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Brij Maharaj

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Brij MAHARAJ (University of Natal):

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Local Government Challenges in post apartheid South Africa

Brij Maharaj, Professeur, Université du Natal-Pietermaritzburg

MaharajB@nu.ac.za

Since the late 1980s, the need for strong decentralised local government received increased impetus as "African states became subject to external as well as internal 'democratic' pressures" (Tordoff and Young, 1994:287).

In a preface to the second edition of his book entitled *Local Government in the Third World*, Mahwood (1992:vii) argued that demise of the "centralised party state" in many parts of Africa has resulted in a growing emphasis on "good government" at the local level. The focus on local government is significant in a period of economic and political restructuring because "it tends to be an important manifestation of pluralist democracy" (Mahwood, 1992:vii).

Local government plays a major role in facilitating and promoting three important values which nurture democracies:

- i) liberty: as local government is a vehicle for dispersing political power and catering for local variations;
- ii) participation: as local government extends choice and individual involvement in the democratic process;
- iii) efficiency: as local government - with its greater sensitivity to local conditions - enables the matching of services to the needs and wishes of local communities (Bekker and Jeffery, 1989:1).

Furthermore, in order to function effectively, local government must be seen to be legitimate by being politically acceptable to the society it serves. As Bratton and Rothchild (1992:265) have emphasised, effective local government "depends on the legitimacy derived from broad based participation, fairness and accountability". Local government must also be viable in the sense that it must have the financial and human resources to enable it to conduct its functions efficiently (Bekker and Jeffery, 1989).

The restructuring of local government is especially significant in the context of South Africa's emerging democracy, especially since this transformation "has taken place in a way that is probably unique from an international comparative perspective". Out of all the political systems that have gone through a non-revolutionary regime transition from authoritarianism to democracy, South Africa is the only one where this transition occurred *simultaneously* at a national and sub-national level. The reasons for this relate to a large extent to the structure of South Africa's towns and cities and to the nature of the urban social movements that resisted, challenged and overthrew urban apartheid during the decade of defiance that led up to the decade of transition, namely the 1980s" (Swilling, Monteiro and Johnson, 1995:16, original emphasis).

While the prime purpose of restructuring local government (and the redrawing of municipal boundaries) in South Africa was to ensure democracy at the local level, there were other reasons as well:

- i) rationalising the many structures of local government (both political and administrative);

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- ii) changing the focus of local government from strict control to development and management;
- iii) eliminating corruption and mismanagement of funds;
- iv) reducing the level of duplication at local government level; and
- v) creating a more user-friendly local authority (Subban, 1994:4).

It is at the local government level that citizens actually ‘experience’ democracy as they try to influence local processes. This is often done by relating to elected councillors and bureaucrats, individually or in groups. Hence, local government is viewed “as an expression of civic freedom” (Fiedler, 1993:3). The new democratic government in South Africa has acknowledged that local authorities will have an important role in unleashing the “political and creative energies of the people and bring[ing] the government closer to the people”.¹

The temporal goals of any city are determined by the results of the local political system and the configuration of interests it represents - in terms of who holds leadership posts, whose interests are promoted by the city, and the nature of local policy (Greer, 1987). Collectively, these components ascertain the viability of political leadership, the differential ability to combine interests and to promote programs responsive to local needs and the capability to manoeuvre public and private sector interventions. Together, these factors influence political and economic outcomes in specific localities.

The governance and administration of cities is influenced by social, economic and political factors. However, in many cities ‘race’ has emerged as an important local issue, and urban politics has been significantly influenced by racial factors. This has been especially so in South Africa.

In South Africa the de-racialisation of local government represents a major challenge. Also, the socio-spatial distortions of the apartheid era will have to be addressed through a more equitable distribution of resources, and the re-drawing of geographical boundaries. It is in this regard that local governments have a key role to play in the new South Africa as they will be involved in providing services, as well as influencing and implementing the Reconstruction and Development Programme which will make a major impact on the well-being of communities. The emergence of non-racial, democratic and viable local government structures is crucial for the survival and development of South Africa's fledgling democracy.

Bekker *et al* (1990:5) have suggested that the ‘public institutional situation’ in the Durban Functional Region (DFR)¹ exhibited the following characteristics:

¹ White Paper on Reconstruction and Development - Government's Strategy for Fundamental Transformation, September 1994, p. 22.

¹ Some of the factors which influenced the definition of the DFR boundary included “daily functional relationships with a core city; including enough area to encompass the broad settlement patterns of a metropolitan area; including enough land to incorporate expected population growth; ensuring a manageable planning area; attempting to correlate administrative and statistical boundaries with the functional region; and identifying physical features which correspond with the boundary” (Tongaat-Hulett Planning Forum Report, 1989, Appendix 2).

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- i) a mosaic of uncoordinated local authorities ('own affairs' local bodies within Natal and a variety of tribal and other bodies within KwaZulu);
- ii) a resultant fragmentation of service delivery to the DFR's different communities;
- iii) a highly diversified political culture in the region;
- iv) a number of rapidly expanding informal settlements with high priority development needs;
- v) centralised governmental control over planning in the region (rather than devolved and participative planning); and
- vi) deep division over alternative future scenarios for the city of Durban and the wider metropolitan area.

The challenges facing democratic non-racial local authorities in South Africa as identified by Bennington and Hartley (1994:7-8) had a special resonance for the city of Durban:

- i) how to democratise local government to ensure that it would be non-racial and legitimately representative of all people;
- ii) how to engender an adequately solid political alliance between the numerous competing (and sometimes conflicting interests) at local, regional and central levels;
- iii) how to develop new structures in local government which would manage and deliver services to communities disadvantaged by apartheid and also contribute to urban reconstruction and development;
- iv) how to restructure the workforce through training and retraining existing employees, and affirmative action recruitment, to ensure that there is a racial and gender balance.

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