

A MISTRA Policy Brief



*A research project
of the Mapungubwe
Institute for
Strategic Reflection
(MISTRA)
Launched February 2023*

Protest in South Africa: Rejection, reassertion, reclamation

This policy brief is informed by MISTRA's edited research volume, *Protest in South Africa: Rejection, reassertion, reclamation*. The volume explores the underpinnings of protest in contemporary South Africa and both its short-term causes and structural drivers. Contributors to the volume provide an overview of the complexity of protest action, the diversity of protest spaces and actors, and the responses to protest from both citizens and state.

This policy brief extracts the key policy messages from the book.

The volume explores the underpinnings of protest in contemporary South Africa and both its short-term causes and structural drivers. Contributors provide an overview of protest action, and the responses to protest from both citizens and state.

KEY FINDINGS

1. While South Africa's history is characterised by protest and resistance, contemporary protest action reflects popular experiences post-1994, including dissatisfaction with the quality of governance, the absence of many of the anticipated substantive democratic outcomes, and the common experience of an incomplete freedom.
2. Protest in South Africa has increased, both in frequency and range. These increases are accompanied by intensifying critiques of the dominant order and even a growing rejection of formal or 'system' politics.
3. Contemporary protest often reflects calls for improved or further democracy and complements other established forms of public participation. In some instances, however, it indicates a rejection of multiparty democracy itself.
4. Resonances can be identified between protest in South Africa and the global wave of 21st-century protest. Internationally, protest has been underpinned by experiences of economic inequality, democratic deficit and the varied experiences of citizenship.
5. Protest has not only been the preserve of the marginalised or those seeking progressive change. We can also identify blurred boundaries between protest action and alternative forms of collective violence that arguably go 'beyond protest' and amount to reactionary acts, even if expressed within a narrative of limited economic resources.
6. The underpinnings of protest in South Africa are inseparable from citizen–state, party–state, party–citizen and citizen–citizen relations, which remain entangled in the dominance of the governing African National Congress.
7. Protest on occasion is mediated by elites across the spheres of government and enabled by the actions or inactions of the state. Criminalisation within some arms of the state facilitated their failure to pre-empt and contain the organised unrest of July 2021.
8. Protest is an assertion of agency, but also a call for inclusion. Across the diversity of spaces, actors and sectors, protest constitutes a mode of rejection – of the status quo, lived conditions, policies, authority; a means of reassertion – of rights, identity, ownership, belonging; and a vehicle by which to reclaim – citizenship, dignity, democracy, power.

Contemporary protest often reflects calls for improved or further democracy and complements other established forms of public participation. In some instances, however, it indicates a rejection of multiparty democracy itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research presented in this MISTRA publication makes the case that policy responses entail both specific interventions, and also determined efforts to deliver on existing policies to improve socio-economic conditions, reduce inequality and deepen the mechanisms of democracy. It is the response to protest by the state that will determine its role as force for positive change.

The publication makes a number of area-specific recommendations.

Socio-economic transformation and service provision

- Policy responses to grievances raised in protest must address socio-economic conditions and the failure of current frameworks to transform the lives of the majority of South Africans far more substantively than has been the case to date. This requires that development be seen consistently as central to the reduction of protest, and that interventions respond to the underpinnings of all forms of protest, be they peaceful, disruptive or violent.
- Inadequate delivery of quality services at municipal, provincial and national levels underpins many protests. It is critical that government address the delivery of water, electricity, housing and other social services as fundamental to human dignity, quality of life and citizen-state relations. Integrity and transparency in the provision of these services are pivotal.

- Policies must address concertedly, and with much-improved impact, the many forms of deprivation that impact on South Africans' experiences of democracy and citizenship. This requires interaction between the multiple government departments involved in the delivery of infrastructure and social services.
- Interventions for economic development must be aligned with environmental concerns about the protection of natural resources, ecosystems and livelihoods, and must include meaningful consultation with affected communities and interest groups.

Strengthening of democratic mechanisms

- Mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making, especially at local government level, must ensure that the needs and concerns of communities are reflected in policy decisions. Protest is often about calls for greater democracy and improved governance.
- Protest movements have been able to mobilise those who may not previously have engaged in protest action. Responses to protest by state and society may be better informed by understanding the connection between increasing protest action and dissatisfaction with the country's trajectory.
- It is crucial that public officials display transparency, accountability and ethical values to avert a potential rejection of democratic values by some South Africans.

Recognition and inclusion

- Policy responses to protest grievances must be cognisant of the voices sometimes silenced in dominant narratives, such as those of women and rural communities. The needs and concerns raised by these groups are foundational issues affecting the wellbeing of wider communities. An understanding of their accounts, and a recognition of their agency, would improve our understanding of protest drivers.
- Provision of basic infrastructure remains central to the realisation of dignity and social inclusion. Policy interventions relating to service delivery must take account of this, and be cognisant that access to services can shape communities' experiences of citizenship itself.
- Community organisers and movements must be aware of the potential for protest leaders to be co-opted during their engagements with the state and private sector. It is important that community organisers be aware of this, and take steps to ensure that the communities' influence and agendas are asserted, rather than the vested interests of individuals.

Provision of basic infrastructure remains central to the realisation of dignity and social inclusion. Access to services can shape communities' experiences of citizenship itself.

State stability and legitimacy

- Political parties must address the spilling-over of intra-party contestations and factionalism into social instability and protest. This is manifest at both local and national levels, and notably within the governing ANC.
- It is critical to reverse the waning legitimacy of the state against the backdrop of systemic corruption and 'state capture' if the threat of social and state instability is to be addressed. Equally, illegitimate centres of power and authority that are expanding outside of the state must be tackled.
- The Public Order Police must urgently be equipped, and the service reformed, to ensure the state's ability to prevent a repeat of devastating unrest.
- In order to prevent a recurrence of the violence and instability experienced in July 2021, it is imperative to reverse the politicisation and corruption in the State Security Agency.
- De-politicisation of the police service and independent oversight of policing and intelligence must be strengthened to guarantee a police service that serves the interest of the public.
- In an already weakened state, the existence of illegally operating, armed, private security companies poses a threat to law and order. Regulation of the private security industry must be improved to reduce threats to stability.

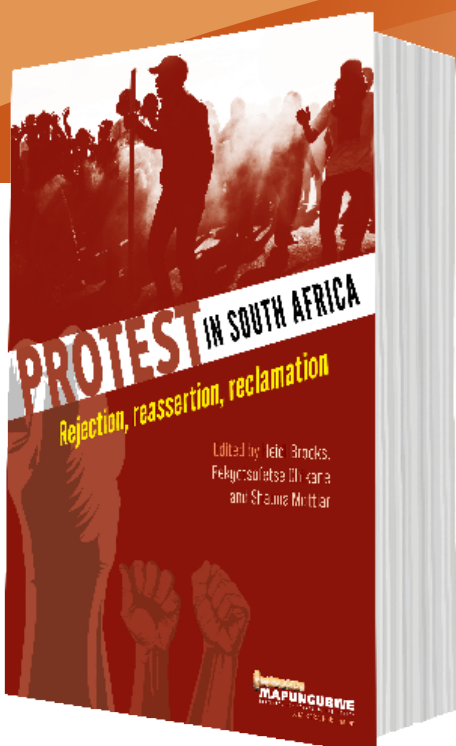
Social cohesion

- Any interventions aimed at addressing underlying structural and material drivers of protest must recognise the inequality of experiences between communities, such as between formal and informal settlements, not least in the receipt of state services.
- Persistent socio-economic inequalities and racial and class differences remain barriers to the achievement of social cohesion. These challenges must be addressed to prevent divisions within communities and the racial tensions that characterised the July 2021 unrest.
- Policy interventions and narratives must address the prevalence of xenophobic and Afrophobic protests that manifest from the material circumstances in which many South Africans find themselves. It is crucial to address the root causes of exclusion and marginality in impoverished communities to stall the emergence of an exclusionary, populist nationalism.
- Social cohesion between South Africans, and between South Africans and migrants, must become the responsibility of all societal actors, including the state, political parties, private businesses and civil society organisations.

Criminality, safety and rights protection

- The manner in which the police carry out crowd management has an impact on the character of protest. The model of policing in South Africa must achieve a careful balance between protecting the right to protest and the duty to maintain public order.
- Policing interventions are required to address the vigilantism and mob justice evident in some protests. These interventions should include concerted efforts to ensure both accountable and responsive policing, and trust in the criminal justice system.
- Criminality and looting in protests can be addressed by programmes to improve people's material circumstances, by the display of ethical and accountable values by political elites and representatives, and by effective and legitimate police action.

The model of policing in South Africa must achieve a careful balance between protecting the right to protest and the duty to maintain public order.



The published book containing the research report entitled Protest in South Africa: Rejection, reassertion, reclamation can be purchased from: sales@jacana.co.za | Tel: +27 011 628 3200

To contact MISTRA

Tel: +27 11 518 0260 | **Fax:** +27 11 518 0266

Email: web@mistra.org.za | **Web:** www.mistra.org.za

Address: Cypress Place North,
Woodmead Business Park,
142 Western Service Road,
Woodmead, Johannesburg, 2191