

The Crisis Committee, post apartheid protest and political mobilisation in Phomolong Township, Free State

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Abstract

Often depicted in images of violence, burning tyres, destruction of property and looting of private businesses, service delivery protests have captured the imagination of many scholars interested in South Africa's post apartheid politics. There are two main approaches to the study of service delivery protests. On the one hand are studies that argue that service delivery protests directly spring from an economic reality that privileges the market as a provider of services. The strength of this analysis is that it draws an important link between neoliberal capitulation and the rise of protest and mobilisation in post apartheid South Africa. The limitation in this analysis is that it pays scant attention to local associational politics. On the other hand is an approach that locates its analysis in the institutional design of post apartheid local government. Although offering a competent analysis of the grievances in service delivery protests, this analysis lacks a historical approach in studying local protest. Furthermore, this approach seldom illuminates the social composition and organisational character of the movements at the centre of these protests. Based on extensive life history interviews, this study examines the 2005 service delivery protests in Phomolong - a township in the northern Free State. With a grounded analysis on the Crisis Committee, which was the coordinating centre of the protests, the study reveals interesting complexities about the articulation between service delivery protests and the historical evolution of political mobilization and protest in Phomolong. In the paper it is argued that, despite some promising aspects and potential to effect thoroughgoing transformation on the local state, post apartheid protest movements present a hybrid and fluid political character, which can be understood by looking at the interface between the internal dynamics of protest movements and the structural factors that influence their formation.

Keywords: Phomolong; Crisis Committee; Political mobilisation; Post-apartheid protests; Service delivery; Collective consumption; African National Congress; Free State.

Introduction

There will come a time when the individual South African, uninfluenced by any political ideology but influenced mainly and only by what lies in the interests of the country will come together and advance a course of uniting the people and fighting for the people against this government. It has happened all over the world in many democracies where when tendencies like these creep in, the people depend upon themselves and they will takeover. I am seeing this coming slowly, unless the ANC corrects some of these things.¹

These words are a hindsight reflection by Banks Tshabangu who was forced to flee Phomolong Township and resign as a councillor following sustained local protests that started in February 2005. Phomolong is an African township situated six kilometres from the small town of Hennenman in the northern Free State. Hennenman and Phomolong form part of the Matjhabeng local municipality, which consists of other towns such as Odendaalsrus, Welkom, Virginia, Allanridge and their adjoining African townships.² Phomolong Township was proclaimed on the 14th of April 1950. Its establishment was as a result of the relocation of Africans from the centre of Hennenman town in 1952.³

This article eschews a discussion on the casual factors behind these service delivery protests in Phomolong and pays more attention to the social agents behind these protests. This is done through extensive interviews of the activists in the Crisis Committee, which was the coordinating centre for the 2005 protests in Phomolong. The conceptual framework employed is based on two central themes, collective consumption and local associational politics. Collective consumption refers to state provided services and functions in the reproduction of labour. Manuel Castells contends that collective consumption leads to the politicisation of the local state in various ways and through this politicization, generates conditions for the formation of inter-class alliances. For Castells, struggles based on collective consumption present enormous possibilities for revolutionary change and open avenues to overturn how the capitalist local state organises collective consumption.⁴ Local association politics are explored in this paper through a magnified look at the Crisis

1 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/B Tshabangu (former Phomolong Councillor), 20 September 2009.

2 *Matjhabeng annual report 1 July 2007- 30 June 2008*, June 2008 (available at: <http://mfma.treasury.gov.za/Documents/06.%20Annual%20Reports/2007-08/02.%20Local%20Municipalities/FS184%20Matjhabeng/FS184%20Matjhabeng%20Annual%20Report%202007-08.pdf>), as accessed on 20 February 2009.

3 National Archives (NA) Pretoria, Reference NTS 5749 346/313K, Memorandum on the new location for Hennenman, 26 May 1952.

4 M Castells, *City, class and power* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1978).

Committee's internal dynamics as well as its relationship with the local state and the ANC.

The article posits that although the rise of the Crisis Committee can be squarely located within the rising contradiction between the local state's imperative to provide the means of collective consumption and the structural constraints imposed by neoliberalism, political power struggles in local ANC branches and the local state were undeniable mediating factors in the eruption of the 2005 Phomolong protests. In addition, despite some of its promising aspects and potential to effect thoroughgoing transformation on the local state, the Crisis Committee's hybrid and fluid political character and its failure to craft a radical critique of the status quo should induce some scepticism on the part of those committed to a radical transformation of capitalist South Africa. An analysis rooted in the internal dynamics of protest movements as well as the structural context from which they arise presents possibilities for understanding the social conflicts currently taking place in many South African townships.

The character of service delivery protests

Service delivery protests have become an integral part of South Africa's body politics in recent years. Recent data shows that these protests were particularly frequent in 2009 and were, during this time, increasingly marked by violence and the destruction of property.⁵ Several studies have explored the causal factors behind local community protests in the post-apartheid era.⁶ On the one hand are studies that argue that service delivery protests directly spring from an economic reality that privileges the market as a provider of services.⁷ According to this analysis, community struggles in the post apartheid period are buttressed by the unevenness of municipal services, the politics of privatisation, massive cuts in intergovernmental grants and cost recovery. All these factors stifle the local state's ability to perform certain service delivery

5 K von Holdt, "Overview-insurgent citizenship and collective violence: Analysis of case studies", von Holdt et al, *The smoke that calls – insurgent citizenship, collective violence and the struggle for a place in a new South Africa* (CSVR/SWOP, July 2011).

6 Compare R Ballard et al, *Voices of protest: Social movements in post-apartheid South Africa* (University of Kwazulu Natal Press, University of Kwazulu Natal, 2006) and L Botes et al, *The new struggle: Service related unrest in South Africa*, (Centre for Development Support, University of Free State, 2007).

7 P Bond, *Cities of gold, townships of coal – essays on South Africa's new urban crisis* (Africa World Press, New Jersey, 2000).

functions.⁸ The strength of this analysis is that it draws an important link between the state's submission to neoliberalism and the rise of protest and mobilisation in post apartheid South Africa. The limitation however is that it pays scant attention to local associational politics, in particular the relationship between protest movements, ANC branches and the local state and sheds little light about social agents behind the protests and their different motives for participating in protest movements.

On the other hand is an approach that locates its analysis of service delivery protests in the institutional design of post apartheid local government. It argues that current local government architecture provides political parties with a monopoly over the distribution and administration of local government resources and enhances patronage and clientelism.⁹ The ineptitude of ward committees, intergovernmental relations, municipal inefficiency and the breakdown of the relationship between ward councillors and their constituencies are cited as the main reasons behind protests.¹⁰ Overall, this analysis is cautious about the possibilities of some of these protest actions, in particular the implications for the ANC's electoral support. This analysis is not without weaknesses. It provides an inadequate study of these protests and the people that participate in them. It also gives a rather state centric approach with little information about the self-perceptions of the participants in such protests. Additionally, there is no attempt to draw a connection between how the neoliberal macroeconomic policies have affected the (local) state's capacity to live up to the expectations of South Africa's poor.

According to some scholars, a rapid process of class formation also accompanies the rise in post-apartheid protests. This school of thought contends that the rise of the new elite has a dislocating effect on the "large underclass of the unemployed".¹¹ This process, combined with the dislocating

8 S Mottair & P Bond, "The politics of discontent in Durban", *Politikon: South Africa's Journal of Political Studies*, 39(3), December 2012, pp. 309-330.

9 Compare L Staniland, "They know me, I will not get a job': Public participation, patronage, and the sedation of civil society in a Capetonian township", *Transformation*, 66/67, 2008, pp. 34-60; D Atkinson, "Taking to the streets: Has developmental local government failed in South Africa?", S Buhlungu, et al. *The state of the nation* (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 2007); C Benit-Gbaffou, "Are practices of local participation sidelining the institutional channels? Reflections from Johannesburg", *Transformation*, 66/67, 2008, pp. 1-33; D Piper & L Deacon, "Party politics, elite accountability and public participation: Ward committee politics in Msunduzi Municipality", *Transformation*, 66/67, 2008, pp. 61-82.

10 S Oldfield, "Participatory mechanisms and community politics: Building consensus and conflict", M van Donk et al, *Consolidating developmental local government: Lessons from the South African experience* (Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press, 2008).

11 K von Holdt, "Overview-insurgent citizenship and collective violence...", K von Holdt et al, *The smoke that calls ...*, CSV/SWOP, July 2011, p. 11.

effects of democracy and accompanied by neoliberal economic restructuring, has given rise to a differentiated citizenship in which despite formal guarantees of equality, the elite is accorded different treatment, rights and privileges. Out of this context, arise the struggle to “destabilise the differentiated”.¹²

Alexander identifies three possible effects of community protests on the local state and local politics.¹³ In the first scenario, the ANC as the dominant political actor, simply reacts to these local protests through a range of political manoeuvres which include co-opting protest leadership, removing unpopular councillors, making some cosmetic improvements in the communities concerned and increasing political repression. What impedes the real transformation of the state of local government and service provision at a local level, according to Alexander, are conservative economic policies and the hostile economic period. The second option is that these protests will lose momentum if protracted popular mobilisation and violence is seen as having minimal success. In such a scenario, communities might slip into cocoons of apathy. The third scenario has more positive prospects. In this case, local community protests will give birth to a wave of general and interconnected popular mobilisation against the disappointments of democracy. However, despite his dose of optimism, Alexander stops far short of painting these local struggles with a “revolutionary” brush and contends that they are more likely to feed into reformist notions of governance rather than call for a complete overhaul of the system.¹⁴

Von Holdt et al share similar sentiments with Alexander and points to some of the regressive features of these protest movements, which include gender and national discrimination (xenophobia) as well as the excessive use of violence to settle political and social disputes. The study cautions that instead of giving rise to revolutionary outcomes, these protests are more amenable to producing a “precarious society”. This pessimism is also driven by the presence and leading role of “political entrepreneurs”, who utilise popular mobilisation as a means through which to settle political scores and advance their own upward social mobility. The relationship between communities and these political entrepreneurs is often a symbiotic one, with the latter utilising

12 K von Holdt, “Overview-insurgent citizenship and collective violence...”, K von Holdt et al, *The smoke that calls ...*, CSVR/SWOP, July 2011, p. 38.

13 Alexander applies caution in ascribing “revolutionary” labels to these service delivery protests and argue that they are more likely to feed into reformist notions of governance rather than call for a complete overhaul of the system. P Alexander, “Rebellion of the poor: South Africa’s service delivery protests – a preliminary analysis”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 37, 123, March 2010, pp. 25-40.

14 P Alexander, “Rebellion of the poor...”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 37, 123, March 2010, p. 38.

the former's proximity and experience with political processes to air their grievances, whilst political entrepreneurs use mass mobilisation to advance their political battles.¹⁵

A few scholars have also argued that these protests present little opportunities for autonomous civil society organisations at a local level.¹⁶ The main reason for this is that the ANC at a local level is able to represent itself as both a "people's liberator" at a grassroots level whilst simultaneously being the political party at the helm of state power.¹⁷ The result is what Von Holdt et al call the "subaltern classes" that are denied a vehicle in the form of autonomous civil society organisation through which to channel their grievances and advance the struggle for an equitable citizenship.¹⁸

The genesis of the Crisis Committee

When protests erupted in Phomolong, some analysts were caught by surprise. It was difficult to understand why such "a quiet place"¹⁹ suddenly dominated the headlines of the national newspapers, drawing in the highest levels of the ANC and the government into the protest.²⁰ According to the testimonies gathered, the Phomolong protests started in early February 2005 and ended in September 2005 when the ANC councillor Banks Tshabangu officially resigned from the council.²¹

Service delivery issues were important in the protests. The bucket system was an acute problem in Phomolong.²² In 2001, only 50.3% of the population had access to a flushing toilet. The percentage of people using a pit toilet or with no sanitation at all increased from 10.6% and 1.9% in 1996 to

15 K von Holdt, "Overview-insurgent citizenship and collective violence...", K von Holdt et al, *The smoke that calls...*, CSVN/SWOP, July 2011, p. 11.

16 L Staniland, "They know me, I will not get a job'...", *Transformation*, 66/67, 2008, pp. 34-60.

17 K von Holdt, "Overview-insurgent citizenship and collective violence...", von Holdt et al, *The smoke that calls...*, CSVN/SWOP, July 2011, p. 14.

18 K von Holdt, "Overview-insurgent citizenship and collective violence...", von Holdt et al, *The smoke that calls...*, CSVN/SWOP, July 2011, p. 11.

19 M Mokoena, "Phomolong: Once a quiet township, now in turmoil", *City Press*, 20 February 2005, p. 19. This characterisation of Phomolong as a quiet place was rather inaccurate given the history of protest and resistance in the area.

20 M Mokoena, "Protests rock Free State towns: ANC suspects role of Boeremag in upheavals", *City Press*, 20 February 2005, p. 19.

21 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN Madia (Crisis Committee member), 25 October 2009.

22 Phomolong Community Memorandum, Service delivery, 6 February 2005.

13.4% and 3.5% respectively. The percentage of people living in informal housing in Phomolong and Hennenman (28.6%) in 2001 was also higher than the Majhabeng's average of 13.2% during the same period. Although the number of people without access to electricity decreased from 32.2% in 1996 to 22.8% in 2001, affordability remained a major issue.²³ Water cut-offs also became rife especially between 1999 and 2000. The spate of water disconnections increased from 25 households in December 1998 to 762 households in March of 1999.²⁴ The Crisis Committee linked service delivery challenges in Phomolong with Tshabangu's leadership and called for his immediate resignation.²⁵

The protest can be traced back to an ANC branch meeting that took place in January 2005, where an altercation ensued between the chairperson of the ANC, Banks Tshabangu and one of Branch Executive Committee (BEC) members. The bone of contention in this meeting was how Banks Tshabangu who was also the local councillor was "privatising employment opportunities", preferring to give jobs to those loyal to him and to those with questionable "struggle credentials". Tshabangu's response to these probes would spell his downfall. One of Tshabangu's detractors in this meeting, "Ndade" Morake reports that he informed some of his comrades who were also suffering the same frustration of unemployment: "it's tough inside the ANC. This thing that we are going to be deployed is not easy. We must just find our own jobs."²⁶ This realisation and disillusionment led Morake, "Power" Mthenjana and Ndade Tshosane to the decision to search for jobs at the local municipality. Their plight was evident as they hitchhiked their way to Welkom, which is about forty kilometres from Phomolong.²⁷ The interaction of the three men with the officials in the local municipality was to demonstrate just how far Tshabangu's patronage networks stretched. After being denied the job opportunity, with Tshabangu's instructions stated as the reason, the three men decided: "things are going to change in Hennenman."²⁸ What followed was a protest that

23 L Botes et al, *The new struggle: Service related unrest in South Africa* (Centre for Development Support, University of Free State, 2007) p. 1.

24 Minutes of the Hennenman Transitional Local Council, 21 January 1999.

25 M Mokoena, "Protests rock Free State towns: ANC suspects role of Boeremag in upheavals", *City Press*, 20 February 2005, p. 19; P Kunene (Local Histories, Present Realities), MA Student, Wits University, interview, M Madia (Crisis Committee member), 1 December 2009.

26 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, (Crisis Committee member), 27 November 2009.

27 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana (Crisis Committee member), 27 November 2009.

28 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

would bring the township to a standstill.

Tshabangu became the primary target as he was perceived as central in dispensing patronage and controlling access to the resources commanded by the local state. To carry out the task of removing the councillor, the three realised that it would be difficult to mobilise residents without a clear compilation of grievances around the slow pace of service delivery and corruption in the area. They had to convince more people to become involved in the action. The fear was that the three were people known to be historical acquaintances of the councillor, a fact that meant that they were devoid of legitimacy. Pursuing the fight against Tshabangu without co-opting other people meant that they would be perceived only as disgruntled former friends of the councillor.²⁹ The Crisis Committee was born out of this realisation in a community meeting convened on 2nd February 2005 in Phomolong's oldest high school - Bahale. In this meeting, a number of residents volunteered to form part of the committee to formulate protest demands and coordinate the community's direct action by applying for marches and organising future mass meetings.³⁰ The involvement of the broader section of Phomolong residents was the initial step in transcending the parochial identity of the Crisis Committee as a committee of disaffected people. This move boosted its legitimacy.

The social composition of the Crisis Committee

A discussion on the social composition of the Crisis Committee is important for understanding the different motivations and persuasions of the people who formed the coordinating centre for the 2005 protests. In total, these participants were fifteen (15). Additional to this fifteen were people who erratically attended the Crisis Committee's daily meetings. Of the fifteen members, four (4) were women, two (2) of whom recused themselves from the committee. Some of the participants in the Crisis Committee were Tshabangu's historic allies who had worked with him as an ANC leader at branch level and a councillor in the municipality.

29 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Tsolanku (Crisis Committee member), 20 January 2009; Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

30 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

Two main characteristics were evident in the Crisis Committee's composition. Firstly, the Crisis Committee had a youthful character, with a majority of its members being under the age of thirty-five. Secondly, most of the activists in the Crisis Committee were also unemployed. Thabo Sethunya, "Power" Mthenjana, Nyathi Madia, Azael Leseba, Ndade Morake, Tshidiso "Mzambiya" Mokati were among the unemployed members of the Crisis Committee.³¹ Additionally, some of the participants had also witnessed the impact of neoliberal cost-recovery in the country's institutions of higher learning. For instance, Moss Tsolanku dropped out of his studies at Wits University due to a combination of lack of financial and academic support. Three other members of the Crisis Committee also had a history of incomplete higher education. This was Shambe Tsiane, Frank Monyamane and Movers Mohohlo. Tsiane is described as a brilliant comrade who matriculated from Bahale with distinctions in Mathematics and Science. Monyamane and Mohohlo were renowned for their participation in Bahale's debating activities. At the time of the protests, Monyamane and Madikgetla Madia, one of the two women who remained in the Crisis Committee, were pursuing their university studies. Therefore, the Crisis Committee attracted the participation of educated young people whose advancement had been derailed through a combination of both financial and academic exclusions from the country's universities. Some of the activists in the Crisis Committee spent a great deal of time in the local library. They would often gather in the library to read newspapers and ponder complex philosophical questions about "Marxism, Communism and government strategy." This earned them the label "township intellectuals". The label was not an entirely positive ascription. Madia alleges that Tshabangu used this label to mobilise other township youths against this group.

Banks used to address community meetings [and] he would say 'there is a group of people who sit in the library, they portray themselves as the intellectuals of the township, they analyse everything, they plan and do all sorts of things.' So when people come from the community meeting they would tell us that Banks was talking about you, saying you are elevating yourselves into intellectuals of the township.³²

31 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/T Sethunya (Crisis Committee member), 15 February 2013; Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Madia, 1 December 2009.

32 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN Madia, 25 October 2009.

Although the Crisis Committee did not imagine itself in this way, the fact that all of its participants were drawn from the township meant that they were well acquainted with the impact of neoliberalism as an economic prescription governing the post-apartheid local state.

While most of its members were young, the Crisis Committee boasted the involvement of two experienced activists from the 1980s namely Sethunya and Mokati. Sethunya, affectionately known as “Commissar” among younger comrades, is renowned for having cultivated a crop of political activists in the area. Mokati was also in the same generation of activists who went to Bahale high school and became involved in early political formations in the area.³³

The Crisis Committee was comprised almost exclusively, with the exception of Sinda Nhlapo, of individuals linked to the ANC, as supporters and members. As “Power” notes, in the Crisis Committee “we didn’t choose where a person came from, who was the person, but people knew that we were ANC members.”³⁴ A considerable number of activists in the Crisis Committee lamented the absence of democracy in the ANC. This “absence of democracy” was twofold. Tshabangu was accused of “privatizing” the ANC’s recruitment machinery and barring those who differed with him from joining as members. There were also some activists in the Crisis Committee whose ANC membership was suspended allegedly due to Tshabangu’s mechanisations.³⁵

Why we joined the Crisis Committee

There were several reasons motivating participation in the Crisis Committee. One of the activists argues that she was drawn to participate in the Crisis Committee by the lack of development in the township.

I saw that there was no development in Phomolong, no direction. The only changes took place was the expansion of the township and the building of three more schools to bring the total to six. It was the same as when we were

33 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/T Sethunya, 15 February 2013.

34 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

35 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/F Monyamane (Crisis Committee member), 15 March 2009; Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Tsolanku, 20 January 2009; Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN Madia, 25 October 2009.

young. I realised that Phomolong will not go anywhere unless we change it.³⁶

Tshabangu's role in marginalising certain comrades and contributing to the demise of their "political careers" was a key factor driving participation in the Crisis Committee. Tshabangu does not deny this. His analysis concedes that his fallout with the likes of Sethunya and other activists from the 1980s contributed to his political demise. In his words, it was, a "tactical blunder" to exclude this crop of activists when he became mayor and a ward councillor after the consolidation of the municipalities in 2000. Tshabangu also claims that:³⁷

Thabo Sethunya is an example of the pain that divisions have sown... It had to be personal at some point where we couldn't talk to each other. Where there was this communication that had absolutely broken down. So there was no one to facilitate this communication... [W]hen there were secret meetings to deal with me, no one could have neutralised those meetings.

This account is given credence by other testimonies. Commenting on these hostile relations between the two, Madia notes that:³⁸

The person he [Tshabangu] hated the most was Sethunya. He would lambast him in every platform of the community. He contributed in the demise of Sethunya's political career. Even if he regrets it now, but he contributed. He is the reason why the likes of Sethunya didn't get ahead in politics.

The reasons for Tshabangu's former allies' participation in the protest are appositely captured by one of the activists in the Crisis Committee:³⁹

There were people who were disgruntled in the Crisis Committee. They were close to him and they worked together and he always promised them jobs and failed to deliver for approximately eight years. He had been in the municipality since 1997. There is nothing that he did to upgrade the lives of people. He used those particular people close to him.

Of these people, "Power", Morake and Papi Qaba were central. "Power" and Morake were particularly distraught about Tshabangu's stranglehold over job opportunities in the municipality. One of the participants in the Crisis

36 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Madia, 1 December 2009.

37 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/B Tshabangu, 20 September 2009.

38 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN Madia, 25 October 2009.

39 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Tsolanku, 20 January 2009.

Committee captures this expressively when he says that:⁴⁰

We were talking about the role of this man specifically because the region in Mathjabeng told us straight that it's Banks that refused us to be deployed. He told them that the people from Hennenman have jobs already. He used to block everything. We had found the proof after he blocked us from working as general workers in the municipality.

Another victim of Tshabangu's unfulfilled promises is Nyathi Madia, whose relationship with Tshabangu could be traced back to the early 1990s when Madia and other students in Bahale formed part of Tshabangu's core supporters in unseating the Transitional Local Council (TLC) put in place in 1995.⁴¹ Madia maintains that in exchange for mobilising against the first TLC, Tshabangu had promised to "deploy" Madia in the local council once he became the mayor. These close relations turned sour as the years passed and there was still no deployment. Madia adds that in the immediate period before the 2005 protests, Tshabangu was very hostile towards him. In his own words:⁴²

[T]he biggest thing that made us fight this person is hunger in the township. I remember when I was still in Jo'burg and the life there was too fast. I realised that there is no survival there. You are always drunk... we used to speak and say what should happen is that this man must also give us something to eat because we have been there. Why does he want to eat alone? He eats alone therefore we must come up with a strategy to make him go.

Tshabangu was blamed for unfulfilled promises about jobs and deployments. In crude terms, service delivery challenges were but a means to an end. Some have argued that the overwhelming focus on the councillor was justified. Sello Sefuthi's analysis of the protests was that Councillor Tshabangu's leadership style and his alienation from township residents were the critical mix that led to his ultimate demise.⁴³

He was one dictator that I have ever known. I have known him from the school days. But mainly the issues there were more about a style of leadership... and the community saying that ons is gatvol [we have had enough] more than service delivery issues.

40 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

41 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SP Sefuthi, 27 November 2009.

42 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN Madia, 25 October 2009.

43 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SP Sefuthi, 27 November 2009.

Curiously, their participation in the Crisis Committee was also a way of addressing the democratic deficit within the ANC. Tshabangu, according to the participants, had to be removed because he monopolised the political space and the local state's resources. "Power" articulates Tshabangu's domination over political space in this way:⁴⁴

We were saying we are enough (sic) with this councillor 'cause he's the chairperson, he's the secretary, he's the deputy, he is the treasurer! He is all these things!... He was jack-of-all-trades!

Evidently, internal ANC contestations were crucial in building opposition to Tshabangu. Thus, the Crisis Committee's ideas about the democratisation of the political space were solely limited to the internal democratisation of the ANC and eliminating all hurdles to participation within the ANC. The Crisis Committee spent little, if any time, pondering the question of building a grass roots movement that combined demands about the improvement of collective consumption with the struggle for what Castells calls "political self-determination".⁴⁵ The latter concept means giving citizens more voice in everyday government and the autonomy to make decisions about what affects them. In fact, "Power" argues that one of the reasons why the mobilisation for the protest could not take place within the ANC was because the ANC had no "democratic" and "vibrant" branches: "We called it the Crisis Committee ... because at that time we didn't have active branches."⁴⁶ Therefore, joining the Crisis Committee was synonymous with restoring democracy inside the ANC.

An analysis by one of Tshabangu's former allies is apposite:⁴⁷

Our assessment was that he was greedy. He held political power for too long. He was once a mayor during that time when municipalities were still independent. People were afraid of him because he had political power and was very greedy... If he was a trustworthy person, Hennenman could have been very far ahead because he was in charge of service delivery and deployments, everything.

44 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

45 M Castells, *The city and the grassroots: A cross-cultural theory of urban social movements* (Edward Arnold, London, 1983).

46 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

47 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

Therefore, although many concede, “there were those objective conditions of lack of service delivery”, a significant part of this reality was now attributed to Tshabangu who had occupied crucial positions in the municipality since the latter part of the 1990s. Although Tshabangu was not a mayor during this period, it was argued, his legacy contributed, as he was a former mayor. He was still the most influential individual from Hennenman/Phomolong.⁴⁸ Additionally, his conduct as a leader also came under fierce challenge. He was viewed as divisive, arrogant and indifferent to the plight of his constituency.⁴⁹

Other individuals outside the Crisis Committee also shared the view that Tshabangu was an estranged leader who exuded arrogance and sowed divisions in the community. For instance, Sello Sefuthi, who was also located in the local state, expressed this sentiment about Tshabangu:⁵⁰

[H]e was a divisionist (sic) of the worst sort – extremely divisive. He always finds ways to sow division... Banks had been a source of divisions... I am singling this man out. There were personal issues with Banks because Banks is such a leader that would drive with loud music slowly in the township.

In short, the reasons for joining the Crisis Committee ranged from a need to advocate for development in the area to challenging Tshabangu’s perceived power and stranglehold over resource distribution and patronage.

“We are not a Concerned Group – we are a Crisis Committee”

There is no doubt that those who initially plotted Tshabangu’s downfall were cautious of the limitations of crafting a collective identity solely based on their exclusion from Tshabangu’s patronage network. Developing a mode of organising that would harness the prevailing discontent and, in so doing, transcend the Crisis Committee’s narrow base and galvanise Phomolong residents was extremely important. It was upon this realisation that a strategy was developed to integrate other people who enjoyed some distance from the councillor as well as to craft the protest demands in such a way that they began to address issues relating to services, unemployment and poverty in

48 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Tsolanku, 20 January 2009.

49 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SP Sefuthi, 27 November 2009.

50 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Tsolanku, 20 January 2009.

the area. Without this, there would be little distinguishing Tshabangu from his former allies who had crossed the Rubicon moving further away from his influence in the ANC and the local state. The Crisis Committee argued that the lingering crisis of distribution and access to the means of collective consumption was inextricably linked to Tshabangu's leadership and actions.⁵¹ Tshabangu's recurrence in Phomolong's history, as a youth activist, an agitator against transitional government structures installed in Phomolong and later as the mayor of the merged Phomolong and Hennenman council gave credence to the postulation that his presence in the township's politics had been destructive. The result was that although the protest mainly targeted the legacy of apartheid and the impact of neoliberal policies on the distribution of the means of collective consumption at a local level, these were solely attributed to only one occupant of the local state – Tshabangu. This demonstrated the conspicuous absence of a coherent ideology that could serve as a mobilising cloak for these protests and provides some basis to be cautious about the revolutionary possibilities that can be ushered in by these protests.

The articulation of a coherent opposition to the status quo by the Crisis Committee did not go unchallenged by those who were in power. From the onset the ANC and government formulated a counter critique of the Crisis Committee. ANC leaders at a regional and provincial level attached several unpleasant names to the Crisis Committee. These labels ranged from “third force”, “white sponsored” and a black extension of the white right wing extremist group – the “Boeremag”,⁵² to a concerned group of unemployed dagga smoking youths.⁵³ The central message was that the protests were illegitimate and should be denounced as opportunistic and posing a real threat to government delivering services to citizens.⁵⁴ Tshabangu also referred to the Crisis Committee as the “secret core” and argued that it arose as a result of his failure to fulfil many of his comrades’ “unreasonable expectations” about jobs and deployments.⁵⁵

The Crisis Committee rejected these labels. Most fiercely, it took issue with being called a concerned group as it argued that this label had connotations of criminality and therefore illegitimacy. Importantly, the label had the potential

51 Phomolong Community Memorandum, Service delivery, 6 February 2005.

52 The “Boeremag” is perceived as a right-wing activism group with white separatist aims.

53 M Mokoena, “Protests rock Free State towns: ANC suspects role of Boeremag in upheavals”, *City Press*, 20 February 2005, p. 19; P Kunene, (Local Histories, Present Realities), interview, M Tsolanku, 20 January 2009.

54 Q Khedama, “Push for power”, *Mail & Guardian*, 24-30 March 2005, p. 6.

55 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/B Tshabangu, 20 September 2009.

effect of defining the protest outside the hegemonic politics of the ANC.⁵⁶ It insisted on being referred to as the Crisis Committee as, according to one activist, this particular name denotes a solutions driven organisation.⁵⁷ The intensity of this counter-framing from the ANC suggests that the Crisis Committee managed to unsettle the ANC leadership in significant ways.

The Crisis Committee's resource mobilisation strategy also made it vulnerable to being defined outside the politics of the ANC. In order to organise and coordinate the protests, attending meetings with the provincial leadership and sometimes transporting community members to witness council meetings, the Crisis Committee explored different avenues for resource mobilisation. Businesses, including those organised in the predominantly white Hennenman Business Forum were approached for financial assistance.⁵⁸ The Crisis Committee also courted the support of left-leaning groupings within the Black Consciousness fold, like the Socialist Party of Azania (SOPA) for legal advice and assistance.⁵⁹ These resource challenges made it easier for those opposed to the Crisis Committee to define it in unpalatable terms.

But this criticism of the Crisis Committee's resource mobilisation strategy missed some important factors in this equation. For instance, through engaging the Crisis Committee, the largely white business forum could secure some concessions in terms of disruption of business activity whilst the Crisis Committee could secure financial resources crucial to maintaining the momentum of the protest. As one participant indicates:⁶⁰

We used whites where we could because most whites are business people. When there would be protest marches, people couldn't go to work and business was suffering... production. So most whites have firms and people who work in those firms are Phomolong residents.

Arguably, the business forum's assistance to the Crisis Committee was premised on its recognition of the authority and control that the Crisis

56 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

57 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Tsolanku, 20 January 2009.

58 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/A Leseba (Crisis Committee member), 15 March 2010; Minutes of the meeting between the Community of Phomolong and the Business Community of Hennenman, 22 February 2005.

59 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN Madia, 25 October 2009; Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/M Madia, 1 December 2009.

60 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/A Leseba, 15 March 2010.

Committee mustered in Phomolong.

It is worth pointing out that there was crucial divergence of views within the Crisis Committee on its resource mobilisation strategy. Serious differences surfaced when some activists in the Crisis Committee were accused of approaching political parties that are considered hostile to the ANC. The divisions and disagreements over resource mobilisation gave rise to uncorroborated accusations that some of the Crisis Committee activists were receiving money in exchange for providing opposition parties with guaranteed presence in these protests.⁶¹ The reaction to this type of perception was sometimes extreme and in one occasion included the burning of the SOPA flag in one of the marches that the Crisis Committee organised.⁶² Clearly the activists in the Crisis Committee approached SOPA not out of a desire to establish the Crisis Committee's links with the left or anti-capitalist project in South Africa but rather, practical concerns such as developing a strategy to evade arrests had more bearing on this decision. The fact that the Crisis Committee did not even want to be symbolically associated with organisations on the left of the political spectrum bears testimony to its ideological short-sightedness.

“New rifts and infighting” – the disintegration of the Crisis Committee

By the time Tshabangu resigned, the protest had been going on for more than eight months. Local government elections were scheduled to take place on 1st March 2006. Therefore, some of the activists in the Crisis Committee posit that local government elections provided them with the ample political opportunity for embarking on protest. Apart from concerns about already existing opposition parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA), the ANC was also unsettled by the possibility that the Crisis Committee could contest for local government elections.⁶³

They were scared that we will contest the local government elections and the Crisis Committee would win ... [They] could see that the ANC is losing grip and the only strategy was that we come inside the ANC and campaign for the

61 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

62 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

63 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

ANC in the elections... .

The level of influence that the Crisis Committee wielded in Phomolong was a significant threat to the ANC. This was the case even though the majority of the Crisis Committee activists were either members or supporters of the ANC and that those who made attempts to define the protests outside the ambit of the ANC were quickly reigned in. The Crisis Committee maintained this influence even after Tshabangu officially resigned from the Mathjabeng council. There are several factors that account for the Crisis Committee's hegemony even post Tshabangu's removal. Firstly, despite his banishment to neighbouring Virginia, Tshabangu was still the chairperson of the ANC branch in one of the wards in the area and was still a member of the ANC Regional Executive Committee (REC). Secondly, to the Crisis Committee's dissatisfaction, the corruption allegations made against Tshabangu did not yield any criminal charges. Thirdly, there was still no light in terms of what the municipality was willing to do to resolve the service delivery grievances of the Phomolong residents.⁶⁴

As part of the steps taken to obliterate Tshabangu's influence in Phomolong, some in the Crisis Committee argued that the ANC branch must convene urgent Annual General Meetings (AGM) for both wards in Phomolong so as to allow new leadership to emerge. This new leadership, it was argued, would enjoy the confidence of the community and be better placed to campaign for the ANC in the local government elections. They also insisted that the Crisis Committee would not be dissolved until these AGMs were convened.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the Crisis Committee found itself increasingly divided by material offers presented by various political occupants of the state, especially at a provincial level. Some of the Crisis Committee participants admit to being presented with job opportunities in exchange for sowing divisions in the Crisis Committee and stifling its ability to organise protests and advance resident's demands. In this regard, Power's observation is apposite:⁶⁶

They [would] phone me, 'Power we have a job for you here. So, we wanted to give this job to someone else, but we think we should give it to you so, that you could assist us by disturbing that Crisis Committee. You should split it.

64 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

65 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN, 25 October 2009.

66 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

You should bring us all the information that they've been discussing.' We had people who were spies, being bribed with jobs... .

Another Crisis Committee activist corroborates this view:⁶⁷

I remember guys driving motorbikes came here to beg that the elections must proceed in peace; it was the police and soldiers in motorbikes. They spoke to us nicely that 'we will deploy you, give you better jobs and so on but just campaign for the ANC.'

These material offers were allegedly exploited by some of the participants in the Crisis Committee who utilised their access to government leadership to improve their socio-economic conditions or access government deployments.

There were people who were using their opportunities to benefit them because when we were going to meetings with these MECs you'd find that when a person was supposed to outline the community's perspective he would tell you that I completed my matric 15 years ago and have been to college. I am looking for a job, in the meeting! We would call him to order. Comrade, you can't come and talk about issues like you are looking for a job when we have come here about a certain issue. So, you find that a person gets upset. When they get upset they get an opportunity to use them against the people. [T]hese things were causing new rifts as they were unfolding like these infights.⁶⁸

Further divisions in the Crisis Committee also arose out of the ANC branch election processes. Crisis Committee members were caught up in bitter power struggles for positions in the BECs. Some argued that the REC was biased towards certain members of the Crisis Committee whilst being completely opposed to the election of others.⁶⁹

An environment of mistrust thus permeated the Crisis Committee and rendered it fiercely divided. Accusations about Crisis Committee members leaking sensitive information to the ANC, spreading misinformation about the work of the Crisis Committee and receiving bribes from the ANC leadership became common. Thus, when the ANC branch elections finally took place, only a few of the Crisis Committee members found expression in the leadership. These were Qaba, Morake, Nyathi and Mokati. Some of these members were also nominated to become ward councillors and

67 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/SN Madia, 25 October 2009.

68 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/BP Mthenjana, 27 November 2009.

69 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

Proportional Representation (PR) councillors by their respective branches. Qaba and Morake were nominated for the positions of PR councillors. Their names could not make the final list after the screening process led by the REC. Mokati's hopes for being a ward councillor were also thwarted as the REC preferred another candidate Kholeka, arguing that this would help the branch to comply with gender parity requirements in terms of leadership nomination.⁷⁰ The three, Qaba, Morake and Mokati strongly believed that there was foul play in the process and that their candidature was unsuccessful was due to their participation in the Crisis Committee.⁷¹

When local government elections ultimately took place on the 1st March 2006, the ANC retained its electoral dominance in Phomolong, winning ward 2 with a total of 3,374 votes with the DA only receiving 48 votes. The ANC also won Ward 3 that had previously belonged to the DA with a total of 1,485 votes with the DA scoring closely at 937. The total number of people who cast their votes in ward 2 and ward 3 was 3,511 and 2,599 respectively.⁷²

Conclusion

Protests anchored around collective consumption have become prominent in many townships and this may suggest that movements like the Crisis Committee present significant danger to the survival of the neoliberal project in South Africa, especially at local state level. Unfortunately, the evidence presented in this article precludes such a conclusion. As to whether these movements will eventually spawn a wave of protests that collectively call for the radical alteration of the prevailing class and race relations in South Africa is highly contentious. There are many reasons to be sceptical. Personalised politics dominated the Crisis Committee and this contributed to an absence of a radical critique of the neoliberal policies pursued by the ANC- led capitalist state. As a result, the removal of Tshabangu on the basis that he monopolised political space and the local state's resources is as close as the Crisis Committee arrived at the question of "political self determination". Its politics did not extend beyond Phomolong itself and the local state. An analysis of state,

70 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/T Mokati (Crisis Committee member), 19 September 2009.

71 Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/N Morake, 27 November 2009.

72 2006 Local government Elections Results, Independent Electoral Commission (available at: <http://www.elections.org.za/lgeresults>), as accessed on 4 January 2009.

capital and social relations was blatantly absent in its worldview.

Overall, the Crisis Committee was Janus-like in character. It was forward-looking in its ability to organise mass protests, mobilise popular support, in part, around collective consumption and outside the organisational machinery of the ANC as the dominant political force in Phomolong. However, it was significantly backward and in important respects stuck in the institutional politics of the ANC and rejected attempts to define it outside these politics. These fluid and ambivalent relations with the ANC present challenges for a left project rooted in challenging the capitalist local state and the way it organises collective consumption. The short-term nature of the Crisis Committee's goals and its lack of longevity are more reasons to be contemptuous.

But the Crisis Committee's impact in reconfiguring Phomolong's politics should not be rashly dismissed. Using a concerted mobilisation approach, which emphasised the structural issues around service delivery, the Crisis Committee was able to enjoy popular support in Phomolong. This support was central in the Crisis Committee's ability to weather the negative ascriptions attached to it by the state and the ANC. Perhaps, this signals real possibilities for participatory democracy and grassroots organising around collective consumption. Equally, the protests also made some tangible gains for Phomolong residents. The protests exerted pressure on the local state, which reacted by paving the roads in the township, resuming construction on the new, stands for residents of "Putswastene" (two-roomed houses) and placing flushing toilets in some parts of the township. Arguably, state projects such as "Operation Hlasela"⁷³ are a direct result of the panic induced by these protests among political incumbents of the state.

In January 2013, Phomolong was once again in the news for the same reasons that informed the 2005 protests.⁷⁴ Perhaps the solution lies in more than just removing unpopular councillors but in a complete overhaul of

73 Free State provincial government adopted Operation Hlasela shortly after Premier Ace Magashule took office in 2009. The purpose of the project is to bring together all government departments in an effort to fast track service delivery in the province. See M Motsoari, Operation Hlasela Operational Framework, 22 September 2009 (available at: <http://www.dwaf.gov.za/masibambane/documents/structures/mcc/22Sep09/DAY1/OPERATION%20HLASELA%20UPDATED%20VERSION%2010%20JULY%202009.pdf>), as accessed on 15 August 2010.

74 K Lekhafola, Scores arrested following SA strikes, 22 January, 2013 (available at: <http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/91c045804e45dceeb540b7f251b4e4e2/Scores-arrested-following-SA-strikes-20130122>), as accessed on 25 January 2013; Service delivery protests spreading in F State, 22 January 2013 (available at: <http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/e68b7b004e457c7eb132b7f251b4e4e2/Service-delivery-protests-spreading-in-F-State-20130122>), as accessed on 25 January 2013.

the neoliberal local state and how it organises and distributes the means of collective consumption. Whether Phomolong will eventually move in this direction is debatable and a burning question that local studies must seriously consider. But it is at least comforting to note that activists everywhere are beginning to ask the similar questions. As Sethunya despondently notes:⁷⁵

Things remain the same. Since 2005, nothing has changed. We don't even know what to do anymore, how to mobilise against this. Clearly we need a different approach, I just don't know what this should be?

⁷⁵ Wits collection, Local Histories, Present Realities Collection, Interview, P Kunene (MA Student)/T Sethunya, 15 February 2013.