

Patronage Politics Divides Us

A Study of Poverty, Patronage and Inequality in South Africa

The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), which was publicly launched as a think tank in March 2011, was founded to create a platform of engagement around strategic issues facing South Africa. It combines research and academic development, strategic reflections and intellectual discourse, and applies itself to issues such as economics, sociology, governance, history, arts and culture, and the logics of natural sciences.

Patronage Politics Divides Us: A Study of Poverty, Patronage and Inequality in South Africa is the culmination of a research project that forms part of MISTRA's first suite of eight priority research projects.

The research explores the relationship between patronage, poverty, and inequality with a particular focus on its impact on the conduct of local politics. The overall aim of the study was to explore the possibility of constituting public institutions in a manner that enables them to become legitimate arbiters between the various interests, rather than as instruments that are captured by contending interest groups for their own accumulation.

Most importantly, this study was necessitated by the realisation that post-apartheid patronage politics has not received sufficient scholarly attention. This research study aims to help fill that gap, especially by contributing empirical research to the subject. The report goes beyond answering the primary questions of the study: it is a profile of socio-economic life in South Africa's various communities as experienced not only by locals, but also by foreign-born residents.

The findings provide a window on relationships between councillors, business interests, and local party organisations.



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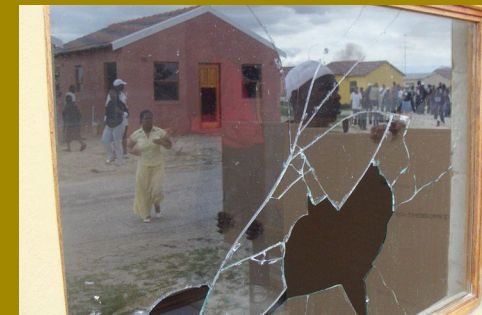
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Mcebisi Ndletyana, Pholoana Oupa Makhalemele and Ralph Mathekga

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F OREWORD

Democracy in South Africa's local communities has been nurtured over some 17 years. At the formal level, this has entailed the establishment of democratic local government structures and systems of accountability, processes of demarcation and re-demarcation, and the establishment of new administrations. As democratic local government matures, so have informal relationships between citizens and this sphere of government congealed – ranging from informal recruitment and employment practices, conduct of the councillors and municipal employees, and practices to garner political support and reward such, to local community protests.

The new local government structures are in large measure an antithesis of the illegitimate apartheid local authorities, which were fiercely resisted by the population. To this extent, they are also an extension of alternative expressions of people's power that started to manifest during the last decade of the apartheid system. Nineteen years into democratic South Africa, however, it is apparent that this sphere of government is facing strain in many areas of the country. Numerous surveys, over different periods, indicate that local government is the least trusted of all spheres of government. Local protests over poor delivery of social services have become a recurrent feature in many communities. Structures and systems of accountability, such as ward committees and processes to develop integrated development plans (IDP), seem largely not to have delivered the initial promise. It is against this backdrop that the Mapungubwe Institute (MISTRA) initiated research on *Poverty, Inequality and Patronage* as part of its first suite of eight Priority Research Projects. Through this research, MISTRA sought to gain insight into how patronage politics contributes to some of the problems being experienced; and further, how poverty and inequality articulate with such patronage.

In interrogating this correlation, the study does not seek to imply unique causality between poverty and inequality on the one hand and patronage politics on the other. Rather, it studies the concrete articulation among these dynamics as experienced by local communities. In pursuit of this objective, five diverse case studies were conducted in localities spread across four provinces. Researchers interviewed a number of individuals and interest groups, attended public meetings, and generally got a sense of life in these communities.

The research was undertaken over a period of two years, about eight months of which were taken up by the fieldwork. The process entailed numerous other activities including a series of colloquia with experts and recognised scholars in the field, and a peer review process. The report goes beyond answering the primary questions of the study. It is a profile of socio-economic life in South Africa's various communities as experienced not only by locals, but also by foreign-born residents. The findings also show the relationship between councillors, business interests and local party organisations. While these issues are studied from the perspective of experiences in poor local communities, this does not necessarily imply the absence of patronage politics in areas where the well-off reside. The latter requires a separate study.

And so, what survivalist strategies do the poor adopt to manoeuvre the patronage minefield? How do they conduct themselves in relation to the often selective enforcement of municipal by-laws, which itself creates fertile ground for patronage and corruption? Where local residents come into conflict with foreign-born nationals or even with migrants from other parts of the country—is this reflective of a shared grievance among the majority? How do political parties discourage or entrench patronage politics and, in turn, what effect is this having on the parties themselves?

Communities' lived experiences, summarised in this report, do offer some answers to these questions. They contain many insights that suggest policy measures that can be undertaken by political parties and government structures to remedy the situation. The study distils these measures in the form of recommendations for consideration by policy makers. These range from internal party democracy in processes to select candidates for municipal elections, to the vexed question about the insidious impact of the current system of party-political funding.

MISTRA is the first to acknowledge that this report does not drill deep enough into the core and related questions. We offer this study as part of a contribution to the necessary discussion that we should have about how to eliminate the negative effects of patronage politics, and thus strengthen South Africa's democracy.

We wish to extend our gratitude to the research team, including the field workers who, for extended periods, located themselves in these communities and trawled through masses of documentation arising from their interactions. We thank, too, the participants in workshops and colloquia, the peer reviewers and the donors for making this work possible.

Joel Netshitenzhe – Executive Director

