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The Socio-Economic Dynamics of Political Killings in KwaZulu-Natal Local Government

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New democracies in Africa face high risks of political violence owing to poor socio-economic conditions, which foster contestation for control over resources. Socio-economic factors such as high unemployment, poverty and income inequality tend to challenge the political legitimacy of governments and may incite conflict among disaffected parties, thus resulting in violence and political instability. The rising statistics of political killings in KwaZulu-Natal necessitate a deeper look into the root causes of political violence in the province. To date, political killings remain a critical part of the country's political culture and politics. While the scale may be somewhat different from the 1990s that were the heights of violence, this political culture creates a climate of political insecurity and therefore calls for ways to root it out fully. Numerous studies have analysed political killings in the province, but very little of this seeks to understand the socio-economic conditions that explain trends in political killings. Using a qualitative discursive method, primary and secondary data available and framed by conflict theory, this paper explores the role of socio-economic dynamics in political killings. The hope is that this will expand our understanding of the problem and thus lead to more durable solutions being proposed.

Keywords: Political killings, Socio-economy, Political instability, Political culture, KwaZulu-Natal.

Introduction

Political violence, including assassinations and targeted killings, is part of the dark history of colonialism and apartheid. KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) experienced wanton political violence during apartheid state-sponsored conflicts between supporters of the United Democratic Movement (UDM) and the Inkatha Yenkululeko Yesizwe (later known as the Inkatha Freedom Party) in the 1980s and early 1990s (Morris & Hindson, 1992). This violence left a scar on the body politic of post-apartheid South Africa, resulting in an architecture of violence that is structural, systematic and so deep-seated that it can explain sporadic explosion of violence in the province, from taxi-related violence to violence accompanying service delivery protests, violent crimes, and police brutality.

Deep socio-economic crises are also a crucial part of South Africa's history from colonialism through apartheid to post-apartheid. The foundations of the country's political

economy include systematic exploitation and socio-economic neglect of large parts of the black population by authorities. Today, over 55.5% (30.3 million people) of the population is living in poverty at the national upper poverty line (ZAR 992) while a total of 13.8 million people (25%) are experiencing food poverty (Data Bank, 2020).

Developmental Local Government is intended to have a major impact on the daily lives of South Africa's and seeks to improve the standard of living and the people's quality of life. Municipalities within the country have a key role in putting in place mechanisms for sustainable socio-economic development for their constituents. However, poor service delivery and corruption in municipalities remains a reality, as such, issues of socio-economic development remain in the periphery. In light of the challenges and failures of local government, the country's local government has witnessed various forms of tensions, uprisings, protests, violent conflicts and more worryingly, political killings. These killings have mainly been in local political structures, municipalities and broader local government throughout the country. The root causes of some of these acts of murder appear to intensify the already dreadful situation of political violence in the country. Numerous reasons have been put forth in efforts to explain the reasons and causes of political killings in the province, particularly in the local government sector.

This study argues that the poor socio-economic conditions marked by underdevelopment, poor service delivery, poverty, corruption, inequality and unemployment play a critical role in turning contestation over power into fierce warfare among aspiring politicians who are willing to kill in efforts to attain and retain power. The paper utilises secondary data on political violence and political killings in South Africa. Using Marx's conflict theory, the paper argues political killings are a part of the entrenched structural and cultural violence that are a product of decades of violence. Finally, the paper argues that there is a need to think about a resocialisation of the concept of violence in the country.

Framing the Point

The paper echoes the Karl Marx conflict theory when it argues that competition for scarce resources in societies almost always guarantees the presence of conflict. This suggests that those who own and possess resources will do everything and anything in their power to protect and safeguard these resources. On the other hand, those without resources will also go to extremes to access and attain resources. This dialectic speaks to the constant struggle between the haves and have nots. This paper recognises the competition of resources among the poor often generated by the overall condition of the hierarchy of economic power that leaves many so destitute that violence becomes an option in asserting and defending interests. In light of this, it seems that most societies are characterised by conflict more than by accord. With this being said, conflict is an unavoidable aspect of human nature and is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. In fact, conflict may be able to assist in understanding some behaviour.