

Part 3: Municipalities and local government

15 June 2021

It's a mess. Of the 278 local authorities in SA 163 of the 278 are in financial distress and 40 are in serious financial and service delivery crisis. In a display of wishful thinking, 102 have adopted budgets they cannot fund.

It is partly due to design. In China, for example, mayors and provincial leaders are appointed and promoted from the centre. In SA, local government is completely decentralized and its autonomy as a level of government is protected by the Constitution. This means that local power elites have a lot of leeway, can dispense patronage, appoint family and loyalists and in general mismanage things. Add to that Lord Acton's century-old adage that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely", and we are where we are.

To date, the most astonishing aspect of local government decline is the failure of opposition parties to capitalize on it. We will see whether this changes in October, but at the moment there is a paralyzing vacuum. It is partly being filled by **protests**, local **civil initiatives** and **court rulings**.

Although somewhat diminished under lockdown, **protests** continued. In Ficksburg in the eastern Free State the unlikely partnership of farmers and taxi owners joined forces and used their taxis and tractors to block roads. Within 24 hours the provincial authorities were in town and potholes were being filled. In Bloemfontein a *#shutdown* campaign has resulted in the suspension of the city manager, which follows on the removal of the mayor last year. Not all protest end so well. In many cases protests result in the burning and destruction of property, making a bad situation worse whilst incumbents remain in power.

In towns like Kroonstad and Cradock, and also in urban townships like Mamelodi, Alexandra and Tembisa **local residents** have taken over road maintenance, waste removal and water and sanitation works. In rural towns particularly, black and white citizens are taking hands across previous divides, co-operating in ways not seen before. It is almost as if staring into the abyss has focused people's minds on common values and interests. In the Eastern Free State, Eskom is piloting a new arrangement with local residents on delivery and payment of electricity. The Afrikaans online newspaper *Vrye Weekblad* currently runs a series on these initiatives, which makes for heartening reading.

In Makhanda in the Eastern Cape the High **Court** has disbanded the municipality. Although the Eastern Cape government is appealing the decision, the High Court also disbanded the Lekwa municipality in Mpumalanga, going a step further and instructing the finance minister to take over the running of the town – Tito Mboweni is now minister of finance and town manager! In Koster and Swartruggens the court has given control of the water system to local residents who are fixing the problems. An application is pending in Vryburg for similar rulings.

So what?

- Local authority is the weakest link in our government system.
- Civil society action and court decisions are a welcome response to the political vacuum, but in the end it's up to the voters.
- As the Covid pandemic, corruption and economic growth are dealt with, a major intervention will be needed on local government.
- Local government poses a fiscal risk to the SA government.