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Service Delivery Protests, not an excuse for anarchy and vandalism

Within the South African socio, economic and political context, the history of protests has always been synonymous with the struggle against unjust apartheid laws, economic exploitation poor living and working conditions, academic exclusion and forced removals amongst others. These protests were a response to the prevailing conditions with the intention to change them for the better.

A brief historical overview can bear testimony to that, the defiance campaign which included the burning of passes by the ANC in the 1950s, using facilities intended for white people in violation of Separate Amenities Act. The Alexandra bus boycott protests against removals from Sophiatown to Soweto, school boycotts and non – attendance of classes and universities. These were some of the protest actions embarked upon by people in various conditions, including workers strikes in factories and mines, and consumer boycotts in different towns, locations and villages all over South Africa.

By their very basic nature these protest actions were largely peaceful. Even the Sharpsville shootings of 1960 were not followed by violent eruptions on a large scale. The situation took a different turn after the 1976 student uprising in Soweto. The change in modus operandi from peaceful to violent one was a result of state machinery unleashing the brand of its military might on an unarmed and defenceless people. In retaliation the protesters resorted to violence through burning symbols of apartheid and secondly in defence of their space and reassertion of their humanity.

The above scenario was understandable given the prevailing conditions of the time. These violent protest actions were a response to a hopeless and deplorable circumstance, which at best led to destruction of property and at worst included the loss of life. By then people were living in abject poverty in scanty living conditions devoid of meaningful material resources.

However, since the dawn of freedom the lives of ordinary black people changed for the better. Before 1994, in many areas where black people lived there was a shortage of schools, roads, clinics, hospitals, electricity and many other amenities which came naturally to white suburbs and other people of colour. It is within this context that an acknowledgement has to be made that a lot still needs to be done. The ANC led government is confronted by an unenviable task of bringing better basic services to all the people of this country, some of these services were unseen and unheard of in large parts of the country – like clean piped water, electricity, clinic, school and employment amongst others. This is a mammoth task which could not be achieved within a wink of an eye by any government on this planet. To bring all these services, to all the people of the country irrespective of their geographic location and social standing.

Notwithstanding the progress already made so far, some disturbing signs are beginning to emerge and are common place all over the country where basic service delivery protests are taking place. What is absent in the majority of these protests is public order as these activities are characterised by lawlessness, anarchy and vandalism. In the heat of these protests public violence is spiralling out of control. It is understandable that members of the community should engage in service delivery protests where they experience government neglect. But what cannot be condoned is the fact that people should destroy the little they have whilst they still demand more. It is paradoxical that people must destroy their own property and still cry neglect in the provision of services in areas where they live. It must be acknowledged that these facilities or resources come at a high cost at a snail pace. So destroying them is not helpful since it will take more time to replace. It is the resources in the position of government that are spread very thin far and wide. So destroying them is not in the best interest of anybody.

Actually moswane o rereshitse ge are “KE GO IPHAHLA KA LEFEGO”, it is not understandable why should people burn a much needed clinic whilst they are protesting against lack of water. It is foolhardy for anybody to dig trenches on access roads whilst they demand electricity. It is unforgivable to stop emergency service personnel from providing services to people in die stress whilst you demand clean piped water.

Equally it must be stressed that politicians and public officials must not be absolved for shirking their responsibilities, which results in people not getting their much deserved services. Where the requisite skills are available and resources plenty services must be provided to communities within a short possible space of time. Failure to do so should result in those holding high offices to account to the public, where misdeeds are detected corrective measures must be taken. Politicians and public officials cannot hide behind political rhetoric and façade of bureaucratic entanglements in the face of these public outbursts. Public officials and representatives must remain true to their ropes and do what must be done and which is what they are paid for.

In certain instances this violent public service delivery protests are fuelled by perceived acts of corruptions by those holding high offices. It is generally believed that corruption where it exists delays and even stalls service delivery. Where corruption is suspected prompt investigation should be undertaken and if found justice should be applied.

In conclusion members of the South African Police Service must at all times be visible and vigilant during this public service delivery protest. Whenever the law is broken they must act swiftly and within the confines of the law by arresting the perpetrators. Unlike in the case of Andries Tatane and many similar others whose deaths were in vain and are still mourned by many, Members of SAPS must be seen as law enforcement officers and not as judges or prosecutors. They cannot act ultra vires.

In the same breath in cases where arrests have been made as a result of these criminal acts, the granting of free or paltry bail serves to erode public confidence in the judicial systems. Furthermore it encourages high levels of anarchy and vandalism in similar future service delivery marches and protests

It is therefore against this background that the Executive Mayor of Sekhukhune District Municipality Cllr Mogobo David Magabe writes this open letter to the people of Sekhukhune in particular and South Africa in general. Recently, the District Municipality experienced some disturbing trends where vio

lent service delivery protests occurred. For example:

1. In Leeuwfontein Township of Epyrain Mogale Municipality, roads were touched as residents demanded water positioning,
2. At Ga-Nchabeleng village in Feta Kgomo municipality, water infrastructure was destroyed and roads were touched as residents were fighting with Feta Kgomo municipality over land,
3. At Driekop, France selection Greater Tubatse Municipality, residents blockaded R37 road and touched a house belonging to a ward Councillor as they demanded electricity and water,
4. At Monstrous in Elias Motsoaledi Municipality, residents blockaded roads with burning tyres demanding water and other services,
5. At Mmanotwane village in Feta Kgomo Municipality, residents touched a house belonging to a Traditional leader and touched more than 24 trucks and cars after a mine operation resulted in a death of a young person.

All the above incidents occurred within seven days leading to the time of printing this letter. And the issues raised are genuine however, the manner at which they are being raised is a serious concern.

In conclusion, I am making a call to all South Africans to exercise restraint and believe that negotiations are the only viable solution to all the challenges confronting us. We need to draw lessons from the successful negotiated settlement that brought about our hard earned democracy and freedom. And in the spirit of our late iconic figure Tata Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, endeavour to make peace at all times and together move South African forward.

Author

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