

From protest hotspot to cabinet hotspot

More on Balfour revolt

In *SALB 33.5* Peter Pfaffe described the July 2009 service delivery protests in the Siyathemba township of Balfour in Mpumalanga. In February 2010 the township again erupted. This is an account of what drove these further protests only six months later after the failure of a government/community task team.

In February the Mpumalanga township of Siyathemba made national headlines once again as militant service delivery protests triggered a wave of protest that quickly spread to other Gauteng townships and squatter camps. The protest came seven months after the community had expressed their discontent over non-responsive local government and its failure to deliver basic services in July 2009.

The analysis I presented in *SALB 33.5* raised questions about the long-term sustainability of the local movement if the ANC government made minor concessions. This account of the February 2010 protest shows that the Siyathemba movement has not lost its drive, despite increased police repression. The state, however, has so far failed to make significant concessions.

2009 TASK TEAM FAILURE

The 2009 protest ended with the formation of a local task team comprising a committee of stakeholders of political parties and community representatives. It was mandated to identify which levels of government should address township youth concerns, and to develop a plan of action. But the community

leadership soon lost confidence in the task team.

One youth leader stated: 'That task team... was just a strategy to keep us preoccupied... We made preparations and we agreed on the plan of action and a set of things that were going to be done from there. Unfortunately the task team did not even see its way to completion, it just collapsed because it was co-ordinated by the MEC of Co-operative Governance, Mr Norman Mokwena. Those officials were leading the task team and ended up not coming to the meetings.'

In response to the task team's failure came the transformation of the Dipaleseng Youth Forum, the youth structure which led the 2009 protests, into the Dipaleseng Resident's Forum. According to community leaders, this transformation aimed to accommodate the needs and demands of the entire community and not only the youth.

RELATIONS WITH MINE

The 2009 protest was also directed at the Canadian-owned Burnstone Gold mine which had started shafting operations on farmland near Siyathemba in 2007. The unemployed

township youth had demanded that the mine employ more people from the local municipality and open a skills development centre in the area.

Initially, the mine invited youth leaders for a meeting. One told us: 'At our first meeting with them at their offices they asked us if we were aware of who we are dealing with here. They told us that they are multi-nationals and they've got political power so that there is nothing that we can do. Then all of a sudden they told us that they cannot engage with us without government playing the middleman as the referee.'

Further: 'It clearly showed us that the mine is not for our interest, it is only there to take our resources, our work and to leave our community like the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) or Nigeria, where they produce the good oil in the world but it is the poorest community in Africa.'

In February 2010, the municipality and the mine stated that of the mine's total staff of 231, 109 employees (47%) were sourced from the local area, and out of 703 employees appointed through contractors, 206 (29%) were sourced locally. Thus 33% of employees at the mine came from



the Dipaleseng municipality.

This is too few according to the Dipaleseng Residents Forum which expects more gains for the local community from the R2-billion mining investment. Mine management claim that their 2005 local skills survey showed that there are hardly any mining skills in the area, and that 'local talent will initially be signed to occupy junior and operator positions'. Great Basin Gold is expecting to extract about 5 000 ore tons of gold per day for 19 years once the mine is operational.

PROTEST

In January 2010 unemployed community members organised a spontaneous march to the mine to demand employment making the gravel road linking the mine with the town. The peaceful march was chased away by police. After a second march to the mayor yielded nothing, a mass meeting was called for Sunday 7 February and was attended by more than 1 000 community members.

A community leader says at the meeting they made three resolutions. 'One: Noting the behavior and the tendency of the mine in dealing with our issues, there is now a need for us

to protest against the mine. The second resolution was with regard to the issues of demarcation. To us, the issue of demarcation is not isolated from the service delivery. We believe that a number of service delivery orientated challenges can be easily dealt with and tackled just by incorporating us to Gauteng Province. Thirdly, community members were clear that... we need to service councillors with notice to say that we are asking them to step down because they are not assisting us...'

The meeting opted for a stayaway for the following day, 8 February. The stayaway would include workers and school children and taxi drivers were urged not to serve routes. The community was to gather at the taxi rank in the morning and then march towards the mine to block its entrance.

Clashes erupted when the police violently dispersed community members on the day of the stayaway even before the march to the mine started. As in 2009, the police's conduct strengthened community structures and the stayaway lasted for two days.

The level of confrontation between community members and the police,

however, was more violent than during the previous protest. The youth erected strong barricades around township entrances and dug trenches to trap police armoured vehicles. Police were pelted with stones whenever they attempted to disperse crowds of young protestors. According to news reports, a group of policemen escaped from angry young residents in a journalist's vehicle.

On the same day, between three and four o'clock, the Siyathemba library was set alight after the mayor refused to address the crowd asking for his resignation. The 2009 memorandum had demanded upgrading of the library with its outdated books and non-functional IT equipment and had called for internet connections on library computers.

According to the municipality, R200 000 had been transferred from the Department of Culture, Sports and Recreation for the upgrading of four libraries in the Dipaleseng municipality. However, by the time the library was set alight, no improvements had happened. One resident said: 'This library was useless, and our corrupt municipality failed to upgrade it for many years. Maybe we will get a properly equipped library now that this one has been burnt.'

POLICE REPRESSION

After the burning of the library, the police tried to hunt down and arrest leaders. At midnight on the same day, police approached the house of community leader, Zakhele Maya. Maya's father reported the next day: 'I was asleep at about midnight when I was woken by people banging the windows of my house. I begged them to stop banging on the windows and asked them to come through the front door. When I opened the door two police officers in uniform pointed a firearm at my forehead and started to hit me repeatedly with a gun, before I could say anything. I was so scared.' The

police, who provided no formal documentation, took a computer and cameras from the activist's room.

The next morning there was a heavy police presence in the township. A resident told us: 'It was very tense. Police were walking each and every street. People were going back to work, and everybody was asked questions like, 'Where are you going? What are you carrying in your bag?'

Four youth leaders left the township out of fear of arrest. One told us: 'Being on the run from the police was a terrible experience. At first we stayed at a friend's house in Heidelberg, but then received a call that the police on their way there. We left the house and went hiding in the bush. We did see the police knocking at the door and looking for us. It was then that we knew that they were tapping our phones.'

Finally a group of local pastors, mandated by the community, intervened and pressurised the police to stop the search. One pastor stated: 'The mandate was for us to go and speak to the SAPS in an effort to try to help in resolving this problem without having to use extreme force and also help bring order in our area. We were requested to meet the police and request that they should stop hunting the youth leadership because... the community has been left without any direction. So many things were developing and the community were beginning to turn against each other and some people were taking advantage of the situation, like common criminals.'

CABINET HOTSPOT

The pastors' intervention yielded success. A memorandum was sent to the Minister of Co-operative Governance Sicelo Shiceka, who had announced a visit for 19 February. In the memorandum, the pastors urged the minister to address the entire community in the stadium, rather than meeting with party representatives only.

Shiceka delivered his address under heavy police presence in the Siyathemba stadium. He promised to have the issue of demarcation addressed by the end of March 2010, and committed to make Balfour a top priority. However, his appearance did not convince residents as the familiar sound of rubber bullets being fired resounded as the minister's convoy departed.

Three months later, President Zuma visited Siyathemba for the second time in the year. He came with Home Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Social Development Minister Edna Molewa and provincial MECs. Balfour had developed from a protest hotspot to a cabinet hotspot – a development that can only be explained by the movements' use of militant tactics. While national government eagerly condemns violent protests, it simultaneously directs its attention towards those communities which use militant tactics of ungovernability including the blocking of main roads.

The president was treated with respect on his first visit in August 2009. This time, his delegation was greeted by angry residents waving placards. 'I have read your placards, so please put them down,' Zuma pleaded with the crowd. 'I would understand your frustration had I not come here, but now we are here to give you feedback on your grievances, so please give us a chance to talk.'

The local protests in Balfour then gained momentum. Youth leaders have been visiting other communities where service delivery protests took place, attempting to combine these localised struggles. Contacts have been made with the Gauteng Anti-Privatisation Forum.

However, the community lacks a counter-ideology to the ANC's neo-liberal approach to local development. Whereas some leaders are driven by a revolutionary socialist and Pan-Africanist ideology, others believe that the function of their protest is to get the ANC's national leadership's attention so it can 'fix' the problems. The community, however, is committed to increasing the pressure on local government and the Burnstone mine.

Militant protests in places like Orange Farm, Sharpeville, Leslie, Mamelodi, Olievenhoutbosch and Finetown over the past few months indicate that there is an increasing awareness among communities that militant action yields better results than peaceful marches and the submission of countless memoranda. The question of the sustainability of these local movements however in the absence of a comprehensive ideology remains open. LB

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Minister of Cooperative Governance Sicelo Shiceka and Balfour mayor, Lefti Tsoetsi (right) during the minister's stadium address.

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