

THE RENAISSANCE OF LOCAL POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT IN S.A.

Local politics and government have assumed unprecedented prominence on the South African political agenda. The government considers local structures as crucial for its broader plans of institutional restructuring. In response, those in opposition from the right, as well as those in resistance from the left, have directed their strategies to a greater extent at the local level.

This article reflects on the background to this renaissance of local political processes and some of its major implications. The argument is made that the local sphere of politics is in a state of flux which makes it worthy of careful consideration by all proponents of political change who are in search of appropriate strategic opportunities and targets.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE GOVERNMENT'S RACIAL POLICIES

The government's new emphasis on the local level, emerged against the backdrop of the report of the Erika Theron commission in 1976. The vital political recommendation of this commission was that the Westminster system be adapted to accommodate what was described as "... the requirements peculiar to the South African plural population structure" (recommendation 178). Ever since, the government and its constitutional experts, have argued that the "group basis" of society has to form the foundation of all political institutions. By 1982, it was generally argued that this could best be achieved through the creation of institutions for mutual decision-making between the various groups; while simultaneously, separate bodies had to exist to allow these groups to decide on matters which are of exclusive concern to each of them.

Hence two reports from the President's Council in 1982 outlined the framework for a new government structure in South Africa: one set the parameters of cultural pluralism and consociationalism for institutions at central level and the other made recommendations for major restructuring at the regional and local level. The principles of joint decision-making on matters of common concern and separate decision-making on matters of group concern, provided the fundamental backbone of the proposed new institutions. These principles were institutionalised in the 1983 constitution through three ethnically-based chambers of parliament for whites, coloureds and Indians, operating within a framework of constitutionally-defined

"own" and "general" matters. After the new tri-cameral parliament came into operation in September 1984, restructuring at the other levels of government received special attention.

Joint decision-making on matters of mutual concern, is being provided for in the Regional Services Councils. The various race-bound local authorities will all be represented in these bodies according to their relative consumption of bulk services provided by the RSC. Apart from being instruments for multi-racial decision-making, these bodies are also purported to be functional to the cost-efficient provision of bulk services in 22 possible categories and as instruments for the creation of infrastructure in deprived areas. It seems that they have been doing this with varying degrees of success in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In the Cape, their functionality has been constrained by them taking over the activities (and staff) of the former Divisional Councils — which has created numerous problems of bureaucracy. In Natal, Inkatha's resistance and firm opposition from farmers' associations have thus far delayed the implementation of the RSC system, but provincial spokespersons are determined to proceed with their implementation in the course of 1988.

RSCs have been criticised for a variety of reasons. They were imposed from above and institutionalise a considerable degree of top-down control from the central government through the provinces on to the local level. Voting formulas in the RSCs favour the wealthier local authorities. They also warrant criticism because they are ultimately based on racially-defined constituent parts. These criticisms remain valid, but the first few months of RSC activity have indicated that these bodies are performing some of the envisaged functions quite impressively. In the Transvaal various upgrading projects have been initiated. Cynics argue that it is merely the "honeymoon" of these bodies, and that conflicts and bureaucratic policies would ultimately curtail this ability. Yet, in the Transvaal there has thus far been hardly any bureaucratic expansion as local authorities are used as agencies for the RSCs. The Cape experience is complicated by the fact that the legacy of massive ex-Divisional Council bureaucracies seems to constrain the Regional Services Councils in their functioning, so that very little actual RSC activities have been undertaken.

The RSC's major achievement in many areas has apparently been that they have exposed white local councillors to black areas for the first time. In many RSCs the members were taken on survey tours of the regions to acquaint themselves with conditions there. Thus, while the power relations within these bodies might still favour some interest groups more than others, they have played some educational role among white members. What the magnitude of this educational process will ultimately be, is unclear, but it could be significant in a society where ignorance has been embedded in the basic way of living of people. There are cases in the Transvaal where HNP and CP people have turned into enthusiastic supporters of closer liaison and financial linkage between the white and black communities after they had the opportunity to experience the conditions in the townships. In that province, co-ordinating committees at the local level exist in most towns and cities which are useful addenda to the RSCs in their educational role. It would be presumptuous to see these bodies as the "solutions" to the historically-established alienation between people in South Africa. However, their modest achievements at this stage, serve as evidence that there is much flexibility in the realm of local politics. This makes it an arena with potential for creative politics.

While the RSCs are supposed to cater for "general" matters, local decentralised bodies are purported to be ideal instruments for facilitating the "own" affairs concept. Pretoria therefore wishes to segregate primary local authorities along racial lines, in order to achieve what is termed the "highest degree of self-determination possible".

Fully-fledged race-bound local authorities are already a fait accompli for whites and blacks. In the case of the whites, various legislative measures since 1948, have ensured racial exclusivity. Not only were the other racial groups systematically removed from these bodies, but measures like the Group Areas and Separate Amenities Acts and a host of others in various spheres, served to build a context of racial segregation at the local level. Today, many people, including government planners, believe that most whites regard racially-exclusive local authorities as vital for the protection of their political sovereignty and the maintenance of their cultural and social identities. Some officials claim that local government is as sensitive a matter as segregated schools and residential areas. Whites are said to attach considerable political and symbolic significance to their own local authorities¹.

The government has no intention to abolish racially-based local authorities. They continue to hope that the coloureds and Indians, who accepted the racialistic parliamentary framework, will eventually accept the principle of segregated local bodies. The chances seem remote. Especially the Labour Party, who holds a preponderant majority in the coloured House of Representatives, seems determined to settle for nothing less than integrated local authorities. In January 1988 they caused a temporary deadlock in the parliamentary standing committee for Natal, by refusing to allow minor legislative changes in the provisions for municipal elections, because they interpreted proposed

measures to delegate more powers to local bodies, including coloured management committees, as an attempt to create segregated fully-fledged municipalities. And the party has repeatedly stated its opposition to separate local authorities. In the present climate of tension between it and the Nationalist government, it seems likely that the Labour Party will use all the institutional leverage that it has, to promote this cause.

But the most important government initiatives on the local level, occurred in the area of black local government. In the wake of the 1976 crisis, community councils were established in several black townships. The establishment of these councils was significant in the sense that they implied acceptance of some permanence for blacks outside the homeland areas. Their autonomy from the central government was, however, severely constrained. The Minister of Co-operation and Development could determine the size, tenure, committees, service conditions and method of election of each council. He was also empowered to regulate their financial affairs and confer additional powers on them.

The Black Local Authorities Act of 1982 altered the status of the black local authorities. The minister could now establish town and village councils, which are elected by Africans with residential rights in urban areas and with homeland citizenship. The new councils operate as proper local authorities with their own mayors, town clerks and executive committees. They have extensive powers — in some respects even wider ones than white local authorities.

However, their existence remains problem-ridden — to the extent that several councils had to resign in the face of community pressure since 1984. Their legitimacy problems seem related to three factors: first, their limited financial resources, a problem enhanced by the massive shortages caused by them being the main victims of rent boycotts in townships; second, the strong feelings in the townships against the very notion of racially-segregated local authorities and in favour of non-racial ones; and thirdly, the fact that the black local authorities were strongly linked to apartheid ideology from the outset. The fact that the government persisted in regarding the homelands as the ultimate political framework for black political rights, served to strengthen this perception.

The Regional Services Councils offer a new source of hope for the black local authorities. In interviews, several councillors and officials involved in this area, expressed high expectations of these bodies as instruments for the redistribution of resources to black areas. This is seen as a crucial part of any attempts to improve the image of black local authorities. There is a belief that the improvement of infrastructure and general living conditions in the townships, would assist the black local authorities in their quest for greater acceptability. The major uncertainty in this regard involves the preparedness of white local authorities to cooperate in this vein. If they fail to do so, the RSCs would not only become focal points for local conflict, but would also be unable to meet the high expectations of black local authorities.

RESTRUCTURING AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Given its unitary form, the South African constitution has never given any safeguards to the country's system of local government. The lack of constitutional definition and protection facilitated the whittling away of local government ever since the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910. This trend was perpetuated in the Republic since 1961. Not only did the central government systematically usurp many of the powers of the lower tier authorities in the ways which characterised the dynamics of government institutions in many countries, but the apartheid policies of the National Party also necessitated considerable intervention by the central state in the activities of local bodies.

The most important effect of the post-1984 restructuring process on local government, has been that it has been brought into a more direct relationship with the central government. This was brought about by the 1983 constitution as well as a number of legislative measures and institutional adaptations which bear directly on the lower tiers of government. The traditional close relationship between the provinces and local authorities has been weakened by the creation of three "ethnic" departments of local government (for whites, coloureds and Indians). In as far as their responsibilities regarding local government are concerned, provincial administrators are now due to become responsible mainly for black local authorities and RSCs, but as representatives of the Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning. At present the provinces' responsibilities for local government are still fairly extensive, but it is being anticipated that the "own" affairs ministries would increasingly supervise "own" affairs affecting local authorities, while the provinces will take charge of "general matters" affecting the local level. This would largely concern the regional services councils. However, the distinction between "own" and "general" matters remains an ambiguous one, leaving politicians and officials at all levels of government confused. It seems indeed to be one of the important uncertainties which leaves much space for manoeuvring by those who want to play innovative politics within the rather complicated institutional framework-in-the-making.

The relationship between the central government and the other levels has also been institutionally tightened through the Co-ordinating Council for Local Government Affairs, a body comprised of representatives from all levels of government and most interest groups in the local sphere. The council's main function is to advise the government on matters facilitating co-ordination of local government activity and all legislation affecting the local level. Thus, the council plays an important role in linking the central and local levels of government and as a channel for co-operation and consultation between representatives from the various racially-defined local authorities.

Many of the laws which originated from this body, contributed to a tightening of the central-local relationship. Government, for instance, now sets franchise prescriptions for local authorities, influences the salaries and service conditions of town clerks and other local government officials and provides a nationally-co-ordinated mechanism for training of local councillors and officials.

The financial relationship between the central government and local bodies, has been adapted to allow the Minister of Finance an enhanced supervisory role with regard to the latter. Local autonomy in the financial sphere is also affected by the fact that the State President's committee on National Priorities has as its brief the co-ordination of the financial priorities of the various levels of government in order to support national guidelines regarding priorities. The most significant alteration favouring local authorities is that they are now entitled to levy property taxes from the central government².

Many people in the local sphere argue that power is increasingly being concentrated, instead of decentralised. Government planners respond that in as far as these accusations are accurate, it should be borne in mind that they are attempting to transform the institutional network in South Africa through "reform by stealth"; which might at times require strategic actions which contradict long term objectives in the short run. Thus, it is argued, power is being concentrated to enable the government to lay the foundations for stronger decentralised institutions in the long run.³

CHALLENGING GOVERNMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

While the government has paid considerable attention to legislative adaptations at the local level, its opponents were forced to consider their strategies at this level too. On the conservative side, the rightwing parties are presently gearing themselves up for the coming municipal elections which are due to be held in October 1988. There is a belief in these circles that they could frustrate the government's reforms by taking charge of local authorities — who would then resist attempts to desegregate facilities and institutions at the local level. There seems to be some debate about what this should mean for the Regional Services Councils. The official Conservative Party position is that these councils ought to be taken over and then prevented from performing the roles which the government envisaged for them. But several conservatives at the local level are involved in the RSCs and seem quite supportive of their general objectives.

On the left, liberal-minded municipalities like Cape Town have a history of dispute with the government. The former refuses to co-operate with other racially-based bodies in its vicinity, and has incurred the wrath of government for that. But the Cape Town authority remains adamant in its demands for a single local authority in the Greater Cape Town metropole.

Extra-institutional groups have also had to reassess their perceptions of the importance of the local level. In the townships, street and area committees served as organisational focal points for communities-in-resistance, enabling residents to structure themselves politically and to find forms of social organisation to arrange the everyday lives of people. In the aftermath of 1984, campaigns were also launched to wreck the official local authority network in the townships — with considerable success, especially in the Eastern Cape. Demands for political change were also increasingly directed at white local authorities and chambers of commerce.

Until 1986, these actions seemed to be bearing some fruit. However, the stringent measures taken under the state of emergency have altered that. With many community leaders detained, and the security establishment apparently setting the tone through the National Security Management System in the government's response to events at the local level, the institutional space for resistance politics became severely curtailed. As a result, left-wing opposition groups seem somewhat reluctant to focus on the local level. They do not see local actors as powerful enough to affect political change sufficiently. This view is however not unambiguously supported in the organisation. From pronouncements by UDF spokespersons, it seems that the organisation feels that no local settlements can be seen as ultimate solutions until a national resolution of the South African conflict has been achieved. But they are reluctant to categorically reject attempts at reconciliation at the local level.

SOME FINAL COMMENTS

Local government and politics are in a state of flux. The government has been restructuring institutions at this level in order to affect the balance of power and the modes of decision-making. This process has not been completed and one is generally struck by the open-endedness of the entire process. Among the government's opponents, there is uncertainty too about the extent to which the local level

ought to be taken as a strategic point for conducting the struggle for political change. There is also a considerable amount of confusion about the viability of locally based strategies in the wake of the strong state action at the local level. Opponents of the government are especially concerned about the influence of the National Security Management System — which through its impact on the flow of information in the state machinery and on the allocation of funds, could affect the outcome of political currents. Yet it is uncertain what the balance of power is between the various organs of the state.

In this very uncertainty lies the reason for the significance of local politics — an area characterised with flux where all choices and strategies seem so utterly risky and yet not in vain. Local politics is by its very nature very real to people. Its renaissance in the South African context is therefore hardly surprising. It could provide an important base for change in the wider society. □

1. Atkinson, D. and Heymans, C., "The Future: What do the practitioners think?" in Heymans, C. and Töttemeyer, G. (eds.) *GOVERNMENT BY THE PEOPLE? THE POLITICS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA*, 1988, Juta and Co., Cape Town, Wetton and Johannesburg, p. 144.
2. Hattingh, J., *OWERHEIDSVERHOUDINGE — 'N INLEIDING*, 1986, Unisa, Pretoria, P. 141.
3. Atkinson, D. and Heymans, C., *op. cit*, 1988, p. 153.

