committee Pat Lephunya says that a number of long-term options were considered in the light of the United Democratic Front-linked past of civic associations. They included the options of the civic organisations simply being replaced by African National Congress branches or becoming ANC residents' organisations. The notion of civic associations preparing themselves to take over the administration of towns and cities was also weighed.

In this process, however, 'the strongest position is that the civic movement must remain autonomous, a broad mass-based structure, which will not attempt to take over local government'.

Individual civic bodies have formally adopted this position in a number of cases, as have some regional structures - for instance, in the Eastern and Southern Transvaal and Southern Free State.

Lephunya says a number of factors have pointed the civic movement in this direction. 'Firstly, the African experience of liberation movements that present themselves as true democrats but when they take over power things change.'

Then, he adds, the warning from Eastern Europe about the abuses that are perpetrated when 'people's organs become conveyor belts of the ruling party'.

And thirdly, the notion that bureaucracy is in itself a counterproductive social factor that has to be challenged. 'We have to have organs that are not hamstrung by bureaucracy.'

Gugile Nkwinti, Eastern Cape ANC secretary with a longstanding involvement in the civic movement, also looks to Eastern Europe in considering the kind of

role that the civics could play. His focus, however, is on the power of social movements once they ceased to be the 'conveyor belt' of the party, on the swiftness with which radical change was effected because of the power of the people.

'The success lay in the fact that whatever was done was done through civil society,' comments Nkwinti. He argues that there is a need for grassroots democratic organisation in all societies, that social movements - because they relate directly to social issues that shape people's lives, and are not mediated by the necessity of holding or attaining power - are best place to answer this need.

'The basic role of the civics is not changed in my view. This role is building people's power and it is something that must play itself out in civil society,' asserts Nkwinti.

But shuffling off the past is not so simple, he acknowledges. Although the civics, within the UDF, were dominated mainly by the concerns of civil society the front's overall role was largely political. Pulling the civic movement clear of the political net is not easy - and overlaps of personnel make that very clear.

## **Civics and parties**

But it is imperative that civics 'come clean vis a vis the political parties,' says Nkwinti. The need for this may not be immediately clear, since at present 'there shouldn't be a contradiction between a social movement and the liberation movement'. All that changes, however, when liberation movements accede to power.

Nkwinti also says that although the civics seem like the most appropriate shoulders for the mantle of a social movement, this needs to be looked at critically. They are only fit for the task if they are truly grassroots organisations - and this might differ from region to region.

Sekgopi Malebo, interim chairper-

son of the Southern Free State Civics Congress (Sofrecco), points out that it is an oversimplification to interpret the civics as invariably in opposition to the ruling party simply because they've elected to stay outside of party politics.

'In Sofrecco we have actually put it very clear. Although we would like to remain autonomous from any political party, we would have the right to decide at any moment with whom we align ourselves politically. We don't necessarily see ourselves as an opposition to the ruling structure.'

It is this freedom to endorse political programmes and the candidates representing appropriate policies that answers how the national civic movement might participate in forthcoming national constitutional negotiations.

In line with its non-party political role, the civic movement is unlikely to seek direct representation at the negotiating table. But it will attempt to have its positions put by parties whose views on local government approximate to the civic movement's own positions. It would actively seek a consultative role on local government in relation to such parties.

#### **Wits Metropolitan Chamber debate**

If views on the long-term nature of the civic movement tend to converge and grow more solid, the same cannot be said of the responses of civic associations to the challenges of the political transition. Faced with the question of how to carry forward their demand for 'one non-racial city with a single tax base' - even while the government itself is tinkering away at municipal structures - the civics have come up with widely divergent answers in the process of local-level negotiations.

The developments in relation to the Witwatersrand Metropolitan Chamber brought matters to a head simply because civics which had concluded different local level pacts were being asked to agree on a move at metropolitan level - and they could not.

But the Johannesburg situation is not unique or especially pathological. Significant differences exist among many civics in the way they relate to existing local government structures; how they define acceptable participation in interim local government; and the methods they see as most likely to deliver the goods - electricity, water, other services and a better housing deal - to the communities they represent.

What was striking about the Metropolitan Chamber debate was that the

participating civics and the boycotting group declared that they were pursuing the same medium- to long-term goals.

Both Cyril Ramaphosa of the participating Soweto People's Delegation (SPD) and Moses Mayekiso of the boycotting Alexandra Civic Organisation (ACO) and Civic Association of the Southern Transvaal (Cast) insisted their civics were committed to: the destruction of existing race-based municipalities and the campaign for the resignation of township councillors; the future of local government being formally negotiated at a central level along with other constitutional issues; resisting participation in any 'neo-apartheid' municipal formulations devised by the National Party; immediate moves to improve the housing situation in the townships, to secure better services and infrastructure and to spread the wealth of the cities into the townships.

#### **Endorsing neo-apartheid structures?**

Cast accused the civics who were participating in the Chamber of inconsistency in sharing a structure with the very councillors whose demise they sought. They said that the Chamber was inherently racial, constructed like a mini-tricameral parliament from the existing racial councils. They argued that participation in such a structure could easily be interpreted as practical endorsement for precisely the 'neo-apartheid' structures which the civic movement abhorred. And that because of this and the fact that the Chamber described itself as a 'negotiating forum' on future local government, participation in the Chamber ran a grave risk of undermining national negotiations for non-racial, representative local government.

Ramaphosa on behalf of the SPD and the Soweto Civic countered that in a racial society it was virtually impossible to start crossing old barriers except by engaging racial structures. He accused his opponents in ACO of doing precisely the same thing on a local basis.

With regard to township councillors, he maintained that their resignation could be pursued through the Chamber - as the work of the Chamber progressed, these councillors would become evermore marginalised and powerless. Again he accused his critics in Cast of employing double standards because some of them had negotiated and concluded agreements with councillors.

And, as for the Chamber being the instrument of constitutional negotiations, whatever its constitution said, this would

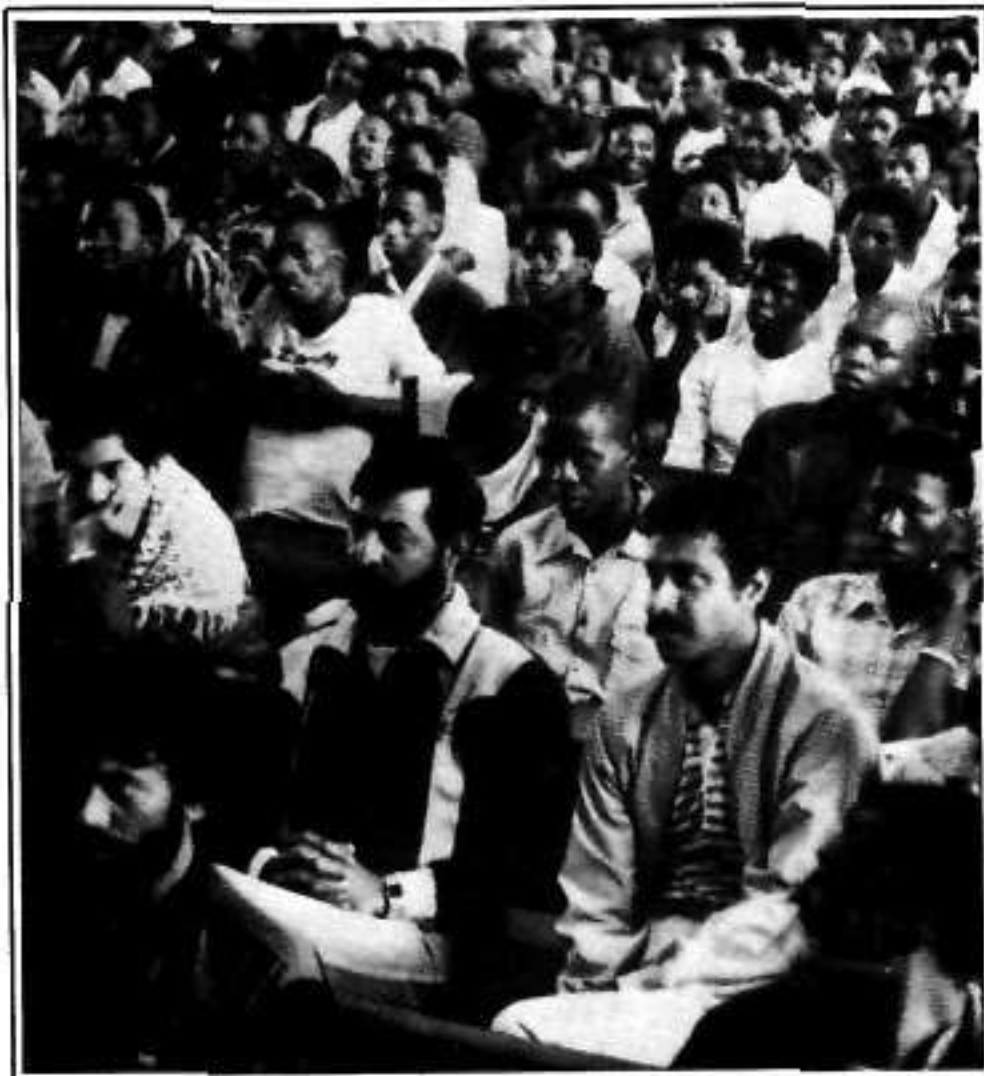


• Cyril Ramaphosa

**There can be little time for luxuriating in visions of life after the end of apartheid. Ensuring that the transformation of local government is managed from below is surely a priority.**



• Moses Mayekiso



**Civics, as autonomous organisations, can play a major role in developing true 'people's power'**

not be the case. 'The Chamber has its own limitations and shortcomings. Our view is that it cannot be seen as a negotiating body.'

In the meanwhile, Ramaphosa believed the Chamber was the vehicle by which to achieve certain objectives of the Soweto Accord concluded by the SPD/SCA with the authorities last year - objectives such as the transfer of houses to the people and the improvement of services and infrastructure.

Mayekiso in turn argued that there were significant differences between ACO's handling of the Sandton council and Alexandra councillors and the SPD's treatment of councils in the Chamber. He pointed out that the Alexandra Accord bound all signatories (including the councillors themselves) to addressing the aim of getting the township councillors to resign. Also, that in seeking a one-to-one relationship with Sandton, ACO aimed at deracialisation at a much more local level than the National Party with its neo-apartheid metropolitan models would like.

### **Important tactical debate**

Underneath the accusations and counter-accusations, ran an important tactical debate. Some regarded its public airing as unfortunate - ANC deputy president Nelson Mandela was apparently among these and called the sparring parties together to urge that they begin to settle their differences in a more private and

controlled manner. For others, however, the dispute served as an alert to debates to which they had been largely oblivious.

Bloemfontein-based Malebo highlights one of the factors underlying the Chamber debacle: individual civics have very particular histories that are partly shaped by local state strategies. The same range of strategic options simply does not exist for all civics.

He makes this point by stressing that although, after a month-long consumer boycott, the Mangaung Civic Association was able to gain major service concessions from the Bloemfontein Council and the province - and effectively by-pass the remnants of the Mangaung Town Council - this did not mean that major gains had been made toward non-racial government or a single municipality. 'The gains we have seen came purely as a result of the consumer boycott,' Malebo observes. The white authorities were reluctant negotiators. Official and businessmen alike 'showed clearly where they were siding'.

As a result of this experience of negotiations - obviously different from what the SPD found in relation to Johannesburg - the MCA would be very reluctant to 'join any interim structure that has been decided by the apartheid regime alone'. There is also the strong perception that local agreements are open to manipulation and 'could be landmines on the road to national agreements on local

government'.

### **State strategy**

From the government quarter there is evidence of a more centralised and coordinated intervention than the civics are currently able to muster. The provincial administrations are active participants in virtually all civic-municipal negotiations and are widely seen as the saviours and promoters of township councillors - or at least the 50 percent-or-so who remain in office. In the Transvaal talks have repeatedly broken down as officials and civic representatives have deadlocked over the right of councillors to take part in negotiations. Civic leaders on the Reef say that the province is attempting to foist the Soweto-style settlement on them. And service cuts are frequently an added form of pressure in this scenario.

A political analyst who has observed local level talks at close quarters discerns a number of threads in the state's policy on local government. One aspect is its determination to force the pace of negotiations - taking advantage of certain inevitable organisational shortcomings in structures that are short on funds and reliant on part-time volunteers.

Another is a replica of the NP's national policy: an insistence on including as many players in the negotiations game as possible in order to dilute the voice of its main opponent - in this case the local civic organisation. It is not quite clear whether this ploy to fragment township opinion finds expression in the growing association between Inkatha and township councillors and attempts by Inkatha in places as remote as Schweizer Reneke to reverse rent boycotts.

What does stand out clearly is that, in this transitional phase, the civic movement's non-partisan role needs to be actively asserted; it is established through consultation with all parties, rather than avoidance of party contact. This strategy was firmly grasped by the Vosloorus Civic Association which foiled an attempt by the authorities to bring independent parties into the talks by coordinating a delegation of the civic, Inkatha, Nactu and the Ministers' Fraternal. Other parties - such as the ANC, Azapo and the PAC - are understood to have been approached but to have declined because they saw no need to supplement the civic's efforts or usurp its role as a residents' body.

Lephunya says civics are actively seeking contact with political parties to persuade them of a greater commitment to non-partisanship.