

South Africa: Police brutality and service delivery protests

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The six policemen arrested for the murder of protestor, Andries Tatane in Meqheleng Township in Ficksburg in South Africa's Free State are 'political scapegoats'. To put it bluntly, the six are 'sacrificial goats' on the altar of populist, grandstanding and electioneering politics. Their arrest is a quick ploy to take attention away from the systemic factors that inform police brutality. It is aimed at absolving the collective responsibility of South African Police Services (SAPS) and its political principal, the ANC-led government. It is the timing of the incident rather than government's intolerance to police brutality that informs the arrest of the six cops. The number of incidents of intimidation, harassment, torture, arrest and shooting of protestors by police during peaceful protest action in the post 1994, neo-apartheid dispensation is alarming. Families, individuals and organisations that lay complaints to the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD) and various state institutions about incidents of illegal arrests and illegal shootings, harassment and torture and 'disappeared dockets' often wait forever for any kind of response.

Usually there is hardly a public announcement, let alone a report of investigation of incidents of police brutality. Instead, incidents of harsh repression of protests by the police are often followed by stern pronouncements by the state and government officials amounting to criminalisation of protest action and radical acts of civil disobedience. These statements are often accompanied by warnings to the public that the police will deal harshly with those involved in these acts. As a matter of fact, statements labelling civil disobedience as criminal acts and amounting to threats of harsh police action have featured in the state of the nation addresses of both former president, Thabo Mbeki and the current state president, Jacob Zuma. When you add 'the shoot-to-kill' injunction of the police chief Bheki Cele to state indifference to public complaints and public pronouncements that criminalise protest action and justify repressive measures to suppress it, you have a policy and systematic framework that sanctions and fuels police brutality.

As for the protests against lack of service delivery, one does not need to be a rocket scientist to know that public discontent is mainly the result of failure of government policies and programmes to provide sustainable and quality jobs, free and quality public education, health and transport, decent and habitable housing and free water and electricity to all citizens. There is also common agreement that the protests are fuelled by an absence of genuine and direct participation of communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of planning, governance and development; the complete disregard of public opinion; and the capture of ward committees and other public platforms and state institutions and resources by narrow and selfish party and elite interests. This is exacerbated by the allocation of state tenders, jobs and promotions in public administration only to comrades, friends and family members and various forms of cronyism and nepotism, maladministration and corruption including jobs for sex.

There is no doubt that unequal social and power relations and inequitable allocation of resources as

well as unequal access to amenities and services has an impact on public participation and on the organisational capacity of communities to engage in effective lobbying and advocacy. This also affects the extent to which different communities and sectors of society can effectively make use of tools and platforms such as research, print and electronic media, public hearings, petitions and submissions on policies. The reality is that success of various forms of lobbying, advocacy and influencing public policy still rely heavily on the quality and quantity of financial, technological, material and human resources and social capital at the disposal of communities.

A critical factor to also consider is that citizen action and public participation is either aided or disabled and sabotaged by state agency and state capacity. The receptivity or non-receptivity of government institutions to the voice of communities largely determines the form that public discontent will take. In South Africa the incapacity or reluctance of state and public institutions to respond proactively to public concerns and needs or to take decisive action has diminished their faith in government and state institutions.

Public scepticism has been worsened by the bad state of internal democracy in political parties and by the general impression that politicians and parties only use popular support as a leverage and device to attain power and wealth for themselves. Among other things, this has led to the reduction in the numbers of people who attend public gathering and public hearings, greater mistrust of politicians and political institutions, and a decline in voter turnout. For an example, the voter turnout in the national general election in SA decreased from 19.5 million people in 1994 to just over 16 million in 1999, and fewer than 16 million in 2004.

It is this lack of trust of formal structures and processes for placing demands on the state that drives both peaceful and aggressive expressions of protest action and civil disobedience. Therefore, instead of criminalising protest action and civil disobedience, the government should design and implement a coherent and practical programme of transforming the organisational culture and value system of state bureaucracies and public administrations. Currently the Batho Pele initiative is just words on a piece of paper, without a concrete sanctions and incentive framework that enforces adherence and performance. It is therefore not capable of yielding a service culture, transparency or transformed attitudes of public administration staff and government officials. Clearly the solution to these problems is processes and platforms that locate people and communities at the centre of designing, planning, implementing and evaluating policy, governance and development. This would include effectively making people to be at the centre of designing protocols, systems and structures of security and policing in their communities and transforming SAPS into a police force that protects communities rather than one attacks them.

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* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org [2] or comment online at [Pambazuka News](https://www.pambazuka.org) [3].

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Article-Summary:

The arrest of six policemen for last week's murder of protestor Andries Tatane is 'a quick ploy to take attention away from the systemic factors that inform police brutality', says Mphutlane wa Bofelo. Shouldn't the country's police force protect the interests of communities rather than criminalising service delivery protests?

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