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THE COALITION EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL, DISTRICT AND METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITIES: 2016 – 2021

The Economy in 2016

The 2016 local government elections – the fifth held in South Africa since the dawn of democracy – were held on 3 August. Millions of eligible South Africans cast their votes to elect local, district and metropolitan municipalities across all nine provinces. The economic climate leading up to these elections was dire. The country's economy had contracted by 0.3 percent quarter-on-quarter (seasonally adjusted and annualised), plunging economic growth into negative territory. The mining and manufacturing sectors were experiencing significant decline – with the former contracting by 11.5 percent owing to a decline in the production of coal, gold and other metal ores including platinum and iron ore (Statistics SA, 2016). Manufacturing saw a contraction of over three percent owing primarily to slow production in manufacturing sectors related to food and beverages, petroleum and chemicals, and transport equipment (Statistics SA, 2016). And while the unadjusted real GDP increased by 0.7 percent year-on-year in the fourth quarter of 2016, and all provinces – apart from Mpumalanga Province and the Free State Province – had recorded positive economic growth rates in comparison to previous years, this was not enough to offset the devastation that had been wrought by the declining contributions to the economy by the primary and secondary sectors (Statistics SA, 2016). The implications of this were growing levels of unemployment and poverty, and the widening inequality gap that saw the poor become poorer and the rich become richer.

Unemployment levels in 2016 hit a 12-year high. The country's unemployment rate stood at 26.7 percent in the first quarter of 2016. The expanded unemployment rate, which includes people who stopped looking for work, stood at 36.3 percent. The results of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the fourth quarter of 2016 released by Statistics South Africa indicated that employment grew by 235 000 and the number of job seekers declined by 92 000. Among the hardest hit sectors were construction and manufacturing, which saw quarterly employment drops of 88 000 and 80 000, respectively.

Other critical industries also saw significant job losses – leading to one of the worst job bloodbaths the country had ever seen. The youth aged 15-34 years were the most group vulnerable in the labour market. The youth unemployment rate stood at a debilitating 37.1 percent – which was 10.6 percentage points above the national average (Statistics SA, 2016). Importantly, the race factor in unemployment was especially pronounced in this period. Over the period 2008 to 2016, the incidence of long-term unemployment was highest among Black Africans with as many as 61.0 to 71.0 percent of that group looking for work for one year or longer. The unemployment rate among the White population group – ranging between 4.1 percent in 2008 and 7.3 percent in 2014 – was the lowest of all the population groups by a large margin. In 2014, Black Africans accounted for 79.3 percent of the working age population, but they were under-represented among the employed and over-represented among the unemployed, at 85.7 percent, and the not economically active population at 83.3 percent (Statistics SA, 2016). The situation was identical in 2016 and continues on a similar trajectory today.

By the time the 2016 local government elections took place, many Black people had been hurled into a zone of economic inactivity and marginalisation. We had entered the third decade of democracy and while change was happening, to many, it was at a glacial pace. Millions of Black people were increasingly feeling alienated from the South Africa that the governing party had characterised as a country alive with possibilities, and this alienation gave way to a feeling of collective rage and dejection.

The Rise in Crime

The socio-economic climate was also impacted significantly by these economic realities. With growing levels of unemployment, the country also saw a marked increase in crime. According to the crime report released by the South African Police Service (SAPS) for the year 2016, nearly all categories of crime were on an upward trajectory. The murder rate increased marginally from 34 to 34.1 per 100 000 people, with an average of 52.1 people murdered each day. Sexual assaults, robbery with aggravating circumstances, house robberies and hijacking of cars also saw a marked increase. Other crimes that saw an increase include drug-related offenses which include use, possession of and dealing in drugs. In the 2016/17 period of reporting, the police recorded 292 689 drug-related offenses, translating to an average of 801.9 offences each day. This means that 524.1 drug-related crimes were recorded for every 100 000 people in the country. And while crimes such as rape and common assault saw a decline, with the assault rate decreasing from 301.1 to 280.2 per 100 000 people and rape decreasing from 75.7 to 71.3 per 100 000, various researchers including the Institute for Security Studies (2016) made the valid point that the decreases could not be taken as an accurate measure of either the extent or trend of the crimes. This is due in part to the notorious under-reporting rate for rape in South Africa resulting from low prosecution and conviction rates for perpetrators, and

the chronic distrust of the criminal justice system by ordinary people, among other factors. The unreliability of common assault statistics stems from the fact that most victims do not report these crimes to the police since the victim and perpetrator may be related, such as in a case of domestic violence. Victims are thus often reluctant to report assault.

What is evident from the crime statistics in this period is that economic crimes were on the increase. These are crimes that are committed by individuals or groups specifically for economic gain. The correlation between inequality and crime has been found in empirical literature. The Development Policy Research Unit at the University of Cape Town released a report in 2017 titled *The socio-economic determinants of crime in South Africa: An empirical assessment*, which combined published crime statistics with demographic data from the 2011 South African Census Community Profiles to investigate which socio-economic factors attract crime at a police precinct level. The research determined that resource-acquisition driven crimes such as robberies are attracted by high levels of income and inequality and low levels of unemployment. The research also found a positive relationship between violent crime and income: that at high levels of precinct-level income, violent crime decreased. These results are universal. Dr Kostadis J. Papaioannou, a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Department of International Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science, in a paper titled "Hunger makes a thief of any man: Poverty and crime in British colonial Asia" uses rainfall variation as an instrumental variable for rice production to estimate the impact of poverty on different types of crime across British colonies in South and South East Asia. Using original primary sources retrieved from annual administrative and statistical reports, it provides some of the first evidence in a historical setting on the causal relationship between poverty and crime. Papaioannou demonstrates how extreme rainfall, both droughts and floods, led to a large increase in property crimes including robberies in colonial Asia. Dong, Egger and Guo (2020) make a similar analysis about the crime in China. In their paper titled "Is poverty the mother of crime? Evidence from homicide rates in China", they contend that poverty and low-income level is positively related to homicide rates. They demonstrate how the internal rural-urban migration from more poor and violent localities contributes to the destination cities' homicide rates. The poverty-homicide association implies that absolute deprivation is mainly responsible for violent crime.

If the argument by Marcus Aurelius that "poverty is the mother of crime" is true, then it is evident that the 2016 local government elections that took place in an environment of economic difficulty were inevitably going to occur in a high crime environment. And while no crime is victimless, economic crimes are especially devastating to individuals, families and communities. They view these crimes as a failure by the government to institute law and order, thereby protecting the citizenry. It is thus not surprising that in environments of high crime, there is serious conflict and distrust by citizens towards the police and the criminal justice system, translating into distrust and anger towards the government.