

Inside Balfour's protests

Some reflections

In July this year Siyathemba in Balfour in Mpumalanga erupted in protest at the lack of government interest or service delivery to the community. **Peter Pfaffe** visited the township and makes some interesting and important observations.

During July 2009 the township of Siyathemba, Balfour, made national headlines after allegations that protests over service delivery had turned xenophobic. However, this analysis of the protest offers a different view.

What appears to be emerging is a new generation of young political activists who have lost confidence in the local structures of governance. However, it remains to be seen whether the movement in Balfour indicates the potential for long-term change or an end to activism after minor concessions by local government.

THE PROTEST

When we arrived in Siyathemba on the morning of 25 July, the township was still showing signs of the violent clashes between community members and the police which had gone on for the past week. All entrances to the township were blocked with heavy rocks and rubble. The smell of burned tyres was still in the air. The streets were covered with stones, empty tear gas containers and rubber bullet shells.

We met Lifu Nhlapo, 25 years old and member of the local Youth Forum. He informed us that the

rocks had been put in place in order to stop the armoured police vans, Niyalas, from entering the township.

On 19 July, at a community meeting members had voted for a stayaway of workers and school students after the Dipaleseng municipality had failed to respond to a memorandum submitted by them two weeks earlier.

Siyathemba is a desperately poor township of about 40 000 residents, many without electricity, water and sewerage. Most of the memorandum's demands concerned basic issues, such as a request for a police station, a mini-hospital, high mass lights and housing. Topping the list were calls for a skills training centre and policies governing job recruitment in the area.

Clashes between community members and the police erupted when the police violently dispersed the 19 July meeting, firing rubber bullets, teargas and according to some residents, live ammunition. But instead of intimidating community activists, the police's conduct led to a strengthening of community structures and the stayaway lasted for four days.

Angry protesters set fire to two

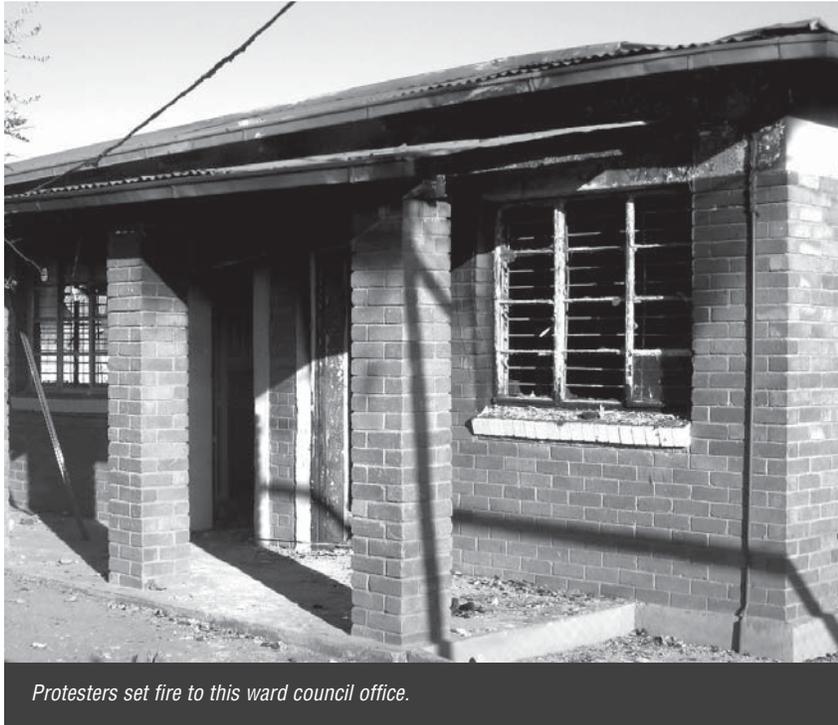
buildings: a small ward council office and an abandoned school store. On 20 July, in the course of the rioting, 22 foreign-owned shops were also looted. Looting of shops is common during protests in South Africa and elsewhere. In fact, people showed us South African-owned shops in the townships that had suffered this fate during the anti-apartheid struggle.

WERE PROTESTS XENOPHOBIC?

It is important to note that unlike the May 2008 xenophobic attacks across South Africa, rioters aimed at the foreigner's property, not their bodies. There is no evidence of demands for foreigners to leave the community. In fact, there is history of opposition to xenophobia in Siyathemba.

Lifu Nhlapo and Andile Matiwane, members of the Youth Executive Committee recalled their intervention in a community meeting in May 2008. Local business owners were concerned that foreigners would bring the drug trade and crime to the location. "The business leaders just wanted to protect their businesses. Each and every question and concern that they were having, we were able to capacitate and to measure them, so that they

Peter Platfe



Protesters set fire to this ward council office.

understand each and everything. And then this thing of xenophobia never came up again. When xenophobic violence erupted in the country in May 2008, it was not an issue here for us in the community," they said.

Mohammed Waqas, spokesperson for about 30 foreign nationals, mostly Ethiopians, told us that the foreigners were, albeit worried about their financial loss, supporting the protest: "The people are right," he said. "I've lived in Balfour for five years. I didn't see the government build any road, any new houses. They didn't do anything for the people. That's why the people are angry now. They want the service delivery."

Members of the Dipaleseng Youth Forum also took a strong stand against xenophobia. Lifu Nhlapo told us: "This must be put categorically clear about this xenophobia issue. People want to turn around the situation so they can advance their own interest.

Those foreign nationals who are the victims of this march, they got into the crossfire.

Jacob Makubo, another youth activist said: "We want to officially apologise to the foreigners. We never intended in harming them. It is a historical thing; toyi-toying always goes with looting of shops and all that. It is not a matter of the foreigners. Those guys who are Parliament today, they were also toyi-toying, and they were also breaking property."

YOUTH ARE LEADING

During our visit to Balfour, we had the chance to attend a mass meeting of the Youth Forum, made up of young men and women with matric certificates and no jobs. The meeting was militant, democratic and passed a motion of no confidence on to the mayor and the councillors. This reflects that while the protest was backed by the community, leadership was provided by the township's youth. It

is this generation that suffers the most from unemployment and lack of housing.

Many of the old leaders are now politicians and tender seekers. Lifu told us: "They are looking out for their interest - which means tenders. If you come out vocally and denounce the town councillors, you won't be in favour of your councillors and you won't be getting tenders and you won't be getting employment. Like us the youth as you can see... we have accepted that we don't even care whether you get employment or what. Because for yourself to be in a position of getting an employment or a business opportunity... you have to compromise the outcome for the community. So whether you become employed or you don't get employed, it's a matter of 'I won't compromise my community just because I want myself to be employed'. If things are wrong, I will come out and raise my concern. It's the youth who is leading now."

While xenophobia has been exaggerated in sensationalist news reports, almost no attention has been paid to the police brutality that occurred. We saw two examples, but were told that there were others.

In one case a fifteen-year-old boy, had allegedly been shot about 10 times with rubber bullets at close range. The boy also suffered a severe head injury from what looked like a blow from the butt of a gun on the back of his head. In another case a young mother was dragged from her hiding place under a bed and had her stomach ripped apart by a rubber bullet.

A SUSTAINABLE MOVEMENT?

Following the protest and violence in Balfour, a meeting was held on 27 July to address some of the issues the community had raised. The

meeting was attended by representatives of provincial and national government, community representatives, representatives of local business as well as members of the ANC (African National Congress), PAC (Pan Africanist Congress), SACP (SA Communist Party) and their respective youth organisations. Notably, no union representatives were present.

At the meeting it was agreed to set up a task team to investigate which level of governance should facilitate demands made by Siyathemba residents. However, no deadline was set for the task team to present its findings. It also remained unclear whether the task team would engage with the whole community in a public meeting as desired by the Youth Forum.

Our research showed that there is a great deal of frustration with ward councillors and other representatives of local government, who are perceived by residents as incompetent and unresponsive to their needs.

The legal means for frustrated citizens to express a democratic voice and claim rights had failed to bring relief, despite a new administration, who were expected to be more responsive to residents. Moreover, the increased levels of violence and police brutality in the protest paints a picture of a repressive state rather than an accommodating and approachable one that is willing to listen to its citizens.

When the task team started its work in the Dipaleseng municipality, it brought to the surface political divisions within the Youth Forum.

The majority of the executive committee are members of the ANC Youth League and a minority comes from the political tradition of PAC youth organisation, Payco (Pan Africanist Youth Congress). At the

height of the protest they demonstrated unity and emphasised that the protest goes beyond political organisations. But since then the more radical members belonging to the PAC tradition have become more and more isolated.

The ANC-loyal youth leaders engaged with the task force, whereas the other group argued for a continuation of the protest and a more radical strategy outside the structures proposed by provincial and national government.

This raises the question of the long-term sustainability of movements like the Dipaleseng Youth Forum.

The protests that swept the country in the middle of 2009 are not a novel occurrence on the South African social and political landscape. Impoverished residents of neglected townships have been voicing dissatisfaction with inadequate service delivery since the ANC came to power in 1994. Many community movements such as the Khutsong Demarcation Forum have lost their relevance and strength after ANC-led government structures made minor concessions. The question is whether the movement in Balfour will face the same fate.

What is new about the politics of the Balfour group is the leadership role of township youth in the struggle. The members of the youth executive committee, both male and female, are capable and disciplined political organisers who maintained a highly democratic culture during the protest. But the closeness of some members of the group to the ANC-initiated task team could mean that the movement might lose its radical commitment to democratisation and change.

CONCLUSION

We did not find evidence that xenophobia was the motivator



A 15 year old shows injuries resulting from police shooting rubber bullets at close range.

behind the service delivery protests in Balfour. If there was anti-foreign sentiment, it was limited and condemned by all.

But why were South African-owned shops spared from the looting? One possibility is that their owners remained in the township while rioting took place, unlike foreign traders. According to community members, it was mostly males as young as 14 and 15 who broke into the foreigners' shops and looted stock. It is likely that the looters feared fewer repercussions from the foreign shop owners. LB

Peter Pfaffe is a research assistant at the Centre for Sociological Research at the University of Johannesburg. During July and August 2009, the CSR conducted a quick research response in four 'hotspots' of service delivery. See the full report at www.uj.ac.za/csr