Reconsidering the origins of protest in South africa: some lessons from Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg

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ABSTRACT

Protest politics in South Africa has a long history and has been deployed differentially in different historical moments. Whereas protests formed an important vehicle during the fight against apartheid, their rebirth and propulsion to the centre of the struggles in the post-apartheid dispensation have come as a surprise to many. A majority of these protests, so-called 'service delivery protests', are reported as emanating from communities' dissatisfaction with municipal service delivery as well as problems relating to lack of communication between council and councillors on the one hand and citizens on the other. In this article, we interrogate data from five study sites located in Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg. While we found support for the importance of service delivery, our data contradicts many widely held assertions as regards what causes these protests. We were able to show, for example, that these so-called 'service delivery protests' may actually emanate from reasons that extend beyond service delivery. Since our data indicates that levels of participation in Cape Town are higher than in Pietermaritzburg on the one hand, illustrating perhaps the different provincial contexts, there is also variation between the relatively high participation rates of the 'black African' sites of Langa and Khayelitsha, on the one hand, and the lower rates of the 'coloured' site of Bonteheuwel, on the other, which we ascribe to the disengagement of the community in Cape Town, from both local and national politics.

Keywords: participation, protest, service delivery, local government, ward councils, councillors

1   INTRODUCTION

Hart points to an intractable link between what she refers to as the national question and the so-called service delivery protests:

> The capacity of the ruling bloc to tap into deep veins of popular understandings of 'the national question' has been simultaneously the lynchpin of its hegemonic power and a key source of

vulnerability. Thus, for example, what are ostensibly 'service delivery' protests over housing, water, sanitation, electricity and so forth are simultaneously expressions of betrayal – intensified and sharpened by obscene and escalating material inequalities, and the crisis of livelihood confronting many in South Africa today. (Hart, 2008:22)

She argues that these protests point towards feelings of betrayal over skewed material opportunities, and in fact a host of other grievances extending far beyond the realm of service delivery. Invoking the dramatic defeat of Thabo Mbeki at the hands of Jacob Zuma at the 52nd ANC National Conference held in Polokwane in 2007,[1] she demonstrates how the meaning of liberation was successfully deployed by the victors, who sought to model themselves as guardians of the liberation struggle against an onslaught by intellectuals and capitalists. In developing Harts' argument in this paper, we employed a quantitative methodology to test a number of variables in order to ascertain their importance in generation of protests.

The rest of the article is presented as follows: section 2 analyses the literature on causes and explanations of protests; section 3 presents a brief description of the methodology and summarised descriptions of each study area; section 4 presents the data and analysis; section 5 presents the results; while section 6 is the discussion and conclusion respectively.

2   CAUSES AND EXPLANATIONS OF PROTEST – AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Participation of individuals in protest and other forms of communal activity has long been attributed to certain personal characteristics of individuals. Biological availability, which refers to the absence of personal constraints that may increase the risk of movement participation, such as full time employment, marriage and family responsibilities and age, all of which are indications of a person's position in the life cycle, has been cited as a key determinant in protests (McAdam, 1986; Wiltfag & McAdam, 1991; Dalton, 2002; Schussmann & Soule, 2005). Citing several works in the literature, including McAdam (1986) and Wiltfag and McAdam (1991), they found that along with income and age these factors have been found to have an effect on willingness to engage in protest. Whilst some biological availability literature suggests that being employed is related to lower likelihood of participation, empirical studies suggests otherwise, as explained by an increase in resources. Family commitments and marriage are inversely related to participation. Students are also more like to participate due to less rigid commitments.

2.1   Grievances and relative deprivation

The role of grievances in mobilisation has been widely debated in literature (see McCathy & Zald, 1977Opp, 1988; Klandermans, 1984). It has long been posited by classical theorists, notably Aristotle, Tocqueville and Karl Marx that anger with material conditions and the resultant aspirations for better life by the underclass are the ultimate source revolt. Marx and Angels defined collective action as an outcome of social structure rather than individual choice. They argued that contradictions between social classes were a historical truth and inevitable. That thesis has found expression in psychology literature which posits that frustration leads to aggression. Seminal here is the work of Ted Robert Gurr (1970) who posited that in the actualisation of political violence is preceded by politicisation of discontent stemming from emergence of discontent. In

the face of non-occurrence of protests in some instances despite profusion of grievances led to the development of alternative theory, the resource mobilisation theory (see McCathy & Zald, 1977; Opp, 1977, 1988; Klandermans, 1984). However, the grievances theories have clawed their way back into the resource mobilisation theories. We examine both theories here.

2.2   Resource mobilisation

Conventional wisdom dictates that grievances and affinity to movement ideology precipitate in collective action. However, grievances are often held for long periods of time without them erupting into collective (Tindall, 2007). Similarly, ideological affinity to goals of movement increases scope for acceptance of a movement but not recruitment into collective action. Thus, grievances and affinity to movement ideology are necessary but inadequate grounds for collective action. The resource model posits that protests are a resource that is employed by groups in the competition for power. This model implies that protests would be higher in better educated and sophisticated groups in society who would possess the resources to engage in such demanding forms of activity. The recent anti-globalisation protests, such as Davos, come to mind. Clearly these were groups of people with resources to travel and indeed understand the complex working of globalisation as a hegemonic discourse.

What is needed, therefore, is for those who hold grievances to get recruited and mobilised. Contact with a recruiting agent has been identified as this missing link (McAdam, 1986; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). However, the exact mechanism that links collective action in and social networks, is not clearly understood (Tindall, 2007). Tindall (2007) notes that the following long list of factors have been identified in literature as important: (1) communication, (2) recruitment appeals, (3) identification, (4) social influence, (5) incentives and sanctions, (6) social support, (7) socialisation, (8) knowledge and information, (9) personal efficacy, (10) norms, (11) subjective interest, (12) beliefs about others' willingness to contribute, and (13) trust.

McAdam (1986) developed a model for high cost/high risk activism which in which he identifies the following variables as key to mobilisation: (1) the role of media in disseminating goals, values and activities of social movements; (2) alignment of individual values/goals and movement values/goals; (3) alignment of individual-movement values/goals may lead to development of ties with other activists; and (4) participation in movement activities develops ties with other activists even in absence of ideological affinity. In the same vein, Schussmann and Soule (2005:1098) found that while individuals belonging to many 'organisations and who possess a certain type of human capital, civic skills' were more likely to be asked to protest and consequently getting involved, there were some individuals whose participation was uninvited, who they termed 'hyper engaged'. This finding introduces the possibility that organisational and group networks are but only one method of information dissemination and recruitment. The level of political engagement seems to play a critical role in the recruitment process.

3   DESIGN AND SAMPLING

The results reported in this article come from a wider study of citizen action undertaken consortium of researchers based at the University of the Western Cape using a common survey questionnaire. Although each researcher had their own particular focus, the questionnaire was

designed to be generic in order to aid comparison between the study areas. The questionnaire itself is an adapted variant of that employed by the highly acclaimed Afrobarometer.[2] The choice of the Afrobarometer as standard was based on two main considerations, namely the ease of comparison with the Afrobarometer results, and the advanced state of development of the Afrobarometer questionnaire, now in its fourth round, which pointed to higher validity and reliability.

Each of the study sites selected was an area in which one of the researchers was already actively involved, thus, to all intents and purposes, convenience. In spite of the foregoing, the sites represent a fusion which embodies both socio-economic and racial footprints of urbanity in South Africa. For example, while Cape Town is one of the six large metropolitan councils, Pietermaritzburg is one of the second tier cities in the country, the so-called aspirant metropolitan cities. The three sites in Pietermaritzburg, Imbali, Mountain Rise and Prestbury – PM3 respectively, formerly classified as Black, Indian and White group areas, all retain that print despite the deracialisation and subsequent movement across the race boundaries. In Cape Town, Langa, Khayelitsha and Bonteheuwel settled as follows: Black for Langa and Khayelitsha and Coloured for Bonteheuwel. In terms of housing, Khayelitsha is a mix of both informal and formal housing as is Langa (Joe Slovo informal settlement is included as part of Langa) which has a sizeable stock of backyard dwellings. Bonteheuwel, separated by Vaguard Drive (an extension of the N7 freeway), is an admixture of formal and backyard dwellings.

The sampling in each of the study sites was based on probability sampling techniques with each of the sites subdivided into requisite quotas from which random sampling was carried out.

4   DATA ANALYSIS

Data capture in all the cases was done on the SPSS. For the purposes of this paper, whose main aim is to determine the main essential ingredients of the protest phenomena experienced in South Africa, the method used for the analysis of variance (ANOVA). The One Way ANOVA procedure produces a one-way analysis of variance for a quantitative dependent variable by a single factor (independent) variable. Analysis of variance is used to test the hypothesis that several means are equal. This technique is an extension of the two-sample t test. For the purposes of this paper, we do not show the descriptive statistics generated in ANOVA but utilise the means plot display plots of subgroup means defined by values of the factor variable). The means plot is a useful way to visualize the group differences (SPSS, 2008)

A number of factors (independent variables) used in the analysis were constructed during the analysis stage. Two types of transformations were carried out; firstly the recoding[3] of responses in order to simplify interpretation and secondly by computing[4] combination of a number of questions to produce an index variable, that gives a fuller description of the item under review.

Table 1: Data transformations

New variable	Old variable and type of transformation
Age	Age of respondent was reduced to six categories: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64 and the 65+
Duration of stay	The responses were reduced to five categories: 0–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, 21+
Employment status	The number of categories of responses was reduced from six to three: Unemployed not looking and Unemployed looking were collapsed to Unemployed, while part-time employed not looking and part-time employed and looking were collapsed to Part-time employed while the categories Full-time employed not looking an full-time employed looking were collapsed to Full-time employed
Level of education	The number of categories was reduced to four: Informal schooling replaced no formal schooling and informal schooling, Primary education replaced some primary and completed primary, Secondary schooling replaced some secondary and completed secondary, while Tertiary education replaced post secondary, some university, university completed as well as post graduate
Performance of government in water and electricity delivery	This value was computed by adding together performance of government in water services and performance in electricity delivery. These two variables were added together to arrive at a more complete picture of Service delivery
Level of trust in President and parliamentarians	This value was computed by adding together the level of trust in president and parliamentarians. These two were added together to test level of trust in National sphere of government
Level of trust in Mayor and councillors	This value was computed by adding together the level of trust in the mayor and councillors. These two were added together to test level of trust in Local sphere of government

A few caveats are important at this stage in the interpretation of the results. Participation was measured on a five-point scale of 0–4. The values of each of these are as follows: 0 = would never do this, 1 = would do if had a chance, 2 = once or twice, 3 = a few times, 4 = often. Table 2 below is intended to aid in interpretation of the graphs.

Table 2: Levels of participation

Level of participation	Vertical axis values
Non-participants	0–1
Low participation	1–2
Medium participation	2–3
High participation	3–4

As a result of lower participation rates, the graphs for sites in Pietermaritzburg, i.e. PMZ3, Imbali and Mountain Rise, as well as Bonteheuwel in Cape Town, shifted downwards.
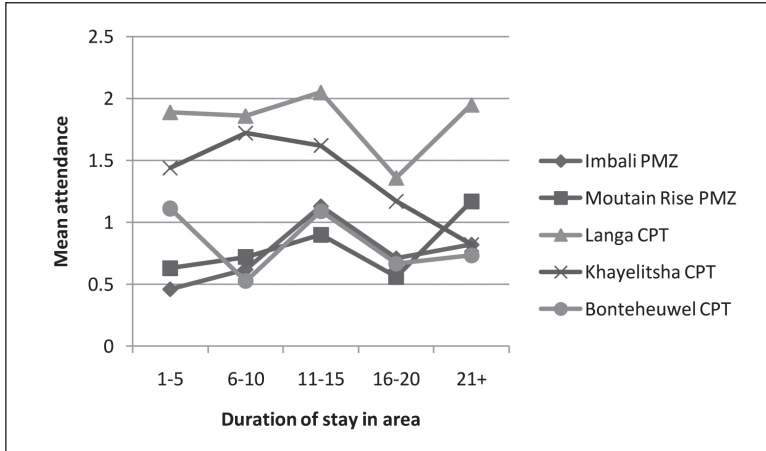
5   RESULTS

5.1   Protest participation and demographic variables

The importance of age in protest participation has long been debated in the literature (e.g. Barnes & Kasse 1979). Our results showed an ambiguous effect of age on protest, as highlighted in figure 1 below. Protest participation increased with age up to the 45–64 age range then declined for the 65+ age groups for Khayelitsha and Langa. For Prestbury (PM3), participation declined with age although this happened at a very low participation rate, while for the other sites the effect of age was ambiguous.
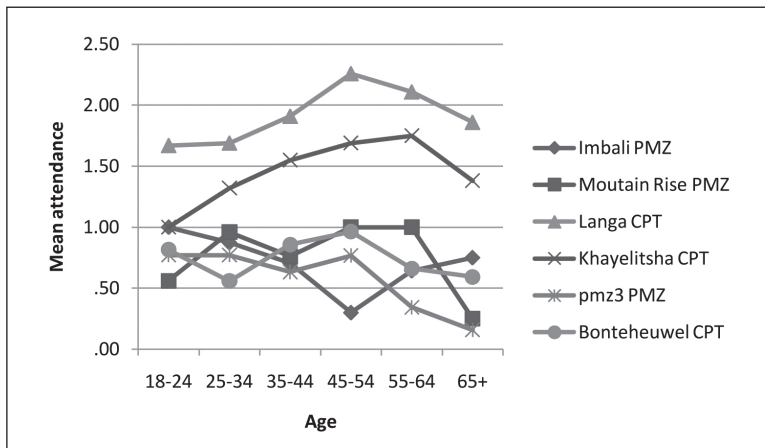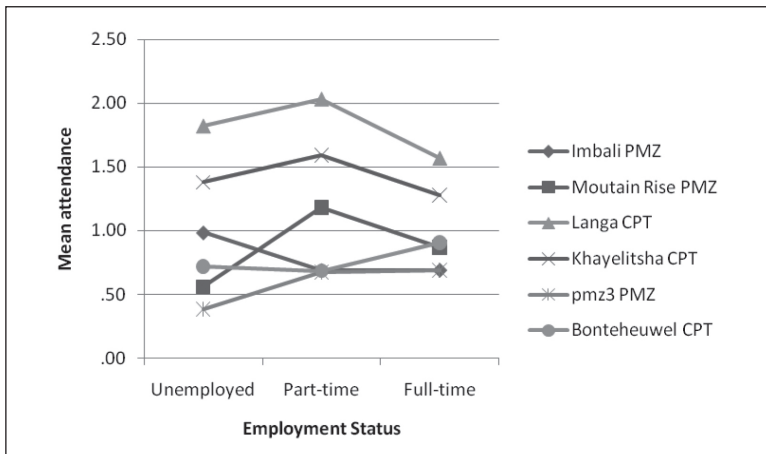

Figure 1: Participation in protests and age

The effect of duration of residence in each of the areas is also ambiguous as shon in figure 2. All the areas have peak in the 11–15 year duration, with the exception of Khayelitsha, where participation declines with duration of residence. Given the lack of clear cut relationship, the hypothesised effect of militancy in new migrants is therefore not supported by the data.
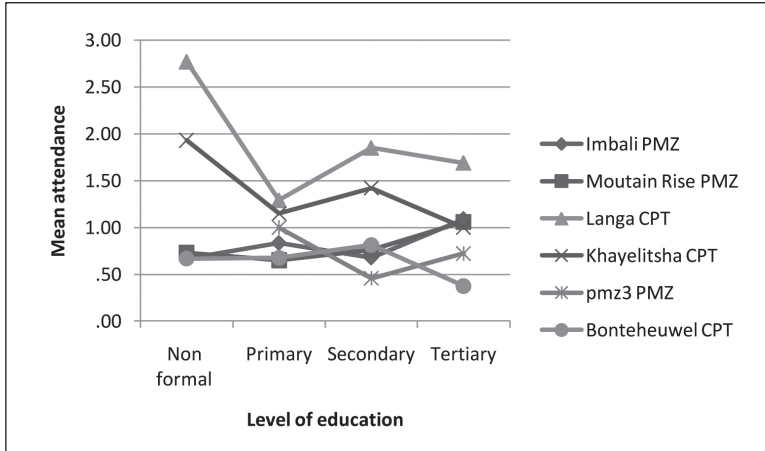
Figure 2: Participation in protests and length of stay in the area

In figure 3 we show that in four of the six study sites, the results indicated that part-time employment is associated with higher levels of engagement in protests, pointing to the importance of flexibility of part-time employment in involvement in protests. Full-time workers indicated they could not attend because of their work commitments, while it is hypothesised that the unemployed are probably busy seeking work opportunities.
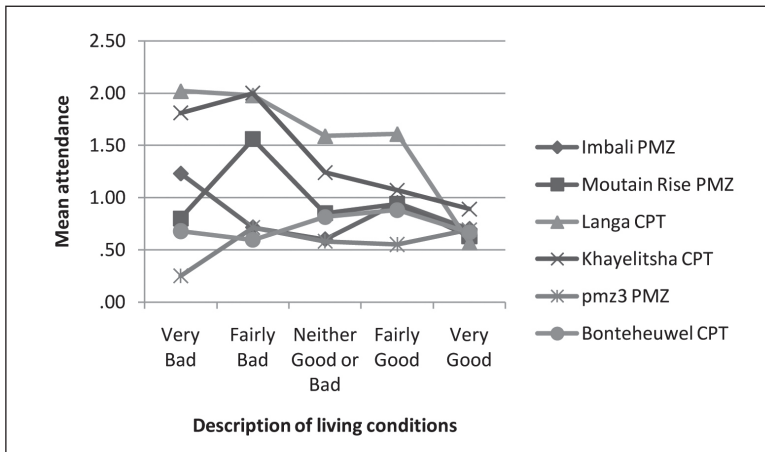

Figure 3: Participation in protests and employment status

The results for education in figure 4 were ambiguous, although for Khayelitsha and Langa, participation declined with age. For Mountain Rise, participation increased with age while the other two cases were ambiguous.

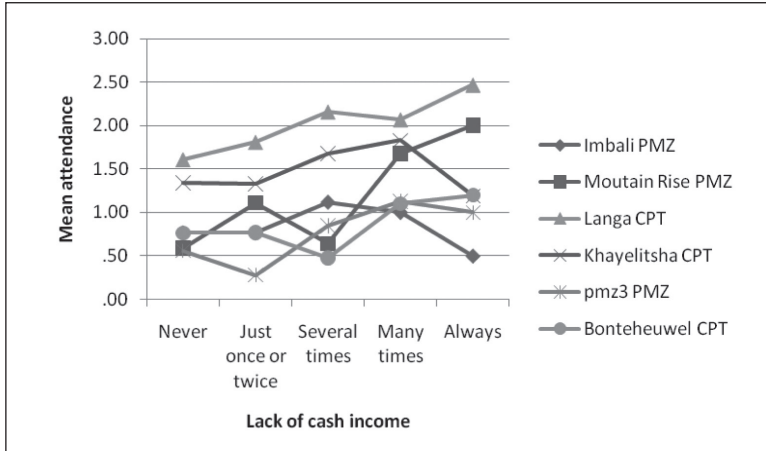**Figure 4: Participation in protests and level of education**

Lower living conditions are associated with higher levels of protest in figure 5. This is important given that at least for all areas of 'black African' settlement a large majority of people live under deficient conditions, both subjectively and objectively. For Langa and Khayelitsha, participation declined with improvement in living conditions. The other cases were ambiguous, moreover their participation rates were low.

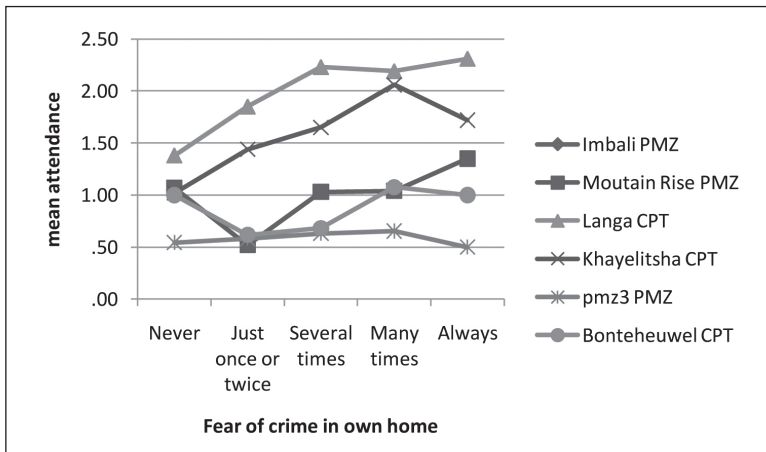**Figure 5: Participation in protests and living conditions**

Although lack of income is seldom articulated as a cause for protests, this data is unequivocal, more sustained 'lack of income' being associated with higher levels of protest as shown in figure 6. Earning a stable income is one of the most important means of escaping poverty. Unlike public service delivery, which conjures a community sentiment, lack of income is more of an individual dilemma, thus diluting its usability as a declared 'problem' during protests.

Figure 6: Participation in protests and living conditions

One of the unexpected findings of this research was the association between fear of crime and higher of protest in figure 7. Firstly, this point implicates crime as one of the major burdens of the different communities leading perhaps to increased militancy in the hope of improved conditions.

Figure 7: Protest participation and fear of crime

Except for Imbali and Bonteheuwel, participation in protests increased with decreasing ease of collecting water in figure 8. Moreover, the source of water is a proxy for type of housing, and quality thereof. Informal settlements dwellers collect water outside their homes, while brick house dwellers either have water in the yard or in the house.
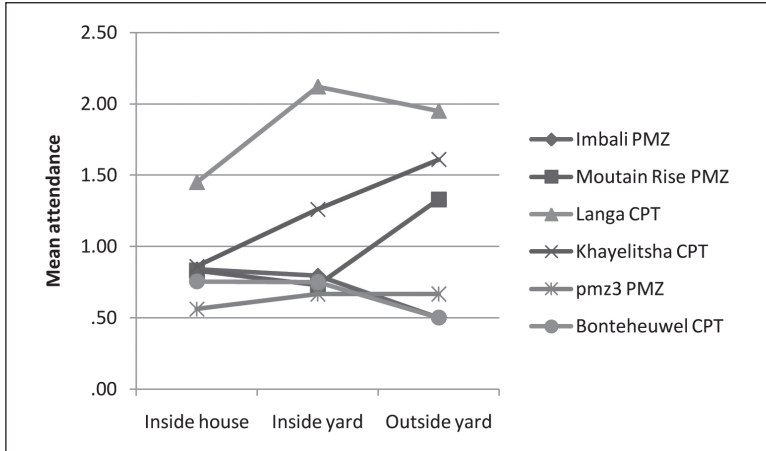
Figure 8: Protest participation and location of water source
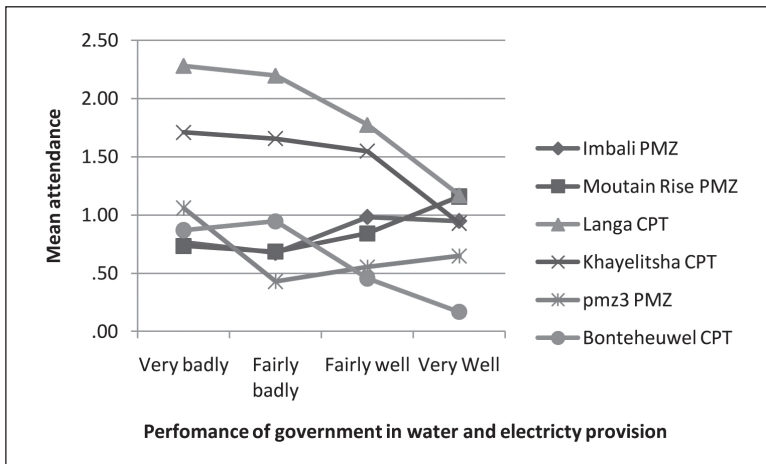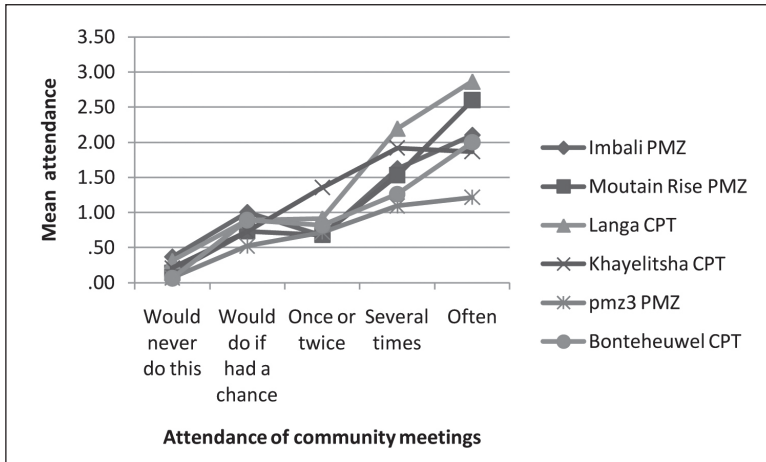

Figure 9: Protests participation and water and electricity delivery

As water and electricity delivery improved, participation declined for Langa, Khayelitsha. For the other cases, i.e. Imbali and Mountain rise, participation seemed to increase with improvement of conditions yet, for both of these, participation rates were very low.

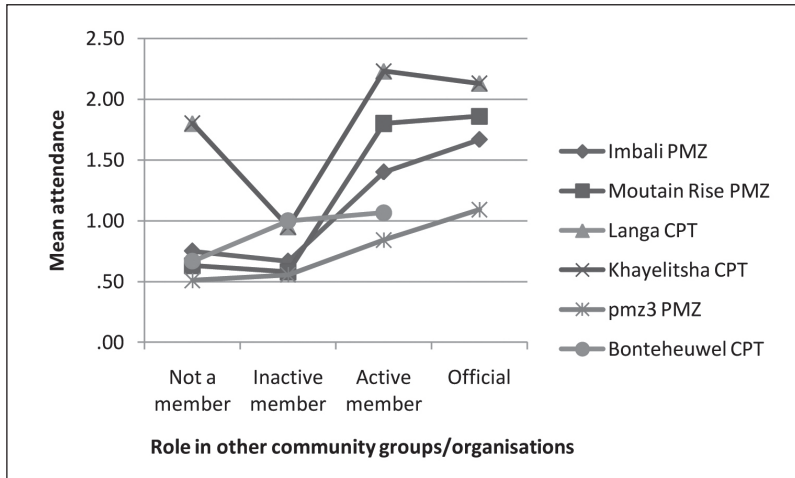**Figure 10: Protest participation and community meeting attendance**

The most important predictor of protest though, seemed to be the level of engagement in community meetings, as indicated in figure 10. In all the cases, increasing participation in meetings was associated with higher protest levels. This is intuitive, since protests need organisation. Moreover, this indicates that protests are an alternative to community meetings.
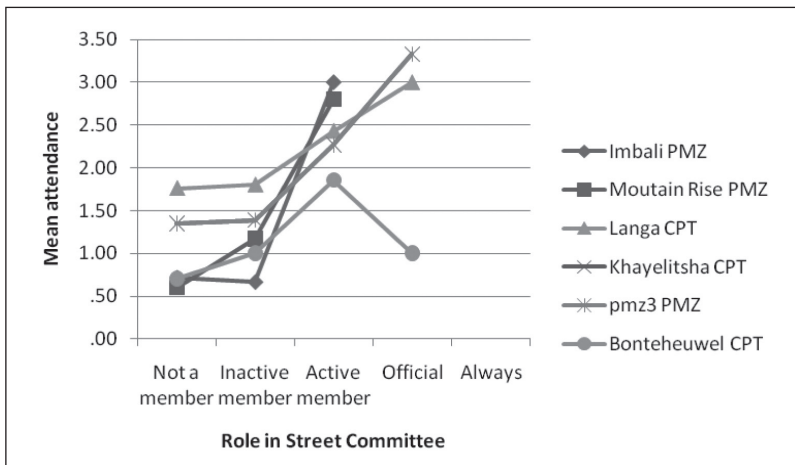
Figure 11: Protest participation and role in street committees

Engagement in street committees in figure 11 seemed to engender higher levels of participation in protests. As with attendance of community meetings, street committees are an arena of organisation. Street committees have been associated with many protests, including those regarding xenophobia.

As with street committees, higher order activity in community organisations in figure 12 is associated with higher levels of protests. Community organisations are a site deliberation, community and building of social capital, a key element of organisation

Figure 12: Protest participation and role in community organisations

Given the allegation that often features in protests that ward councillors are not visible in the communities they serve; it was surprising to find that higher levels of contact with the ward councillor were associated with higher protest levels in figure 13. This points to a number of possibilities, it may be that ward councillors are part of the community organisation for protests in some instances. It may yet indicate that despite the higher frequency of contact, residents may feel the ward councillor has failed to resolve the grievances that arise in the designated area. However, the last point needs to be interrogated further, especially in light of Piper and Deacons's (2008, 2009) finding that ward councillors are less powerless to resolve grievances raised by their constituents. They point out that the Mayoral Committee (Mayco), the de facto decision makers in municipalities, wields more power.

The relationship between trust of the president and parliamentarians, on the one hand, and protest, on the other, is revealing as shown in figure 14. Protest seemed to increase with higher levels of trust, in effect this means that people who protest have not necessarily lost trust in the executive and parliament. This theoretically would calm those in authority, to the extent that the protest is not premised on generalised feelings of distrust in the democratic dispensation, effectively saying the protests are not revolutionary, but directed at solving specific problems. Intuitively though, given this non-revolutionary character of protests, the fact that protestors trust the government means the it ought to act on these problems lest over time this trust may begin to erode, posing a threat to the democratic dispensation.
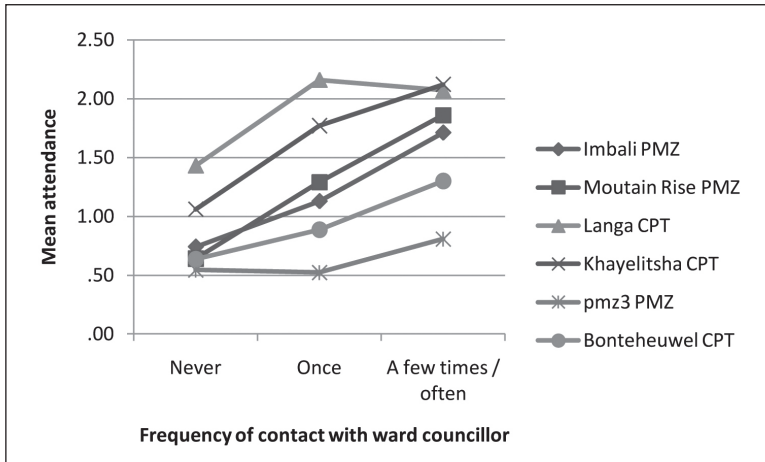
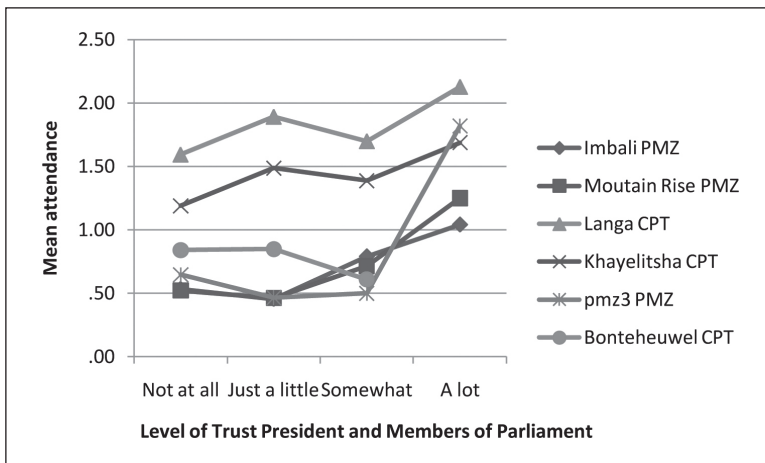**Figure 13: Protest participation and contact with ward councillor**

Figure 14: Protest participation and level of trust in president and MPs

As with trust in the president and parliamentarians, higher levels of trust are in associated with higher levels of protests. Although trust in the local government sphere is lower than the national sphere, protests do not emanate from the lack of trust in the local sphere. The case of Cape Town is particularly illuminating, since the local sphere was controlled by the DA while the provincial[5] and national spheres were under the control of the ANC. When the 2009 round of protests surfaced in May 2009 in Khayelitsha, Premier Helen Zille claimed it was an attempt by the ANC to undermine the DA led municipality and province (Smook et al 2009) While this may be true, our data indicate that quite to the contrary, this need not necessarily be so.
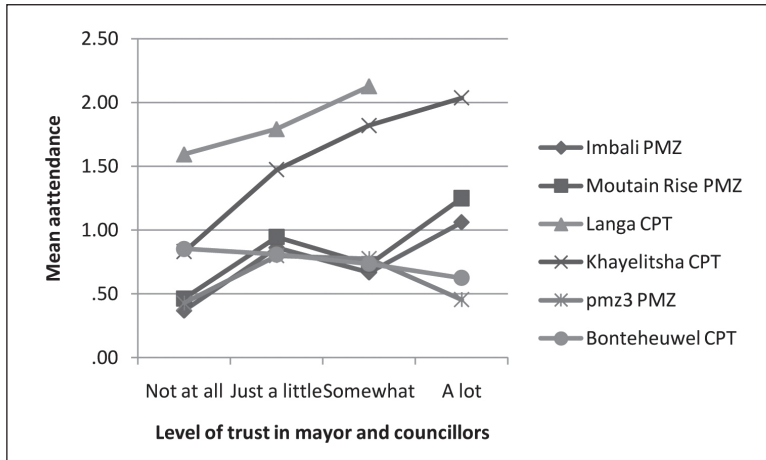
Figure 15: Protest participation and level of trust in the mayor and councillors

6 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

We return to the title of this article, *Reconsidering the origins of protest in South Africa*, and pose the question 'Does the service delivery thesis account for the abounding protests in South Africa?' While that question is considered in more detail in Nleya (2011) in this volume, we have presented an argument for a complex web of factors that act in unison and sometimes in discord to produce a complex state of affairs experienced in South Africa. Therefore we can state without any doubt that service delivery failures are not the only for the occurrence of protests in the country.

We found evidence to support the assertion that service delivery grievances are not the only ones at the heart of protest. We were able to show that deep-rooted poverty, as exemplified by lack of income and dire living conditions, is associated with higher levels of protest. In addition we found that fear of crime is associated with higher protest levels. As stated above there is a multiplicity of grievances that combine to increase feelings of relative deprivation in poorer communities – the locus of protests in South Africa.

We found that an essential ingredient that differentiates protest activity between communities to be the level of engagement and community interaction. The attendance of community meetings, participation in community organisations especially street committees is a significant predictor of participation in protests. We postulate that this form of community engagement funnels community issues towards resolution by creating forums for the debate, social interaction, and dispute resolution. Several scholars have found that antiapartheid repertoires are gaining ascendancy in dispute resolution (Atkinson 2008, Thompson & Nleya 2010).

An unexpected finding was the finding that protests are higher for groups with higher levels of trust in the President and parliament as well as the mayor and councillors. Black Africans show higher levels of trust is government institutions when compared to coloured, Indian and white population groups. Piper (2010) classifies these racialised variations as optimists, pessimists

and non-politicals. He classifies black Africans as optimists, whites as pessimists and Indians as non-politicals. Politicals have higher level of trust in government, pessimists lack interest in political life. Evidence in this study shows that residents of Bonteheuwel level of trust is similar to those of residents of Mountain Rise in Pietermaritzburg and could be similarly classified as non-politicals. When combined with high levels of grievances, high levels of trust precipitate in protests while lower levels of trust do not yield in protests. This indicates that protests in South Africa are less revolutionary in intention but should be seen in similar vein as a cry from a child – whose aim is to draw the attention from the parent. We have shown that service delivery is not the only cause of the so-called 'service delivery protests', but part of a constellation of factors, which, if they remain unattended, may begin to erode the trust bestowed on the ANC government and precipitate higher order hostility and militancy in the future.

NOTES

1   Ndodana Nleya is a Researcher and PhD Candidate at the School of Government, University of the Western Cape (UWC); Lisa Thompson is a Professor at the School of Government, UWC; Chris Tapscott is Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, UWC; Laurence Piper is a Professor and HOD of the Department of Political Studies, UWC; and Michele Esau is a Associate Professor at the School of Government, UWC.

1   Polokwane is the provincial capital of Limpopo province and was the site of the immediate past ANC National Conference. The ANC holds its five-yearly national conferences in different provinces. In addition to its use as a noun, the name Polokwane is now used as a verb, signifying the dramatic defeat of former President Mbeki and his sympathisers, some of whom subsequently left the ANC to form the Congress of the People (COPE) when Mbeki was removed from the presidency of the country.

2   The Afrobarometer website defines the survey as 'an independent, nonpartisan research project that measures the social, political, and economic atmosphere in Africa. Afrobarometer surveys are conducted in more than a dozen African countries and are repeated on a regular cycle. Because the instrument asks a standard set of questions, countries can be systematically compared. Trends in public attitudes are tracked over time. Results are shared with decision makers, policy advocates, civic educators, journalists, researchers, donors and investors, as well as average Africans who wish to become more informed and active citizens' (Afrobarometer, 2009).

3   The Recode into Different Variables dialog box available under the transform menu in SPSS allows the reassignment of the values of existing variables or collapse ranges of existing values into new values for a new variable.

4   The Compute dialog box available under the transform menu in SPSS allows the computation of values for a variable based on numeric transformations of other variables based on the envisioned expression/ relationship.

5   Subsequent to the survey, in the elections held on 22 March 2009 elections, the DA swept to power in the Western Cape, with the then Mayor of Cape Town and DA leader taking over as Premier of the Western Cape.

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