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PROTEST ACTION IN THE URBAN PERIPHERIES: ASSESSING RECONCILIATION BETWEEN THE COMMUNITY AND ELITES AFTER THE PROTEST

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Abstract. Urban peripheries in South Africa, especially in metropolitan spaces, have been sites of contestation of power between local government and the communities, and historically they have been sites of resistance against the apartheid government. Violence has always characterised South Africa, and state-sponsored violence has been used as an instrument to curb violence and resistance. Ironically, state-sponsored violence has consistently failed to curb violence and has always resulted in violence. The history of South Africa is further characterised by protest, especially during the apartheid era, as Black Africans protested against the apartheid government that they deemed illegitimate. The ushering of the democratic era promised a new South Africa in which protest action was to be a thing of the past, and in the first decade of democracy, there was little protest action. However, since 2004, protest action emerged and escalated; it has been observed that the protest action is aimed at local government and concentrated at the peripheries (townships and informal settlements). The response by the government has been the use of state-sponsored violence to deal with the increasingly disruptive protests. Employing the qualitative approach, using documentary analysis, this paper seeks to assess the protests at the peripheries and investigate if there are measures to reconcile the community, the local government and the police after the protest action. This paper finds that there are no measures to ensure that reconciliation takes place. Further, there is no understanding of what works regarding reconciliation. Reconciliation is a complex phenomenon, as it means different things to different people and communities, as people are affected by violence in various ways. Further, reconciliation in South Africa is complicated by its violent history; hence, it has become a complex and lengthy.

Keywords: protests; violence; reconciliation; peripheries

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, service delivery remains vital for every individual and community. It assists citizens in overcoming non-monetary poverty by ensuring they access basic and important municipal services (Matyana & Thusi, 2023; Mamokhere, 2025). According to these scholars, where government services are provided, the community tends to be happy as their living conditions are being taken care of. This assertion is also supported by Waithaka et al. (2020), who state that poor service delivery to communities gives rise to violent protests, which vandalise state resources and other vital infrastructure. These scholars further assert that the cause of violent protests in local communities could be caused by various reasons from the municipal side, such as "infrastructural and resource challenges, weak institutional arrangements, underdeveloped organisational ethics codes, and unaffordable alternative options". These challenges are also supported by scholars such as Thusi et al. (2023), who stated that the causes of poor service delivery in South Africa include a lack of political will, corruption, a

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lack of consequence management, the appointment of incompetent staff, etc. Moloto et al. (2020) observed that most South African communities, predominantly rural and urban peripheries, live under severe conditions of poor service delivery; therefore, the government must work very hard to improve the situation. Mamokhere (2020) indicates that such poor service delivery challenges result in protests, which trigger the attention of the media and require the intervention of the police service to make the situation better; however, it must be noted that the solutions to these protests are not the intervention of the police service, but rather the improvement in service delivery.

Community protests in South Africa rose in the apartheid era. During this period, many South African citizens, especially youth, were protesting against unjust treatment and policies by the apartheid government (Moodley & Adam, 2000). During this era, citizens used community protests to express their dissatisfaction with apartheid laws and policies. This protest culture among communities went on after 1994. Citizens were/are still protesting government injustices, especially poor service delivery. Such protests take place in all spheres of government, but local government seem to be the most affected sphere of community protests due to poor service delivery (Dube et al. 2021; Tsheola et al., 2023). These community service delivery protests have occurred in South Africa since 1994. In support, Mamokhere (2020, 2023) states that service delivery protests have increased in South Africa since the freedom era.

Given the above brief view of the importance of service delivery and overview of community protests, this study assesses reconciliation between the community and elites after the protest, particularly within urban peripheries. This is important because the protests mean violence and dissatisfaction among the community members. In this regard, elites are defined as municipal officials who make slow and poor decisions that result in protests and authorise the police to use painful things such as teargas to disperse the protest members. The aim is to check whether the municipal elites engage with community members after the protests, humbly listen to current and future complaints, and make necessary peace. This aim is also supported by scholars such as Matyana and Mthethwa (2024), Yulistiar and Kriswibowo (2024), as municipalities must promote customer care relationships with their clients and treat them with care. This also implies that applying Batho Pele principles encourages public institutions to redress the communities whenever they have done something wrong.

2. Protest and the peripheries

Before defining urban peripheries, the reader needs to understand what a periphery is, in a general sense. A periphery is defined as the external boundaries of something as opposed to its interior or centre. Phelps et al. (2023: 01) define a periphery as "the external boundary of any surface or area or the outer edge of an area". These definitions of " peripheries " also apply to human settlements or communities. In other words, within our societies, some communities are regarded as peripheries, particularly, "urban peripheries". These are places found outside the main cities or towns. They surround the towns; in most cases, they are regarded as townships. Urban peripheries were areas on the outskirts of cities, where people were moving from rural to urban areas, had restricted economies, and had cheaper land prices, density, and access to jobs than more central areas (Meth et al. 2021:03). As newer peripheries formed and older ones were absorbed into the metropolis, this was frequently seen as a shifting edge. The notion of peri-urban areas is pertinent to African cities where there is a blurring of the lines between urban and rural areas, and where fragmented lateral development (Pugh & Dubois, 2021) or the absorption of densifying rural populations (Sawyer et al., 2021) are important aspects of urban growth. However, although these were frequently depicted in older literature as areas of poverty, more recent research shows that middle-class employment and house building have expanded (Bartels, 2020; Mercer, 2020).

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3. Research methods

To achieve the research question of this chapter, which is to understand the application of ethics in local government, the chapter used a semi-systematic review, also known as a narrative review approach. A systematic review is an academic synthesis of the available data on a topic that has been presented clearly, utilising critical approaches to locate, characterise, and evaluate relevant research. A systematic review gathers, examines, and evaluates published research data before condensing interpretations into a well-informed conclusion supported by solid evidence (Omazic & Zunk, 2021). In support, Zunder (2021) states that this system incorporates instructions for structuring a written discussion of literature that can be applied to the research process.

Between May 2024 and July 2024, five electronic databases, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Sabinet, SAGE journals, and Social Science Citation Index (Web of Science), were examined. The results are shown in Table 1 below. Researchers used the following keywords: "ethics" AND "local government" AND "service delivery"; period 2019-2024.

Table 1. Results of the preliminary literature search using databases.

Databases	Total number of results	Peer-reviewed papers	Included for review
Google Scholar	205	99	17
Sabinet	318	146	11
EBSCOhost	116	13	4
SAGE journals	21	9	2
Social Science Citations Index (Web of Science)	88	14	2

Source: Authors' own compilation

As shown in Table 1, our researcher received 748 articles from the different databases, then the filtering was done to remove articles that are not too relevant to the chapter's aim and protest urban peripheries, leaving a total of 281 relevant articles. After further consideration of the literature and the remaining articles, only 36 were selected to be reviewed.

4. Findings

4.1 Accessibility of the elites

In assessing reconciliation between the community and elites, establishing the connectedness between the community and the elites is necessary before protest activity. Accessibility of the elites is not linear, as local elites are more accessible than provincial or national elites (Kertzer & Renshon, 2022). However, despite accessibility of the elites not being a linear process, evidence indicates that local elites (ward councillors) are usually inaccessible to the community and mostly unavailable (Ndasana, Vallabh & Mxunyelwa, 2022). From scholarly evidence, power dynamics and the behaviour of the elites shape how reconciliation can be approached, and they hint at what hinders or enhances reconciliation after the protest action. Further, since local elites are the first point of contact between the citizenry and the government, unequal power dynamics and unavailability of local elites imply compromised trust towards the government by the community.

Despite the evidence indicating the unavailability and behaviour of elites, instruments and measures have been recommended to ensure that the public does participate in local government decision-making, and the proper use of such instruments will minimise protest action. One such instrument or measure is public participation through ward committees in local government. Ward committees are community-based structures created to enhance local participation in municipal affairs (Dube et al., 2021). Despite the adoption of ward committees as modes of public participation, evidence indicates that participatory processes in South Africa are not transformative to elicit trust in the government institutions, hence this triggers protest action (Ragolane & Malatji, 2024). In establishing ward

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committees, it must be noted that municipalities are not legally obliged to establish ward committees, and ward councillors must be chairpersons of ward committees (Sekgala, 2016). As ward committees are led by ward councillors, in theory, ward committees together with ward councillors are closer to the grassroots to hear community grievances and concerns; however, as councillors lead ward committees, this implies that agenda-setting and some decision-making powers are vested with the councillor as opposed to the ward committee. Further, evidence indicates that ward committees cannot deal with complex issues such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and budgetary processes (Ragolane & Malatji, 2024). It is evident that utilising the system of ward committees does not change the perception of unequal power, but somehow perpetuates it as ward councillors are leaders of ward committees. Further, evidence indicates that ward committees do not sit at municipal council meetings, hence they have limited ability to influence decision-making (Dube et al., 2021).

4.2 Categories of protests

Protests in South African landscape have been categorised into different categories. The most common categorisation of protests is "orderly", "disruptive", and "violent" (Chiwarawara, 2023). Chiwarawara (2023) states that violent protests are characterised by property damage and people's injuries. Another category is introduced in categorising protests, namely protest events, lasting more than three days (Bekker, 2022). Further, protests can be categorised by their trigger. Protests triggered by dissatisfaction with municipal service provision are termed service delivery protests (Wöcke et al., 2023). Wöcke et al (2023) add a sub-category of service delivery protests, which are gangsterism-type protests where small groups of individuals emerge out of the social protest groups claiming to be local business forums and issue threats and demands to companies. These groups were seen as opportunistic and taking advantage of the situation. However, as protests are commonly categorised as 'orderly', 'disruptive' or 'violent', we believe that all protests in the peripheries and in South Africa are disruptive, regardless of the cause or trigger. A protest can be orderly, disruptive, or violent, as all protest actions disrupt the normality.

4.3 Cause of protests in the peripheries

In the peripheries, different factors trigger protest action. Behavioural factors are associated as triggers of protest action, such as perceived and real corruption, nepotism and incompetence by municipal officials (Ragolane & Malatji, 2024). Ragolane and Malatji (2024), on top of behavioural factors, indicate that structural factors also trigger protests, such as lack of basic services, poor infrastructure, lack of housing, inadequate job opportunities, lack of accountability of local councillors, inequality, and a general feeling of alienation from the structures of democracy. Some causes of protests are linked to the behaviour of leaders, while other factors are outcomes of the complex interplay of economic and policy variables. The authors also add that the slow pace of service delivery is one of the triggers.

Other scholars argue that the above-mentioned factors and a combination of factors trigger protest action in the peripheries. Poor service delivery in the peripheries, corruption, unemployment, poverty, leadership, political indifference, lack of accountability and improper use of funds have been identified to trigger protests (Damoah, 2023). Other identified factors include dissatisfaction with service provision, unemployment and poverty in the peripheries, and a lack of communication with ward councillors (Ndasana et al., 2022; Xaba et al., 2024). However, not all protests are triggered by structural factors mentioned above, as demarcations of municipal boundaries trigger some protests, as communities will object to these demarcations, and such objections are accompanied by protests (Netswera & Nealer, 2020). Although ward committees enhance public participation, local community exclusion in municipal decision-making triggers protests (Thusi et al., 2022). Mamokhere (2023), in agreement with the abovementioned factors, mentions unemployment, poor housing, water and sanitation, electricity, corruption, municipal administration, health, and crime as causes of the protests. Deducing from the mentioned factors, it is evident that elite behaviour concerning quality, good governance and ethical leadership changes when the peripheries are concerned. Further, as factors such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality trigger protests, this indicates that different spaces have different levels of economic performance in a

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way that triggers protests in the peripheries as opposed to the core and suburban spaces. Lastly, the protests in the peripheries are triggered by a complex interplay of factors; however, the factors mentioned above are the most cited reasons for protests.

4.4 Attributes of protests in the peripheries

Having established the triggers of protests and their categories, some factors are key attributes to protest action in the peripheries. As much as evidence indicates inadequate leadership to facilitate development in the peripheries as opposed to the core spaces, concerning protests, evidence suggests otherwise. The first attribute that has been observed in South Africa, especially prevalent in the peripheral spaces, is that citizens are not satisfied with their involvement in local government's decision-making, despite ward committees being utilised as a mechanism for public participation (Ragolane & Malatji, 2024; Matyana & Sibiya, 2025). Other evidence indicates that, citizens have low level of interest in municipal politics as opposed to national politics, and this manifest through low participation in local government elections, and this occurs in the context where there is rife political interference in local government and citizens are not consulted adequately (Netswera & Nealer, 2020; Myeni et al., 2024). These attributes form the background of protest action in the peripheries. These attributes imply that communities have low trust in local government.

Some actors are collectively observed to initiate protests in the peripheries; however, these actors do not share the same characteristics besides residing in peripheral spaces. Community movements facilitate protests in the peripheries and are constituted by members of different political organisations, thus giving them an apolitical character (Paret, 2024; Sinwell, 2023). Historically, community movements were deemed as opposing the government during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999 to 2008) (Bond & Mottair, 2013).

The other attribute present in the peripheral protests is using different conduits and nodes to facilitate protest action. Concerning conduits, social network services such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp serve as nodes and conduits utilised by political actors and activists to advance their agenda and propaganda to influence people through online participation (Mathe & Motsaathebe, 2022). Mathe and Motsaathebe (2022) warn that social media platforms are usually not utilised for meaningful political discussions or rational debate; participants are expected to adhere to the set agenda instead of independent thought.

The other attribute of protests in the peripheries is the utilisation of state-sponsored violence against the protesters. The concept of state-sponsored violence has characterised protest action in South Africa and also has characterised lived experiences for the Black majority in South Africa, albeit in different forms. Harden and Deligio (2021) state that state-sponsored violence is a violence committed by the members of the armed forces (police and military) against civilian victims, and there is an element of race involved in state-sponsored violence. The primary characteristic of state-sponsored violence is the response when the citizenry commits acts which are deemed to be revolt, rebellion, uprisings or misbehaviour; the state responds by violent action which includes the use of non-lethal force, beatings, arrests and imprisonments and at times the use of lethal force (Togarasei, 2022). Ntini and Mdlalose (2021) posit that the state is conceptualised as having the monopoly to exercise violence over its population within its territory. In South Africa, state-sponsored violence has been one of the triggers of protest action, and evidence indicates that protests are concentrated in the peripheries; hence, state-sponsored violence is a peripheral occurrence (Bonga, 2021). It is not only during protest actions that state-sponsored violence is utilised in South Africa. During the transition to the democratic era, state-sponsored violence was utilised by the apartheid government in South Africa, as the government supported the Zulu nationalist political organisation, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which warred against the political forces aligned to the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the African National Congress (ANC). The transition era violence was largely based in the peripheral spaces of Gauteng (former Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal, or PWV) and KwaZulu-Natal (former province of Natal and KwaZulu homeland). The state-sponsored violence of the transition era utilised private companies, covert operations and homelands' police and military regimes (Evans, 2024). Further, the use of state-sponsored violence

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was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, when the state sanctioned the employment of armed forces to enforce lockdown rules, which was more pronounced in the peripheries (Reed & Xaso, 2022). Considering that in South Africa, white minority governments during both colonial and apartheid eras utilised state-sponsored violence to thwart opposition from the Black population, and state-sponsored violence was utilised during the transition era, this implies that the democratic government inherited institutions that were characterised by violence against the majority, which is the Black African population. As the government transitioned from apartheid to democracy, the character of violence remained; hence, state-sponsored violence has been utilised in the peripheries in the form of repression during protest actions. Reed and Xaso (2022) note that the police have utilised violence against Black and Coloured populations in the country, and this has continued into the contemporary democratic era. State-sponsored violence in the form of repression has been one of the characteristics of protest action in the peripheries in South Africa's democratic era, which also necessitates the need to deal with complex intergenerational trauma as a result of violence that has been unleashed on the Black majority.

The modus operandi of reporting protests by mainstream media is another attribute concerning peripheral protests. Protests covered by the mainstream media are based on the size of the protest, geography (especially main towns and cities), and the dramatic nature of the protest. As the media is selective in reporting on the protests, this results in protest activity being viewed in a negative light. The public views protesters as threats to the stability and democracy (Chiwarawara, 2023). Chiwarawara (2023) further posits that while mainstream media's hype about violence is understandable, given the desire to sell newsworthy stories, this is often misleading because more orderly and 'peaceful' protests do not receive the same coverage as 'violent' protests. It is not only media reporting that can be deemed problematic in reporting protest activity. Chiwarawara (2023) and Bekker (2022) point out the biases of data sources concerning protests in South Africa, the data from different organisations and the security apparatus. The Incident Registration Information System (IRIS), which is maintained by the South African Police Service (SAPS) Crime Combating Operations' Visible Policing Unit (VPU), records "crowd incidents", which are inclusive of other events such as social, religious and sporting events apart from protests (Chiwarawara, 2023). Bekker (2022) indicates that the size of the protests is a factor that is sometimes not considered when reporting about protests, thus introducing biases. Bekker (2022) further argues that between 2007 and 2009, protest action was underreported.

4.5 Reconciliation between elites and the community

Having established our thesis concerning protests in the peripheries in South Africa, and having determined that protests are disruptive and tend to be violent, we turn our attention to reconciliation. What is reconciliation, and why is it necessary? Peña (2022) defines *reconciliation as a process of building and normalising good relations between states, groups, organisations and individuals following severe reactions to incidents and preventing future incidents from occurring.* Deducing from the high incidence of protest activity in South Africa, this implies a need for reconciliation vis-à-vis protest action in the peripheral spaces.

As established, reconciliation prevents future incidents from occurring, and Wasserman et al. (2018) establish an argument concerning media coverage of protest action in the peripheries. Media coverage can amplify the voices in the peripheries or silence them by portraying protests as illegitimate and undemocratic. South African media has largely done the former as it largely reflects the elite perspective. Therefore, perception creation is used to further elite perspectives where protests look savage and uncivilised, thus thwarting avenues for reconciliation. Despite media coverage of protests being pro-elite, Chiwarawara (2023) brings another dimension that disproves the elite perspective concerning protests. Peripheral communities before protest action usually exhaust all peaceful avenues and only resort to protests and violent tactics after the failure of peaceful avenues. Chiwarawara (2023) further states that protestors usually avoid violence; violence in protests is often unplanned and is usually triggered by police's heavy-handedness. Damoah (2023) states that police brutality has adverse effects as it endangers infrastructure, including buildings, streets, clinics, schools, and other public facilities that are not being

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used for protest. Careful consideration of the statements by Chiwarawara and Damoah reveals that the police are utilised as a buffer between elite interests and peripheral communities regarding protest action, while the media approach thwarts reconciliation

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Since community movements drive protests in the peripheries, this has led to another measure being utilised instead of pursuing reconciliation. Transactional activism allows state actors to make promises of service provision and ignore them. Paret (2024) observed an incident where the then-ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), incorporated community activists into a housing project, thus effectively muting any opposition. Building from this observation, Paret (2024) made further observations concerning the ANC. The ANC has dominated the South African political landscape between 1994 and 2014, securing 60% of the vote, and this domination correlated with issues such as corruption, patronage and authoritarianism. Although the ANC has been the dominant party, its dominance has been declining, as it declined from 70% in 2004 to 62% in 2014. At the time of this writing, the ANC's support stood at 40%, forcing it to enter into a coalition government, which was dubbed the Government of National Unity. Paret (2024) states that the decline of the ANC was evident in the 2016 local government elections, where it lost control of metropolitan spaces such as Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Nelson Mandela Bay, which are key metropolitan spaces. The ANC's decline is attributed to the formation of political organisations such as the Congress of the People in 2009 and the Economic Freedom Fighters in 2013 (Paret, 2024). The ANC's misfortunes did not stop in 2016, as it had lost 17 percentage points within five years after the 2019 national elections, and lost control of the most populous provinces in South Africa, namely Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, which raised the questions of sustainability (Everatt, 2024). The recent loss of the ANC in the 2024 elections can be primarily attributed to the formation of the political party Umkhonto weSizwe. Everatt (2024) argues that the ANC is acquiring a rural character in the urbanising country, as it has lost control of most strategic urban spaces. Concerning the use of transactional activism to minimise protests while disregarding reconciliation, the ANC has been a crucial factor in this phenomenon as it has largely controlled the state machinery, which now begs a question on how transactional activism will unfold given the different political dynamics as the ANC has entered into a coalition government. Further, the emerging political dynamics raise questions on whether the new coalition government will prioritise reconciliation with peripheral communities following protests.

Another angle of scrutinising reconciliation is observing how the state treats specific spaces. Evidence indicates that protests in urban capitals and major cities threaten leaders, and they use non-lethal means to suppress such protests. In contrast, they use more violent means in rural or secondary towns and urban peripheries (Christensen, 2018). Different approaches are utilised by the state actors in different spaces, indicating that reconciliation is not a top consideration for state actors.

Conclusions

Concerning the social strata in South Africa, evidence points out a bifurcation of classes, which is more pronounced when elites are compared to the peripheral communities. This bifurcation runs so deep that one social stratum exists in one of the continuum and the other stratum exists on the other end, with the other middle falling in between. When the peripheral communities protest at the other end of the continuum, the elites at the opposite end see no need for reconciliation with the peripheral communities; however, they are willing to unleash coercive measures to thwart protest action and identify certain leaders in the peripheries and co-opt them into a different class, thus thwarting reconciliation and minimising protests. This analogy explains why protest action in the peripheries suddenly erupts and subsides, resembling popcorn, hence earning the nickname "popcorn protests".
Deducing from Christensen (2018) that heavy-handedness is utilised when protests threaten the extraction of natural resources, this indicates the willingness by the elites to employ state-sponsored violence in the form of police action while reconciliation is ignored.

However, concerning reconciliation between the elites and communities, it is not clear from the existing literature who is responsible for reconciliation. The extant literature is further unclear on which models or approaches can be utilised to reconcile the elites and peripheral communities after the protest action.

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