

Living in contested spaces: the role of factionalism in local government

South Africa's municipalities are contested terrain, and in order to understand the politics, one must understand the territory in which it plays itself out.

This was the opinion of Anton Harber, Caxton Professor of Journalism and Media Studies and director of the Journalism Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand and author of *Diepsloot*. He was the opening speaker at a round table hosted by Isandla Institute late last year. The purpose of the meeting was to consider the role political parties play in strengthening local decision-making and governance, especially in the light of factionalism.

“The term ‘factionalism’ denotes different interpretations, ranging from a neutral assessment of different power blocs within a party or organisation to a value-laden interpretation that associates factions with patronage and even self-interest (if not self-enrichment),” explained Pamela Masiko-Kambala, Policy Researcher in the Politics of Local Governance Project at Isandla Institute.

While contestation in and of itself need not be an issue of concern, not all contestation (or how it gets expressed) is healthy and contributes to the smooth running of local democracy. In fact, some forms of contestation could be counterproductive for local government efficiency.

In *Diepsloot*, for example, Harber found that “anger, distrust, factionalism were so strong that they came out and people spoke with remarkable candidness about how much they hated and mistrusted each other”.

For Harber, the absence of local community media left a huge gap in the ability of the community to deal with the politics and factionalism that were rife during the local government elections.

“Where there is no media, rumour runs rife and feeds into the problems,” he said. “Yes, local media can promote factionalism, but with it there is a stronger sense of commonality. People have a voice. Without it people are much more limited, and disempowered.”

The ANC has experienced differing levels of factionalism throughout its 100 year existence, but it acknowledges that factionalism assumes a new dimension once the party is in power.

According to the Leadership Renewal, Discipline and Organisational Culture document tabled at the 2010 National General Council, “Different factions contend over party leadership using the instruments of state to tilt the balance of power in their favour, including using patronage to reward those who are loyal to a faction in power and punishing opponents in all manner of ways”.

“The notion of factionalism can be used in anti-democratic and exclusionary terms in order to stifle internal debate and contestation in political parties and also to discredit dissenting voices. Because of the negative connotations attached to it, few politicians are likely to voluntarily disclose themselves as belonging to a particular faction, nor do factions announce their existence publicly,” Masiko-Kambala said.

For political analyst Aubrey Matshiqi, it is important “not to exaggerate possible threats and act as if we are faced with the threat of democratic reversal”.

He reminded delegates that the UDF defined factionalism and clique-ism as counter revolutionary tendencies. From the perspective of liberation movements, factionalism is always seen as a bad thing, as it undermines unity, coherence and uniformity.

“The prism through which we reflect relations in the local state may make us believe that the dangers we see are larger than they are,” he said. “To find solutions to distortions caused by factionalism, we must not disempower the ordinary citizens by portraying them as helpless or innocent victims,” he pointed out. “They are not an innocent party in the existence of factionalism within the local level of government.”

“What we need are citizens who continue to be engaged and vigilant and continue to develop a strong sense of urgency,” he pointed out.

It is clear that divisions within (and between) political parties are overflowing into the life of municipalities, rendering some of these dysfunctional. As a result, service delivery is hindered and the community is negatively affected. Assessments conducted by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) revealed that party political factionalism and polarisation of interests and the subsequent creation of new political alliances and elites, have contributed to the progressive deterioration of municipal functionality. National Treasury attributes failures in municipal performance directly to failures in local political leadership rather than a lack of capacity in municipalities.

Not everyone agreed that factionalism was the cause of the problems within municipalities.

Mohammed Bhabha, Advisor to the Deputy Minister of COGTA did not believe that problems within local government can be ascribed to factionalism within the ANC.

“The nature of transition was that there was no victor and no vanquished,” he said. We can't ignore the past. Perhaps time for deployment policy has passed, but we need to start looking at structure of local municipalities. Is the system in its current form giving expression to the local communities?”

Jaap de Visser Coordinator of the Local Democracy, Peace and Human Security Project at the Community Law Centre, believes that the root of the problems within municipalities lies in the “political-administrative interface”.

“Political problems (including excessive factionalism) immediately affect the administration and service delivery,” he said. “Officials become despondent when they don't know who they are actually reporting to. There is a growing resentment among councillors who feel marginalised and lacking control.”

Then came the turnaround strategy and the Municipal Systems Amendment Act.

“This meant that municipalities were no longer allowed to appoint staff for positions that don't exist on an organogram,” he said. “This had real impact, and unintended consequences. Now suspensions are being used to deal with political coalitions rather than actual offences.”

Xolani Sotashe, ANC Chief Whip in the City of Cape Town called for a time to “pause, reflect and introspect” and to ensure that the party is still responding to the values that it stands for.

“Factionalism can be defeated by ongoing training of those who are in government so they understand their role. We need political education. Branches of the ANC must be campaigning branches, so they understand community issues and developments.”

He claimed that the ANC is the only organisation that speaks out about these issues. Leonard Ramatlakane from COPE disagreed. “There is going to be continuous contestation of power in all parties, and that is healthy,” he said.

Bhabha pointed out that factionalism exists in other parties “but it is much more sophisticated and thus less obvious”.

Masiko-Kambala's research backed this contention. She found that the analysis on municipal dysfunction has largely been focused on the ANC as the party has dominated the political scene for the past 17 years. However, with the emergence of municipalities controlled by the opposition parties in the Western Cape and in KwaZulu-Natal, there seems to be room for a comparative analysis. The sense is that similar patterns emerge in some municipalities where opposition parties are in power. A recent example of this is contained in the South African Public Protector's recently released report titled “It Can't Be Right: Remedying Self-interest in Midvaal” where evidence of maladministration and irregularities in the Democratic Alliance (DA) controlled Midvaal Municipality were exposed.

What was clear from the discussion was that the involvement of communities in the political process is key to the health of our democracy.

“If the past 15 years of local government transformation have taught us anything, it is that there is a limit to what legislation can achieve; there is a need for other interventions and incentives to safeguard the integrity of the administrative and political structures in local government,” Masiko-Kambala concluded.