

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND NATIONAL RESISTANCE

INTRODUCTION

The South African state has embarked on a process of reform which has touched virtually all spheres of South African society. Many of these reforms have taken place at the level of local government. In opposition to the reform process, a host of extra-parliamentary organisations which had mushroomed in the 1980s, launched a series of protests. These protests were predominantly levelled at local government structures. This analysis focuses on community-based organisations opposition to the reforms at local government level.

Prior to the formation of the United Democratic Front (U.D.F.), community organisations also directed their struggle at local government, namely municipalities. This struggle took the form of campaigns against increases in service charges implemented by municipalities. These issues served as impetus to mobilise people as they were issues that directly affected the community.

With the formation of the U.D.F. this emphasis shifted to protests that directly challenged the existence of African, "coloured" and "Indian" local government structures. Although these protests were against local government structures, they served to challenge the reform process and to undermine the state policy of separate development.

Since 1982, the government has given top priority to the establishment of legitimate and viable local authorities. This, however, occurred within the framework of the "own" and "general" affairs principles of the 1983 constitution. Thus, racial distinctions formed the backbone of primary local authorities, while the Regional Services Councils were created for "joint decision-making" and to generate funds for the development of especially the townships¹.

However, instead of being accepted by the people they are intended to serve, these structures have become targets for community protests.

PROTESTS AGAINST LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES

The 1980s saw the emergence of many civic, youth and student organisations. These organisations grew out of the parent-student committees, support committees and various other groups which were formed during the protests that occurred from 1976 into the early 1980s.

Many of these organisations directed their struggles at increases in service charges, implemented by the municipalities. For example, the first protests of this nature, in the Cape Peninsula, occurred in Mitchell's Plain in 1980. Residents refused to pay a R2,00 penalty for defaulting to pay

their electricity at the due date. This led to what became known as the Electricity Petition Campaign which lasted for a period of six months. Two hundred residents marched to the Cape Town City Council (C.C.C.) to hand over a petition. The residents were granted a month's grace if their account was less than R30, i.e. they would not have to pay the penalty.

Political mobilisation encouraged communities to no longer accept impositions from municipalities but to actively challenge their decisions. After the above-mentioned campaign, many communities launched other protests against increases implemented by the C.C.C. The Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (C.A.H.A.C.), which was the umbrella organisation for many of the civic associations existing in the Peninsula, initiated these protests. Campaigns against bus fare, water and electricity and other increases became the order of the day in virtually all townships throughout South Africa.

The following can be deduced from the above period of protest. Firstly, these protests developed out of issues that essentially affected only a specific community. Secondly, they never challenged the existence of local government structures per se, but rather presented opposition to decisions taken by municipalities.

In 1983, a united front of predominantly community-based organisations, namely the U.D.F., formed, with the specific aim of opposing the three "Koornhof" bills. These bills were the Orderly Settlement of Black Persons Bill, Black Local Authorities Bill and the Black Communities Development Bill, the latter two of which are in effect today. Although this was not the first time that the existence of local government structures was questioned (e.g. in 1977 we witnessed protests against the formation of community councils), it was the first time that opposition occurred on such a broad scale.

Opposition was not only directed at black local authorities, but also at the management and local affairs committees. Two campaigns can be mentioned to illustrate that these local government structures are unacceptable to the African, "coloured" and "Indian" communities.

Firstly, organisations canvassed for a boycott of the elections of black local authority, management and local affairs committee members. By staging a boycott, the community organisations intended to prove to the government that the official structures lacked support. To a large extent, this was proven to be correct by the low polls recorded. For example, the polls for management committee elections in Cape Town ranged from 1,81% to 11,98% in 1983, compared to the 16,8% to 17,6% poll (low as that was) in 1981.²

Secondly, the community organisations conducted a "Rent Boycott". Rent boycotts are boycotts of both rent (site) and service charges (water and electricity), which are billed and paid together.

The rent boycott had a regional character, predominantly occurring in the Transvaal and the Eastern Cape and, for the most part, only being staged in African areas. It was initiated in the P.W.V. area in September 1984, after the Lekoa Town Council decided to implement a rent hike. In 1985 it spread to the Eastern Cape and by 1986 had affected Soweto, Tembisa and Mamelodi.

The rent boycott differed from former rent boycotts in that it was implemented in part to achieve political goals, i.e. it attempted to make the local government structures unworkable. A U.D.F. pamphlet issued in August 1986, claimed that "The rent boycott weakens these structures and demonstrates to the government that there can be no taxation without representation and that the people will accept nothing less than majority rule".

The boycott therefore, highlighted grievances directly linked to the state's failure to give blacks substantive political rights in general and the persistent inadequacy and illegitimacy of the Black Local Authorities.³ This strategy, coupled with the physical attacks on councillors, to a certain extent, had its desired effect, i.e. it has produced a crisis in black local government.

The rent boycott cost the state an estimated R300 million in lost revenue.⁴ It is estimated that at least 300 houses of town councillors and African policemen were damaged by protesters, 12 town councillors were killed and an unknown number were being housed in "white" areas. Out of fear for their lives, 240 town councillors resigned.

The physical attacks on councillors is a recent phenomenon. Although, since the 1960s, the Non-European Unity Movement had been boycotting "apartheid institutions", ostracising their members, they never physically attacked them. However, since 1985, this threshold has been crossed. Predominantly charterist supporters introduced the "necklace" to deal with what they termed collaborators (e.g. members of town councils).

The state of emergency, instituted in 1986, has however been considerably successful in crushing violent resistance. Many community organisations ceased to function due to the detentions of their members, whilst the J.M.C.'s are playing a major role in the restoration of town councils.

The townships in which town councils collapsed, are being administered by administrators. According to Atkinson, Heymans and Humphries, the residents seem to give more credibility to the structures manned by the administrators. This flows from the material improvements which the administrators have effected in the townships under their control since their appointment.⁵

REASONS FOR THE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS' REJECTION OF THESE STRUCTURES

The government-created structures are primarily rejected because they are based on ethnicity. They are considered to be a powerless appendage of the South African government and watchdogs for the status quo at local level. This is because black local authorities are under strict ministerial supervision. The Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning decides when to establish or dissolve a council, he may alter the name of the local authority, determine how many members the local body will have, and so on.

The areas that these authorities are supposed to govern are essentially dormitories, lacking the financial resources necessary for a town or city. They will therefore not be able to improve conditions in these townships.

At the U.D.F. national conference of April 1985, the meeting resolved that:

1. The state introduced the Black Local Authorities Act to control black people in the townships;
2. the government attempted to co-opt sectors of the "people" through this strategy.
3. The local authority acts have been totally rejected because of the illegitimacy and ineffectiveness in solving the problems of "our people".

Regional Services Councils have also been rejected for various reasons. Firstly, they are based on illegitimate racial structures; secondly, they have been imposed from above without adequate consultation, and thirdly, they will not improve the social and economic conditions of the township. This is because the demands for material improvements of the physical environment far exceed the capacities of the primary local authorities.

Finally, the stance adopted by the various organisations that the national question should be solved first, precludes any reform at local level being viewed as legitimate. U.D.F. informants have stressed the difficulty of affecting any significant reform at third tier as long as government policy remains premised on apartheid ideology.

They will not be satisfied with anything less than "full democratic rights for all in a united, non-racial South Africa". Thus, piecemeal attempts on the part of government will gain no acceptance. Instead, they will only serve to increase an already volatile situation.

CONCLUSION

The government faces two choices. A political solution to inaugurate local government institutions enjoying legitimacy, requires the state to negotiate with the organisations with communities' support in search of concessions that are mutually acceptable.

However, it seems that the state has chosen a different strategy. The state does not feel its domination sufficiently threatened to offer the concessions Inkatha seeks, still less the U.D.F.. Confidence in the success of coercion leads the government to continue with the counter-revolutionary and not democratic choice. It will therefore sustain repression and continue to impose ethnically segregated local government structures.

The paramilitary, kitskonstables and vigilantes will deal with any forms of opposition. This status quo will last until the next episode on insurrection. □

1. Humphries, R., "Intermediate state responses to the black local authority legitimacy crisis" in Heymans, C. and Töttemeyer, G. (eds.), *GOVERNMENT BY THE PEOPLE?*, 1988, Juta and Co., Johannesburg, Cape Town, Welton, pp. 106-114.
2. S.A. Institute of Race Relations, *Survey 1983*, Johannesburg, p. 248.
3. Swilling, M., *The United Democratic Front and township revolt in South Africa, 1987*, paper at ASSA conference, University of the Western Cape, Belleville, p. 15.
4. Laurence, P., "Rents: the state won't back off. Neither it seems, will the boycotters" in *Weekly Mail*, June 19-25, 1987, p. 6.
5. Atkinson, D., Heymans, C. and Humphries, R., *POLITICS WITHOUT POLITICIANS: THE COLLAPSE OF BLACK LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE EASTERN CAPE*, unpublished paper, 1987, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, p. 30.