

'We engaged with foreigners, and they supported us'

Countering xenophobia in Khutsong

While research has looked at why xenophobia broke out in certain areas in May 2008 **Joshua Kirshner** and **Comfort Phokela** examine why it did not erupt in the North West's Khutsong. The township's huge campaign to resist integration into the North West had a lot to do with it.

Analysis of the xenophobic violence in May 2008 emphasised a link between high levels of poverty and violence towards migrants who were seen as encroaching on local people's already limited resources. These accounts focused on hotspots such as Alexandra in Johannesburg where the attacks first broke out but not on places like Khutsong where there were no incidents of xenophobic violence.

From 2005 to 2007, residents of Khutsong, a township next to the mining centre of Carletonville in Merafong municipality, engaged in a cross-border dispute with the government over incorporation into North West Province. Led by the local SACP (South African Communist Party) residents unleashed a wave of protest with the underlying issue being the possibility of bad service delivery in the North West.

RESISTANCE TO MUNICIPAL DEMARCATION

Khutsong was established in 1958 to house mining labour. It was a cross-border municipality that straddled the southwest corner of Gauteng and the northeast of North West Province.

According to Statistics South Africa, Merafong had a population of 215 865 in 2007, 60% of which resided in Khutsong. In the build-up to the 2006 municipal elections, the National Council of Provinces announced Khutsong would be moved from Gauteng to North West to improve administrative performance. But the government failed to consult with the community.

From 2005 through to 2007, Khutsong residents campaigned for the right to remain in Gauteng. Less than 5% of registered voters cast ballots in the 2006 municipal elections. Students and teachers boycotted school and resisted government efforts to coax them back. Armoured cars and police helicopters patrolled the streets. Protesters burnt tyres, looted shops, destroyed property and barricaded roads to make the township ungovernable.

The campaign involved the coming together of citizens' groups to resist an undemocratic government planning initiative.

The government appeared to have settled the matter, but in August 2005, the ANC Minister for Provincial and Local Government, Sidney

Mufamadi, indicated that Merafong would be incorporated into North West. The Merafong mayoral committee stated that it would remain in Gauteng and in November 2005 the portfolio committees for local government of the Gauteng and North West legislatures supported this decision. But on 6 December, the Gauteng legislature approved a bill transferring Merafong to North West.

Khutsong residents opposed the move firstly because they viewed it as a rural, poorly resourced province much less developed than Gauteng. Gauteng they believed offered social services and there was hope of new housing projects. Secondly, they felt their economic ties were to Gauteng as more workers commuted there since transport to Mafikeng, the capital of the North West, was poor. Thirdly, the demarcation ignored local mineworkers' historic contribution to Gauteng's economy.

Peaceful protests did not bring any official explanation for the transfer so activists in the Young Communists League (YCL) and SACP formed the Merafong Demarcation Forum (MDF). This was a democratic organisation chaired by Jomo Magale that mobilised protest actions.



Youths engage in direct action to protest incorporation into North West.

Its members included church leaders, small business owners, taxi drivers' associations, representatives of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), as well as activists aligned with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the United Democratic Movement (UDM).

Over the next two years, the campaign raised political consciousness through civil disobedience and direct action. Organisers held a mass meeting every Sunday for over a year. A group of women organised the Khutsong Women's Forum under the MDF, and many students marched and called for the release of arrested youth. Township residents were in open rebellion of government with at least 6 000 taking part in protests.

Following the boycott of the 2006 elections, the MDF switched tactics and appointed Lawyers for Human Rights to challenge the amendment on municipal demarcation in the Constitutional Court. It wanted to prove that the government failed in its obligations to facilitate public involvement in the re-demarcation process, something that was at the heart of the Khutsong unrest. The court dismissed the application.

Neither the local nor central government used existing channels to explain the policy to township dwellers or seek their input. Residents felt like government was ruling by decree. Making things worse were rumours of offers to Merafong's mayor to become a North West MEC following the demarcation.

MDF continued to mobilise community members and also acted

as a mediating institution to channel local concerns to the state. While the anti-demarcation campaign enjoyed wide support and the MDF maintained a democratic culture during the protests, there was disagreement over the use of violent tactics.

Also, while many immigrants were active in the campaign, some did not feel empowered to participate.

The media described the unrest in Khutsong as a protest about poor service delivery, but such concerns were delivered in an indirect way. The more pressing goal was to resist the provincial demarcation and rejoin Gauteng.

RESPONSE TO ATTACKS

In May 2008, xenophobic attacks spread from Alexandra to Diepsloot and to the East Rand, then onto townships in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. The attacks were met with shock and outrage and shook the country's image of racial reconciliation.

While the crisis unfolded, the MDF invited community members to the Khutsong Stadium, where Mogale and other civic leaders countered xenophobia by conveying the idea that our humanity does not end at national borders. 'They told us not to be afraid because of what was happening... in Alexandra. They said whatever was happening in Alex would not happen here,' explained a Mozambican man.

The MDF-led mobilisation had created a sense of broad-based solidarity in the township. The Khutsong rebellion was mainly aimed at central government, therefore when residents mobilised

they did not view immigrants as a problem or a source of competition.

The presence of a representative civic leadership offers another explanation for the lack of xenophobia. Local elected officials did not lead Khutsong's mobilisation, rather, ordinary citizens provided leadership. Mogale, a schoolteacher and former councillor, Paul Ncwane, a former football star, and Siphwe Nkutha, the YCL secretary were key figures in spearheading the protests. The forum didn't lead; community members took up the fight alongside it.

In part, the MDF was motivated by moral concerns in opposing xenophobia, seeking to set an example by its ability to oppose hostility to foreigners. To achieve this, it encouraged solidarity and sought to instill tolerance among residents through strategy sessions and mass meetings. This put pressure on leadership to be accountable to activists and ordinary residents.

The campaign offered an entry point for political engagement for many residents, including non-citizens. A schoolteacher noted, 'The idea of separation was not there. We engaged with foreigners, and they supported us.' And Mogale commented, 'Our democracy should not only be representative, it should be participatory.'

The MDF passed a community resolution to never harm foreigners, stressing a collective responsibility to defend immigrants' rights. Residents indicated that accepting immigrants stemmed not only from individual morality but also from a collective commitment to the community.

Leaders also felt that xenophobia would upset the movement's focus and recent immigrants might not feel an equal stake in the boundary dispute as long-term residents did. They realised that gaining immigrants' buy-in increased the movement's ranks and its political leverage to negotiate with the state.

Perhaps the key explanation for anti-xenophobia in Khutsong lies in

the way the movement encouraged a common sense of place. The notion of inclusion developed within a community protest coalition which strove for cohesion to strengthen demands and increase political leverage against the state.

This de-emphasis of national citizenship was also a reaction to the state's drawing of boundaries. Public officials overlooked the place-based identity in Khutsong in their effort to boost administrative rationality and eliminate cross-border municipalities. By contrast, many residents saw demarcation as a displacement from

The majority of migrants in Khutsong are Mozambicans many of whom were retrenched from the mines and stayed and married women in the area.

There is also a more recent influx of Ethiopians and Somalis. When asked about their participation in the anti-demarcation campaign, they offered mixed responses. Some residents believed the Ethiopians and Somalis who work in the retail sector undermine local businesses by undercutting prices, but Somali and Ethiopians said they were attracted to Khutsong for its lack of

CAMPAIGN ENDS

The three-year campaign ended victoriously. In October 2008, newly elected Gauteng Premier, Paul Mashatile, oversaw the legislative process to reincorporate Merafong into Gauteng. The National Council of Provinces passed a bill incorporating it into Gauteng in March 2009, a month before national and provincial elections.

Khutsong remains a loyal ANC stronghold, but through the demarcation struggle it became the largest SACP branch in the country. Mogale claims the MDF is in a 'healing process' with the ANC. Others see tensions emerging over its future direction and relationship with the ANC.

CONCLUSION

The anti-demarcation campaign forged interaction and cohesion in Khutsong that contributed to the avoidance of xenophobia. Although not all foreign migrants participated in the campaign, the local leadership nurtured a sense of solidarity among residents.

That some immigrants, particularly Mozambicans, protested the demarcation along with South Africans suggested their long-term stake in the community. Others, less embedded in the community, did not fully understand the protest goals nor feel empowered by them. Fostering the integration of immigrants and overcoming xenophobia will continue to be a challenge in Khutsong as it diversifies. ¹⁸

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New Somali traders in Khutsong.

Gauteng through the bureaucratic redrawing of boundaries. This territorial focus served as a basis for residents to confront the state and assert their rights.

Local leaders sought to create alliances within civil society by building a unified identity as residents of the area. This differed from other places that witnessed xenophobic violence in May 2008.

SOUTH AFRICANS AND IMMIGRANTS

The nearby gold mines attracted large numbers of international and domestic migrant workers. The NUM, which upholds a non-racial and anti-xenophobic ethos, has succeeded in constructing solidarity among its members and it fostered collective bonds between citizens and non-citizens in the mining workforce.

discrimination. Some did not see the difference between being part of Gauteng or North West and others felt a degree of coercion to take part in the protests.

Residents view Mozambicans as social insiders since they downplay their national identity while emphasising their local allegiance to Khutsong and Gauteng. Social ties and interaction fostered Mozambicans' joining the anti-demarcation protests. They have developed close personal relationships with local residents, a grasp of local political dynamics and have made social investments in the community.

In contrast, many of the newer immigrants do not interact with locals much as many arrived after the end of the demarcation dispute. The issue of xenophobia is, therefore, around these newer immigrants.