

Article

Party over outsiders, centre over branch: how ANC dominance works at the community level in South Africa

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Abstract

Common to most accounts of South African electoral politics is some version of voter loyalty or party identification. In contrast to arguments that focus on voter behaviour, although less common, are views that point to the reinforcement of voter choice through the relationship of the African National Congress (ANC) and party-state to key civil society and business allies. This article explores this party capture of political organisation at the crucial, and yet understudied, level of the local community or settlement. Drawing on case-study work in Cape Town and Johannesburg, it is demonstrated how the attempted dominance of political society over civil society at national level is reproduced at the most local of levels through a combination of ideological and instrumental factors. Key to the former is the idea of the ANC's entitlement to rule implied by liberation nationalism. Key to the latter are the forms of patronage politics enabled by the 'party-state', where it exists. The result is the representational privileging of political actors over civil society actors, and the party 'centre' over branches. Notably, the attempt to construct the local 'party-society' is always partial and often weak, not least due to governance failures of various kinds. This leads to periodic crises and popular protest, but the party dominance of representational choice means that new leaders often emerge in the name of the ANC and its allies rather than against it.

Introduction

Most municipalities in South Africa are failing to live up to citizen expectations. However, despite this dissatisfaction, the electoral support for ruling parties has, to date, been largely unaffected, with the partial exception of some of the larger urban municipalities in election 2014 (Southall and Schulz-

Herzenberg 2014: 239). The most frequent explanations are accounts of voter loyalty, typically explained in terms of identity politics or interests linked to political context. This article explores the issue from the perspective of the party and state rather than citizens and civil society, making the case that the logic of the party-state practice and the ideology of liberation nationalism tend to discipline, sedate and co-opt popular representation from civil society actors and even local African National Congress (ANC) branches.

The conception of state and civil society here follows the mainstream political science conception of civil society, largely influenced by Hegel and Gramsci, as that arena outside the formal institutions of the state (government, judiciary, civil service) and the economy (corporations and enterprises) including institutions like the church, schools, trade unions, non-governmental and community-based organisations. These serve as a source of counter-vailing force to authoritarian rule for pluralist thinkers and dominant class ideology for Marxists (Kumar 1993). This conception stands in some contrast to recent accounts such as Chatterjee's (2004) argument regarding 'civil society' as a domain of liberal-democratic practice that exists only for the middle classes in the global south, while the majority of the poor engage the state in a more patronage-driven way mediated by political parties which he terms 'political society'.

Notably, while embracing the mainstream conceptions of state and civil society, the analysis below characterises the relationship between state and society partly in patronage terms that echo elements of Chatterjee, albeit that the liberation nationalism of the ANC, underwritten by race politics, mitigates against the kinds of collective clientelism that Chatterjee describes in India. In South Africa, the story is much more one of representational capture by party elites, and in what follows, we draw on empirical work in communities in Cape Town and Johannesburg to demonstrate both how the dominance of political society over civil society at national level is produced at the local level (Piper 2015), and also how the party centre dominates the local. The dominance of the political over the social, and centre over the local, goes some way towards explaining the ineffectiveness of formal institutions of representation and participation in responding to the needs of local communities in South Africa.

Notably, the attempt at partisan centralisation of popular representation is always partial and often weak, not least due to failures of various kinds associated with local governance. This dissonance is important as it helps explain the prevalence of protests against 'service delivery' issues in local

communities across the country – both in regard to the prevalence of protests, but also in regard to the failure of the many formal mechanisms of local representation and participation (Barichievy et al 2005, Bénit-Gbaffou 2008). However, such is the hegemony of the ruling party that such dissonance does not necessarily translate into support for opposition movements, but often provides opportunities for rival leaders within the party to win office on the basis of reinvigorating the party and its historical mission (Von Holdt et al 2011). Hence protest is not necessarily a sign of the loss of the right to rule, so much as a complaint about how rule is being conducted.

In making this argument, this article focuses on political activists and leaders at the very local level of the ‘community’. We also argue that the behaviour of activists and leaders is, in part, informed by a set of ideas about democracy and identity, and centralist organisational practices, inherited from liberation politics that enables local practices to contradict the more pluralist model of democracy encoded in the design of local governance. Ideological factors refer to the idea of the ANC’s entitlement to rule entailed by liberation nationalism. Organisational cultural factors refer to the internal organisational practices developed down time – in particular centralising tendencies derived from the ‘democratic centralism’ practiced by the ANC in exile and then institutionalised at the formation of the ANC as a mass party in the early 1990s (Ellis 2012: 184-5). Lastly, instrumental factors refer to the forms of patronage politics enabled by the ‘party-state’ at the local level, including preferential treatment given to local development projects and associated jobs.

In general we will be making the case for both the dominance of the ANC centre, namely national and provincial leadership, over the local branches, and of political society over local civil society. In this paper we focus on the role of both community level leaders and ANC branch members. Notably, the ‘lowest’ or ‘smallest’ level of formal political representation in local government is the ward, yet most wards are often comprised of a number of distinct neighbourhoods, suburbs or ‘communities’ that reflect – and indeed often reproduce – the historical legacies of apartheid segregation. Further, the term ‘community’ is typically invoked to describe the most local place where historically poor, black people live. It also has normative connotations of solidarity that are often invoked in legitimacy claims – as demonstrated below.

In addition to being localised, the politics under discussion is informal in

the sense that it is not prescribed by any law or policy, and indeed arguably runs somewhat against the grain of the civil and political liberties affirmed in the bill of rights of the South African Constitution. It is nevertheless a set of practices that is widespread across the country and, although not uncontested, it contributes to the ANC's hegemony by monopolising community representation in the name of a member of 'the liberation movement'. It thus makes local citizen organisation and representation that is independent and critical of ANC rulers much more difficult, and even dangerous, as opposition is delegitimised and made vulnerable to repression. Indeed, this outcome is clearly also a problem for more communitarian conceptions of democracy as well as pluralist ones, as the popular will or deliberative consensus is always at risk of elite veto.

Lastly, a critical factor in understanding the informal politics of the 'party-society' is the normative privileging given to the ANC as the sole legitimate representative of the nation as framed by a discourse of bounded-pluralism that runs through political society in South Africa. Not only does the conception of democracy entailed in this discourse contradict the liberal principles of the formal political system, but also it assists in the dominance of political society over civil society by enabling the normative confusion of party and state, as well as party and society, party and community and indeed central party and local branch. All of this contributes to understanding why local activists and leaders behave the way they do – even though it is increasingly evident that governance is failing in many instances.

Popular incompetence, liberal institutions and liberation legacies

This section begins by sketching the paradoxical phenomenon of popular protest against poorly performing local government by the very same citizens who regularly return these governments to office, noting the explanations of voter loyalty. The paper then turns to explore party-centric explanations for this politics, beginning by explaining how the discourse of liberation nationalism affirms a vision of the political community in South Africa that is homogenising and centralising, and normatively privileges the ANC as representative of this nation. It then demonstrates how this framing reinforces the phenomenon of the 'party-state', undermining key principles of liberal-democratic governance.

Popular incompetence and voter loyalty

It is important at this stage to explain that there is a constitutional division of powers between the national, provincial and local levels. Each is a

separate sphere of governance with different service delivery mandates. It is local government that is responsible for services such as sanitation while housing, for example, is a dual mandate between provincial and local government. The point here is that local government is not fully in control of all services that its residents receive; nonetheless it is an important decision making sphere with constitutionally mandated powers. Furthermore, citizens experience all government interventions at ‘the local level’ – perhaps leading to a degree of scapegoating of local government.

This possibility notwithstanding, it is common cause that most local governments in South Africa are underperforming significantly (COGTA 2009a, 2009b). Relatedly, levels of protest against ‘service delivery’ by local government are high. Hence Alexander (2010: 27) notes, despite methodological problems with the accuracy of numbers, the figures for protests are ‘many times greater than the kind of figures presented for protests around the world’. From 2009 to 2012 the police have recorded an average of 2.9 ‘unrest related gatherings’ per day. Furthermore, the minister of police has previously informed parliament that most ‘unrest’ gatherings have been about service delivery (Alexander 2012). Notably, despite protest, voter behaviour is yet to change significantly. There is much evidence for this claim, including the election results in general, but also a number of studies that have examined voting patterns in wards that have had high levels of protest. In brief, in none of these cases has support for the ruling party declined significantly (Booyesen 2012). This combination of governance failure and yet enduring party popularity is what elsewhere Piper (2015) has termed ‘popular incompetence’.

The common explanation for popular incompetence is voter loyalty, that is, that citizens do not use the vote to hold politicians accountable but rather, like sports fans remain loyal to their teams, they stick to their party regardless of its performance. They may, like sports fans also do when their team is performing badly, want new leadership and strategies, but they will not consider supporting another party.¹ In this regard it is notable that survey evidence reveals that the express identification of South African voters with political parties is comparatively high, and has actually increased in recent times, although the proportion of people who actually vote is dropping (Schulz-Herzenberg 2009: 30-31; 2012: 102). Explanations of voter loyalty have tended to locate arguments on a continuum from ethnic or racial identity-based reasons on the one end to more contingent, interest-based reasons at the other, with various positions in between (Booyesen 2007,

Johnson and Schlemmer 1996, Mattes 1995, Schulz-Herzenberg 2009). Whatever the reason, the implication of voter loyalty is that citizens do not use their votes to hold politicians accountable, but rather to signal a form of political identification, undermining the liberal representational logic encoded in the political system.

Liberal institutions and liberation legacies

The South African Constitution gives expression to mainstream liberal-democratic notions of democracy as constituted by multi-party competition for office through free, fair and frequent elections; the rule of law that upholds political and civil liberties including private property; and various institutionalised checks and balances such as the separation of powers functionally, spatially and in time. In South Africa's case the liberal model is manifest in the very specific establishment of elections, and the electoral form, as part of the founding provisions of the Constitution. The affirmation of rights through the Bill of Rights, actionable through a range of independent state formations, principally the judiciary but also various so-called 'chapter nine institutions' reflects both the liberal emphasis on key limitations to tyranny, popular or otherwise, through both the discourse of rights and the separation of state powers.

These general observations of the liberal model of democracy apply to the local level as well as the national in South Africa, and in this regard it is important to emphasise, following thinkers as diverse as Schumpeter and Dahl, that a central element of democracy is representation through the selection of competing politicians for political office. Correspondingly the main means of holding politicians accountable is through exercising the vote at subsequent elections to choose alternative leaders. As already noted, this strategic use of the vote to remove unresponsive politicians is precisely what is *not* happening in South Africa – at least not quite yet.

A key claim of this paper is that the liberal-democratic conception of democracy established in the constitution sits at odds with the liberation nationalism and organisational culture of the ANC and its allies, and this is notably evident at the local level. Further, the practice of liberation nationalism in a liberal-democratic context helps explain many of the features of the dominant party system evident today. In what follows we will argue that liberation nationalism entails a conception of political community or nation and representation that legitimates exclusionary practices. Key here is homogenisation or bounded pluralism, and a conception of leadership that

constructs the ANC as the only legitimate representative of the nation. It furthermore constrains the voices, even of members within the party, that are deemed to be ‘illegitimate’.

As argued by Glaser (2015) and Brooks Yung (2011), the ANC’s conception of democracy is informed by notions of ‘people’s power’ embraced especially, but not exclusively, by the United Democratic Front (UDF), the ANC-aligned social movement that led internal resistance to apartheid in the 1980s. Glaser (2015: 10) argues that the ‘people’s power’ idea of the liberation movement of the 1980s had two strains. One was an authoritarian, statist and Leninist strain informed by the idea of guidance by a central body championing ultimate liberation. The other was a non-state, civil society-centric view of grassroots power and local autonomy associated with ‘messy heterogeneity of the United Democratic Front’. After 1990, he notes, the former gained the upper hand as the ‘ANC successfully disbanded the UDF and established the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) as a variant of the sort of ANC “transmission belt” that authoritarian radical parties were wont to turn mass organizations into’ (Glaser 2015: 10). Indeed, something like this has occurred to SANCO, as will be illustrated below. Further, the ANC’s notion of politics is significantly, although not exclusively, influenced by a tradition conceptualised in terms akin to Rousseau’s conception of a unified will of a single community (Brooks Yung 2011), rather than competing views of plural groups in one community. Indeed, from this perspective competing views are rendered problematic.

A similar ambiguity surrounds the discursive inheritance of the political community or nation in ANC discourse. Although formally committed to non-racialism, the substance of this discourse pulls in a more racialised direction. Hence the ANC’s official discourse of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR), as adopted in 1969, advances a conception of society divided in terms of both race and class, such that eliminating racial oppression is the first stage in a two-stage process of liberation, with the second-stage being about reforming or replacing capitalism (ANC 2012b). For Jordan (1997), if democracy is to advance national liberation it necessitates the empowerment of the historically most oppressed. In essence the NDR entails the ‘liberation of Africans in particular and black people in general from political and economic bondage’ (ANC undated). For Cachalia (2012: 60) liberation movements such as the ANC may have aspired to transcend ascribed racial difference but in reality the imperatives of political mobilisation often required the naming of ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ in terms that were

evocative of experienced racial difference. This resulted in an essentialised view of race re-entering the theory and practice of the liberation movement. Although there is still no universally accepted understanding of non-racialism in the ANC (Anciano 2013) the ethos of the NDR, and party discussions of the ‘national question’, support the view that ANC liberation standpoints legitimate exclusionary practices. These practices were fully understandable during apartheid but today sit uneasily with the constitutional liberal-democratic conception of democracy.

Lastly, Marxist-Leninism not only influenced the ideology of the ANC, building a discourse of its entitlement to rule as the true champion of the (black) nation, but also its internal organisational practices. As Ellis (2012:198) shows, the merger of ANC and SACP in exile from 1960 to 1990 saw most of the party elite trained in Marxist beliefs, including the practice of democratic centralism, in the ideological schools of the USSR, East Germany and Cuba. Notably, these centralising and largely authoritarian ideas and practices were increasingly deployed internally within the ANC as part of dealing with the many tensions and conflicts of life in exile (Ellis 2012:159, 184-5). This development was also a rational response to the realities of oppressive actions by the South African state including substantial attempts to infiltrate the ANC in exile, leading to a hierarchical, closed and secretive organisational culture. Indeed, while the precise substance of the NDR is far from resolved within the ANC alliance, both internal and external opponents to this account of society and ‘revolutionary’ model of social change are vulnerable to be accused of being ‘counter-revolutionary’ and standing in the way of ‘liberation’.

Liberation legacies undermine formal political accountability

The dominance of the ANC at elections in South Africa since 1994 has led to a dominance of political society to the extent that one can meaningfully speak of a ‘party-state’ such is the common blurring of the lines between party and state office (Giliomee and Simkins 1999, Brooks 2004, Butler 2009). Further, ANC dominance is not necessarily only a bad thing for post-apartheid governance as it allows time to create democratic institutions, reduce political violence, contain racial and ethnic conflict, and pursue long-term social and economic policy goals (Butler 2009). At the same time, we would suggest that the version of democracy at least partly entailed in liberation nationalism legitimates a set of practices that undermine the liberal democratic institutions of the formal system. While this is probably an

unintended historical development, it nevertheless helps explain the lack of accountability in the system – especially from the side of political elites.

There are many practices that are often identified as a threat to liberal principles of democracy in the South African system. These include the practice of cadre deployment, where the ANC decides which party members ought to occupy key offices of the state, including parastatal organisations. The key issue here is that people are appointed for political reasons and regardless of actual performance in office. This is especially notable at local government level where a litany of partisan appointments has been identified as a key reason behind the poor performance of many municipalities (Powell 2012). Another related example would be preference given in awarding state tenders to ANC aligned organisations or organisations staffed by party loyalists. More recently, attempts to control the media and the public access to state information are cited as instances of a growing authoritarian trend.

The difficulty with these kinds of examples is distinguishing the extent to which they are practices of patronage, nepotism, corruption or even criminality made possible by party dominance rather than practices directly informed by the liberation democracy idea. Better examples of the latter are to be found in legitimacy discourses, specifically the many public utterances of the ANC, from national to local level, that reflect a belief in its historical entitlement to govern, in direct contrast to non-ANC representatives. For example, the ANC talks about the need to ‘liberate the Western Cape and some wards which have fallen into the hands of people who don’t understand why we wanted freedom’ (*City Press*, December 21, 2011). Similar comments were made by several ANC leaders in connection with the electoral race with the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in 2009 (*City Press* April 4, 2004). This is despite the fact that these parties won office through formally legitimated liberal democratic means in the constitution. Further the party regularly accuses opponents, internal and external, of being ‘counter-revolutionary’.

Another set of examples of the threat to liberal principles of democracy concerns the elision between party, people and nation made in public utterances. For Hamilton (2011: 10), this ‘gap’ between the rulers and ruled is filled by many claiming to speak for the people, and any attempt to close the gap between the people and their representatives is ‘an invitation to tyranny because it thwarts any opportunity for the people to reflect on and judge the actions of their representatives... The effect of closing the gap – and at the extreme the complete identification of the rulers and the ruled –

is to *exclude* the people from politics in their active or judgmental role'. It is precisely this 'closing of the gap' between the party and the people that follows logically from important strains in ANC discourse and politics, and which manifest at the local level in the closing of space for alternative parties and independent civil society formations.

In what follows we demonstrate how the space for community representatives to speak to power is limited firstly, by the dominance of the ANC and allies over civil society, and secondly by the perceived dominance of the ANC centre over branches.

ANC and allies over outsiders

While the ANC's dominance of political society, and the debates around a dominant party syndrome and the 'party-state' are well established, less commonly observed, but just as important, is the dominance of political society over civil society in South Africa (Heller 2001, 2009). There are two components to this: first, the relationship between formal political society and civil society from national to local; and, second, the informal relationship between political society and civil society at the most local of levels – colloquially called the 'community'. While the first component has been widely observed, much less attention has been paid to the nature of political-civil society relations at the community level. In respect of the latter, we follow Piper (2015) who argues that ANC dominance works through defining as legitimate community representatives those leaders aligned to ANC networks and allies, often through SANCO. In what follows we demonstrate through the case of SANCO how bounded pluralism dilutes the possibilities of robust challenge from allies, increases dependency on the party-state, and marginalises independent voices.

Thus, as Zuern (2004) notes, emerging from the anti-apartheid civic movement of the 1980s, SANCO was initially intended to be a mass-based social movement independent of the ANC but 'committed to the National Democratic Revolution' (Umrabulo 1999). While SANCO managed to establish branches in most townships around the country, the organisations found that many of its key leaders took up positions in the ANC and government, going on to enjoy unprecedented levels of power and wealth. Further, 'leaders at all levels of the SANCO structures ... complained that ANC leaders often attempted to give them instructions, and that ANC officials felt they had the right to veto SANCO programs' (Zuern 2004: 11). Clearly then, for the ANC, inclusion meant command.

Nevertheless, SANCO chose to remain close to the ANC rather than operate independently, not least due to the power of liberation movement nationalism that made overt opposition to the ruling party and its historic mission unthinkable. In addition SANCO was struggling to access resources to operate without support from the ‘party-state’ (Zuern 2004). The consequence of this closeness was what Zuern (2011: 118-9) terms ‘institutional disciplining’ exercised ideologically by party leaders and by SANCO leaders keen to climb the career ladder. The closeness of SANCO to the ANC was nowhere more profoundly illustrated than with the breakaway of the Congress of the People (COPE) from the ANC in 2009 that saw a number of ANC branches switch over to the new party too. At the same time, a number of SANCO branches also moved over to COPE or split into ANC and COPE-aligned branches. This illustrates profoundly the informal politics of the ‘party-society’ at the local level.

The choice to remain close to the ANC meant that SANCO struggled to represent popular demands in a confrontational way to the ANC government. This was exacerbated by an organisational culture – also derived from the ANC – that tended towards a command culture from the top structures to the bottom, with accountability framed upwards to higher structures rather than the other way around. Thus, by the mid-2000s, SANCO had moved to a position of supporting government developmental programmes and requesting inclusion in the tripartite alliance. In the words of one leader, this was ‘purely based on ensuring that our voice is not a voice of a distant step-child screaming outside hoping to be heard when policies were being made inside the alliance, inside the African National Congress’ (interview Hlongwane, June 9, 2004, in Zuern 2004.) Notably SANCO’s request was declined, partly informed by internal ANC battles for power where SANCO was a potential Mbeki ally against COSATU.

Nevertheless, since the mid-2000s SANCO’s emphasis has remained a politics of mediation between the state and communities (Piper and Bénit-Gbaffou 2014), the basic principles of which are, on the one hand, the recognition of loyalty to the ANC to have any influence on decision-making, and on the other, to build a mass base through championing popular concerns, but not in a confrontational way that challenges fundamentally government policies. Thus Zuern quotes a senior official:

SANCO is a cushion, on both sides. ... It works both ways. It is a cushion on the government side, but it is also a cushion on the people’s side. Then it actually eases tensions, because anything that happens, we do

not say: 'Look, do as you wish'. We are saying: 'We are negotiating'.
(Interview, Qhakaza, June 9, 2004)

There are moments when this mediatory politics has worked. Zuern (2004: 21) cites the case of the Tshwane region as one instance where good leaders are able to manage the 'the contradictions of their role as SANCO leaders in alliance with the ANC vis-à-vis their role as representatives of poor communities'. However, even in these instances, the extent and nature of impact must be interrogated. Thus, in writing about similar dynamics around the role of the SACP local branch in housing delivery struggles in Alexandra, Johannesburg, Sinwell (2012) found that while access to, and responsiveness from, the local state seemed to work best through the party or its allies, it was limited to affecting the implementation of policy rather than challenging policy itself.

As Piper and Bénit-Gbaffou (2014) and Piper (2015) illustrate in the case of Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay, Cape Town, not only was there a widespread perception in amongst the community and local NGOs, the police and school leadership that SANCO should be the community leadership, this view was held despite the fact that almost all respondents acknowledged that SANCO is now weak, and divided between an 'old' and a 'new' leadership, both of whom claim the right to represent. The key reason for this legitimacy can be summed up in the words of one respondent: 'SANCO is the little brother of the ANC'. Notably, the conflict between the old and new SANCO leadership centred on their contending visions for service delivery, and the fact that, in addition to their association with the ANC, their local standing was directly influenced by their ability to 'bring development' to Imizamo Yethu. As Piper and Bénit-Gbaffou (2014) note, the advent of the Democratic Alliance (DA) in the city of Cape Town and Western Cape province, and their antipathy towards SANCO, means that state patronage is hard to come by, and this has undermined SANCO's mediating role. Indeed, at the heart of the conflict between the 'old' and 'new' SANCO was the willingness of the old SANCO to engage the DA state on its 'non-partisan' terms, a practice that led the 'new SANCO' leadership to accuse them of 'selling out to the whites' and looking to restore the closeness of SANCO to the ANC.

While SANCO's informal politics of mediation may often fail, and the last few years have seen the emergence of a few independent and radical social movements in the larger cities of the country, what has not necessarily changed is the *de facto* dominance of community representation by ANC-aligned activists and leaders, sometimes through SANCO. Furthermore, this

dominance endures at the normative expense of alternative independent forms of popular representation that are often actively repressed by SANCO leadership. Indeed, as Piper (2015) demonstrates in Imizamo Yethu in Cape Town, an otherwise dysfunctional leadership can be powerful enough to attain office and prevent others from pursuing local development projects – in this instance for allegedly being too close to the Democratic Alliance.

Of late South Africa has witnessed waves of protest that have swept across the country from the xenophobic ‘tsunami’ of 2008 to the rising number of service delivery protests, strikes and the Marikana massacre of 2012. In addition, SANCO is notorious for internal conflict, with rival structures emerging from local to national level. While all of this suggests a weakening of the practice of mediation, and also of the ‘good’ leadership required to manage a contradictory political space, they do not necessarily represent a weakening of the ‘party-society’. Thus, as illustrated by Von Holdt et al (2011: 15), SANCO and ANC leaders are often centrally involved in protests, and use them to advance their own positions with both the party and SANCO, often against rivals competing for a position of access to the ‘party-state’. Critically this may change office-bearers but not the monopoly of citizen representation by the ANC and its allies – much as the advent of Zuma over Mbeki did not hurt the electoral popularity of the ANC.

In addition, there are often ‘protests within protests’, and Von Holdt et al (2011:17) notes that ‘the subaltern’ make tactical use of protest to secure specific gains, even when understanding that leaders have their own agendas. In very few instances, though, is there evidence that this significantly alters the representational logic of ‘party-society’. For example, Von Holdt et al notes that during the xenophobic violence, SANCO leaders in many places felt pressure to take the side of the community, whereas ANC leaders looked to close down the popular revolt (2011: 16). Piper (2015) observed similar dynamics around the xenophobic violence in Imizamo Yethu in Cape Town in 2008. Importantly though, none of these instances saw the demise of the party-society, as SANCO emerged with newly legitimised leadership and the authority of the ANC was reaffirmed. If anything then, these examples of protest probably helped to reconstitute the party-society.

Centre over branches

As discussed above the ANC claims that its dominance over political society in South Africa is not problematic because its internal structures are

themselves fully democratic and truly representative of society (Hamilton 2011). However, research from four ANC branches in the City of Johannesburg points to a challenging experience of democracy in practice, at the branch level.² Several key themes relating to political accountability emerge from interviews and focus groups with ANC branch executive (BEC) and ordinary members. The first centres on the concern that competition for democratic leadership at all levels in the ANC is circumscribed and controlled at senior levels,³ most notably national and provincial leadership, rather than being open to effective influence from the branch level. Theoretically ANC branches are the foundational base of the party and the ‘place where members exercise their basic democratic rights and formulate policy’ (Motlanthe cited in Dlamini 2010: 187). Indeed branch members are responsible for voting for national and provincial leaders every five or four years respectively (ANC 2012a). However, branch members are concerned about how genuinely representative ANC provincial and national elections are of branch members’ choices.

Branch members describe how they have very little, if any, say in who attains leadership positions beyond the branch level. According to an Eldorado Park focus group ‘they already know who they are going to put in there ... we must go on with the procedure while they already know who is going to be in’. When talking about gaining leadership positions a BEC member from Lenasia described the view that ‘there is a brotherhood ... if you want to reach the top ... if you are not a friend of Zuma you will never go there ... or if you are not a friend of whoever is coming in’. He continued to note that it is not always clear why some people are ‘on top’ and that ‘we need to talk openly about this’. For a Sandton focus group member it was problematic that ‘in my branch I have a minister...I have never seen that minister ... if his own branch doesn’t nominate him how does he actually [get power]’. A member from Eldorado Park gave an example of a person serving at the regional level who claims to come from a branch where ‘there is no structure’. Indeed, a Sandton BEC member unintentionally pointed to the lack of real input branch members have in selecting leaders when he described how the ANC promotes non-racialism: ‘The ANC leadership does understand non-racialism, you find that sometimes they just take random people to balance the demographics...even when *they* (my italics) elect the representatives they make sure that Indians, coloured and whites are also represented’. Bénit-Gbaffou’s (2012) work similarly illustrates that locally grounded leaders are often overlooked in favour of more party powerful, but

less locally legitimate, candidates.

This selection of comments contradicts ANC claims to take commitments to internal democracy seriously. The ANC notes that it ‘itself should be a learning school of democracy’ and that leadership should be consistently elected at all levels (*Umrabulo* 1997, cited in Lodge 2004: 198). However, in their discussions of how to attain leadership positions within the ANC, many members described what they feel is a lack of meaningful democracy within the party. This resonates with Dlamini’s (2010: 202) study that raises significant questions about the valorisation of ANC branches as engines for democratic participation and change.

A second concern for many branch leaders and members is the input, or rather lack thereof, that they have into ANC policy formulation. As with branch input into leadership positions the ANC theoretically supports the idea of member feedback into policies, with the ANC Constitution stating that members are entitled to ‘take a full and active part in the discussion, formulation and implementation of the policies of the ANC’ (ANC 2012a). As Lodge (2004: 198) notes, the principle of ‘democratic centralism’ binds lower structures to obeying decisions made by higher structures. However, according to ANC writings such decisions should reflect ‘continuous and ongoing consultations as well as a culture of open debate’. The ANC continues to explain that ‘[w]hen there is a need for a change in strategy or policy we expect leadership and elected representatives to consult and get fresh mandates’ (*Umrabulo* 1997, cited in Lodge 2004:198).

Yet, numerous examples were provided by respondents of instances where branch members had written reports or provided verbal feedback on pressing policy issues and had received little response, or had been told by regional or provincial members that their reports were not read. ‘You can write report upon report ... we did an analysis ... was it ever read ... hell no ... the PEC asks the same questions a year later ... but did they ever read the report’. When asked whether branch members feel ‘more senior ANC structures listen to them’ members from Eldorado Park answered ‘definitely not, definitely not ... we can complain ... ask them to assist with the elections, to come address the plight of the people, nothing is happening, zilch ... they don’t listen to us and I don’t know if it is only here in Eldorado Park but they don’t listen ... they are not taking us seriously’. Respondents from a range of branches were frustrated – as they feel they know well what the challenges in their communities are, and so should have some voice. ‘We are the people that know what is happening in the township ... we work in these communities,

we live here'. Branch members are concerned that 'as much as the state has moved away from the people the ANC and leadership have also moved away from the people'.

The frustration by branch members over a perceived lack of democratic influence in the party could, on the surface, be attributed by some to their racial minority status (discussed in more detail below). However, it is interesting to note that respondents from all areas, regardless of race, expressed concern over the lack of influence they believe they have. Several respondents from Protea South felt strongly that unless you were 'in prison' or 'been to exile' or connected to those individuals who have, you have little opportunity to 'get' a leadership position: 'If only these big cats will allow young people to play their part then all will be fair'. Respondents felt that leadership and influence were not related to your core competencies but rather to your background and ability to 'know politics' and 'how politics are played'.

The challenges inherent in the ANC's internal democracy reflected in both leadership contestation and policy influence by branch members, is perhaps reflective of conventional assumptions about the manner in which the internal politics of political parties manifest. Political office leaders may try to restrain ordinary members and limit the scope of democratic procedures within their parties in order to pursue gradualist programmes (Lodge 2004: 198). Nonetheless branch members' views corroborate the analysis that the ANC's conceptions and practice of democracy reinforce a centralising and homogenising, bounded pluralism that is at odds with the Constitution's liberal democratic model of democracy.

This raises the question of the ANC's understanding of plurality in its own organisation. Who are the authentic representatives of the ANC and the community? Here there is concern by many respondents that the space for plural identities and views in the ANC is closing down, and that this plays out most starkly in the form of race relations. Members, particularly, but not only, from minority race areas felt that black African members were privileged in the organisation. Although the vast majority of branch members interviewed place a high value on the ideal of non-racialism and recognised the ANC's longstanding commitment to ideals of inclusion and equality of races, many branch members interviewed reported racial difference as a key reason for the way in which they are poorly treated by ANC leadership. This sense of grievance by some 'minority' members may be an unintended consequence of an ANC strategy to build non-racialism that requires an intermediate focus

on race essentialism and the (historically necessary) promotion of one race, in particular, to achieve equality. Many respondents from all branches, however, do not support the party's focus on economic policies that favour 'Africans in particular'. Branch members from Eldorado Park in particular, and to some extent Sandton, are frustrated with the party and feel much anger about the way they are treated because they are coloured (or white or Indian in the case of Sandton and Lenasia). Numerous members from 'minority' race groups strongly believe that senior positions are only open to Africans, which hinders their role in the party. This raises concerns that the homogenising, exclusive and intolerant elements of liberation nationalism and African nationalism are influencing local claims to, and practices of, legitimate representation at the branch level.

The research in ANC branches further provides interesting evidence regarding the notion of 'popular incompetence'; why do members who are clearly frustrated with internal ANC processes and, at times its leadership still actively work and vote for the party? There was discussion in all branch focus groups about members at times being disappointed with, and even embarrassed by, actions and pronouncements of some ANC leaders. Branch members from Protea South discussed how an overhaul of the majority of senior leadership of the party is needed: 'the leadership of the ANC is lacking, very lacking'. They voiced concern that leadership is not in touch with the needs and problems of younger generations and is too focused on the past: 'using old minds won't work for us ... because we are still saying "the whites, the whites". It is not going to help us though. Yes we were oppressed, leave it now, we cannot change it, it has happened. We need fresh minds'. A long-standing BEC member from Lenasia explained how the ANC was losing support amongst the Indian community and it was partly 'to blame' because of various reasons including the 'personal and professional conduct of the leader' whose actions clashed with cultural and religious beliefs in the community.

Respondents from Lenasia, Eldorado Park and Sandton all described how support for the ANC in their areas had declined. For many this made their work at the branch level very challenging; 'people in Eldorado Park are anti-ANC, they hate the ruling party, if they see you with ANC clothes they say that "you are in bed with the devil"'. Yet members are still working hard to win support for the ANC. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, many members, particularly those of long standing, referred to the historical role and importance of the ANC as a liberation movement. They joined the ANC

because they wanted to ‘make a difference’, and they continue to work for the party because they believe it is still the best conduit through which to help build and transform local communities. In this vein, a focus group member explained, ‘you may get badly treated but you don’t mind because you are working for the love of the organisation’. Others support core ANC values and policies: ‘the ANC has the best policy to change South Africa to become what we hope to see according to the NDR’; and yet, they continue, ‘how we are going to get there is a problem ... if you want to change ANC behaviour and attitudes then you must be in the inside because standing in the outside is not going to help’. Yet for others being a member of the ANC is an unquestioned part of their identity: ‘I am born ANC, my granny was in the old ANC’; or, for another respondent, ‘I am a product of the ANC’. There is little doubt that the ANC’s liberation credentials are an important part of cadre loyalty. In this view the party is the most legitimate structure through which to represent their communities’ needs.

Branch members were, however, clear that many people join and support the ANC for less salubrious reasons. One focus group discussed how ‘there are people in the branches who are there to gain, people say I will join the ANC to get a tender ... tenders, people want tenders ... we have experience of this’. In conversation with a focus group one member stated openly that ‘we have got leaders in this branch that we know are dirty but they can still phone national leadership and they can still poke people and we know who those people are’. This resonates with Dlamini’s (2010: 197) findings from ANC branch research in Katlehong where a branch member explained: ‘The National Democratic Revolution ended a long time ago. It’s now the Tender Distribution Revolution’. These findings also reinforce Bénit-Gbaffou’s (2012) argument that the ANC’s ability to attract members relies both on deeply entrenched political loyalties and on members’ pragmatic strategies for access to resources.

Conclusion

One of the reasons for poor local governance in South Africa is the closure of space for independent citizen voice, action and organisation at the most local level in South Africa. This occurs inside the ANC, where branch level views are side-lined by national and provincial leaders, and in society where the representation of urban, black communities is usually monopolised by ANC-aligned activists, often in the organisational form of SANCO. While SANCO is historically independent from the ANC, and was set up to be a

mass-based social movement to champion popular interests against the state, it quickly learned that recognition of ANC authority was a necessary condition for access to the influence it craved and resources it needed. Similarly, local ANC branch members learnt that they have little choice but to follow central ANC authority if they aspire to any meaningful leadership position, with the important caveat of factional conflict that allows aspirant local leaders to contest for office. Perhaps even more importantly, both ANC branch members and the activists that constitute SANCO were also schooled in the liberation nationalism of the ANC that established the party as the sole legitimate champion of the nation in its historic struggle for political and economic liberation.

By drawing attention to the links between SANCO and the ANC, not least ideologically, this paper illustrates the significance of party politics for local state-society relations, echoing Zuern's (2011) view. In addition, it draws attention to the significance of ideas to politics, specifically nationalism, even at the more local and everyday level of politics. As demonstrated through our examples above, the nation is often imagined as a homogenous black South African grouping that can only legitimately be represented by the ANC and its allies like SANCO. Further, the paper also directs attention to the centripetal power of the ANC party-state as both branch members and SANCO have come to depend on patronage from above for their political and often socio-economic well-being.

Lastly, the argument here is not that the liberation mythology and the 'party-society' fails altogether to represent popular needs, but rather it can only do so in a way that is disciplined and punished to remain within the existing framework of ANC rule at the centre. Any attempt at the community level to challenge policy in a more thoroughgoing way, and especially any attempt to challenge the ANC's right to rule, will be ignored at best and actively marginalised at worst. Further, as experienced by the most recent generation of social movements in South Africa, once marginalised from ANC hegemony, social movements are treated as morally suspect and quickly become vulnerable to acts of repression. Hence, in the same way as with the 'party-state' and electoral competition for office, the practices that help constitute 'party-society' reflect the hegemony of the idea that the ANC is entitled to rule, and that substantive challenge for office is illegitimate.

Notes

1. Our thanks to Chris Tapscott for this simile.
2. A total of six interviews and four focus groups were conducted with ANC members in branches situated in four areas of the City of Johannesburg, namely: Protea South in Soweto; Eldorado Park; Sandton and Lenasia. This data forms part of a study conducted for the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation (Anciano 2013).
3. Respondents did not explicitly describe who formed ‘the Centre’ of the ANC, or as one respondent from Soweto called it ‘the mother-body’, however it was implied in comments that the ‘Centre’ was composed of national and provincial leadership.

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