



Protesters: activists or criminals?

Last week's protests in Kimberley started off as a peaceful march to highlight concerns surrounding the award of an electricity tender (amongst others), only to degenerate into violent looting (www.news24.com, www.news24.com). This is a great pity as protesters' grievances have been eclipsed by the images of a gutted liquor store and footage of violent interruption of the Mayor's address. The incident brings into relief debates surrounding the growing level of violence witnessed in protests this year and how these impact on the legitimacy of grievances.

Road closures, looting and the morphing of protest modus operandi

Protests have become more violent this year according to data from the Municipal Hotspots Monitor - with more than 9 out of every ten service delivery protests impinging on the rights of others to go about their daily lives, whether it be to commute safely, attend school or keep a business running without fear of looting.

In previous years, typically 7 out of every ten protests recorded on the Municipal Hotspots Monitor were violent. The increase has frequently been accompanied by incidents of looting of vehicles, "tolls" being charged and even petrol-bombing - daunting prospects for commuters, and one that undermines the ability of citizens to access educational, work, recreational, or health facilities.

Anyone who encounters such a protest would have sympathy for Cabinet's condemnation of road closures as "acts of economic sabotage" - with major disruptions to commuting imposed (www.news24.com). In addition, the threat of violence (see below) is commonly observed; with cars gratuitously stoned and in recent months, petrol-bombed.

Where violence escalates, trucks, police and municipal vehicles are hijacked, looted and/or torched. For bona fide community activists, this morphing of protests poses a serious risk to the legitimacy of their protests, and undermines grievances.

A major concern is criminal opportunism - not only are shops looted, often those owned by vulnerable small businesses, but records of micro-lenders are frequently torched, often under the veil of xenophobic sentiment.

The focal point of road closures also distracts policing to restoring traffic, rather than marshalling peaceful protest action and ensuring stability in affected communities. Tools for this engagement become violent too - stun grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets, escalating violence and further alienating communities from those in authority.

The net result is one of a torn social fabric where grievances are lost and protests more likely to become criminalised than heard.

Defining violence

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (www.who.int).

Our Municipal Hotspots Monitor defines protests that impinge on the freedom of movement or property of others, including the state, as violent. This includes road closures that threaten passer-bys or damage road and community infrastructure.

It is important to acknowledge that this definition takes into account the unique South African context of anti-apartheid campaigns that sought to make entire areas "ungovernable", with "shut-downs" used as a tool to assert collective disapproval of government (www.sahistory.org.za). While the legitimacy of such techniques is eroded by democracy and various channels for participation in governance, the great tragedy is that those who suffer the most impact from protests tends to be the very community raising grievances.

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