



Social Movements of the Poor

1. Introduction

Certain pro-poor social movements have received significant amounts of attention in the past year. *Ses'khona*, more colloquially known as the 'poo flingers' have made headlines in the Western Cape with their protests, while *Abahlali Basemjondolo*, or the Shack Dweller's Association, recently gained considerable profile due to their KwaZulu-Natal branch endorsing the Democratic Alliance (DA) shortly before the election.

Consequently, it seems apposite to examine the origins, history and nature of these social movements. What are their ideological leanings? How are they constituted, and why have they traditionally shunned conventional party politics? This paper seeks to answer some of these questions and to shed some light on the nature of social movements, using examples of some of the more prominent organizations of this type. It concludes by discussing the value and relevance of social movements in South Africa.

2. A Brief Background

It is important to understand at the outset that social movements like these are not new, and are by no means original or exclusive to South Africa. In Brazil, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Farmer's Movement, or MST as they are most commonly known) is a significant social force with a 20-year history of organising around agrarian reform, with a strong emphasis on sustainability. Claiming one million members, they have carried out a series of land invasions that have resulted in their members occupying large tracts of agricultural land¹.

In India, social movements have a long history dating back to colonial times. Most recently, organizations such as India Against Corruption

have entered the public's consciousness with their campaign for a new anti-corruption bill².

In South Africa, many of the most prominent social movements originate in grievances that can be immediately traced back to dissatisfaction with the post-1994 dispensation. As Ballard *et al* explain³, these struggles during the early years of South African democracy formed around three different axes.

The first axis was that of left wing opposition to the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme under President Mbeki. This struggle was spearheaded by COSATU, and has never been entirely resolved. Although GEAR is no longer the reigning macro-economic policy, the general contestation over macro-economic policy within the tripartite alliance remains an enduring feature of South African politics.

Secondly, there was anger around government service delivery and redistribution failures, as in the case of HIV/AIDS, highlighted by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). This was perhaps the most prominent social movement in post-Apartheid South Africa, and it presented a significant and unprecedented example of vigorous resistance to government policy in the new democracy. It was also one of the most successful such movements, in that it was able ultimately to realize its core goal of getting the government to provide poor, HIV-positive people with anti-retroviral drugs⁴. A number of similar activist organizations have been formed in its wake, such as Equal Education and Section 27, which campaign for better public education and healthcare.

Another movement operating on this axis is the Landless People's Movement, which was founded in 2001 on a program of organising landless people around reclaiming land that "was stolen from us during colonialism and apartheid⁵."

Thirdly, some organizations, such as the Anti-eviction Campaign, coalesced around resistance to government attempts to perform evictions and cut off water and electricity to poor communities for non-payment. Their demands overlap with that of the second group, but instead of demanding that services simply be provided, their contention is that existing services should be de-commodified.

3. Key Features of Social Movements

What distinguishes these social movements? Some of the most pertinent features of these organizations are as follows:

In the first place, with very few exceptions⁶, the vast majority of them operate from a left, or radically left, perspective. This is a natural consequence of the aforementioned struggles in South Africa, which have emerged as the result of gross inequalities and widespread poverty.

Secondly, they are usually centred on one or more fairly specific demands, such as the state provision of anti-retrovirals, a halt to evictions, the provision of decent housing, or the provision of decent sanitation.

Finally, these movements have usually shied away from allying themselves with political parties. Indeed, in the case of certain movements such as *Abahlali Basemjondolo*, they have also responded to overtures from mainstream civil society and academia with suspicion. In the case of *Abahlali Basemjondolo*, this arises from a sense that mainstream politics are hopelessly corrupt and corrupting.

As Richard Pithouse writes in his polemical but carefully researched account of the rise of *Abahlali*:

“The principled decision to keep a distance from what is widely seen as a mode of politics that has an inevitably corrupting influence on any attempt to keep a struggle grounded in truth was key to the rapid building of a mass movement⁷.”

Recounting a protest march that included a symbolic ‘funeral’ for the much-despised local councillor, Pithouse explains:

“The councillor was not metaphorically buried merely as a deficient instance of councillorhood. It was the whole idea of a top down party structure stretching down to

ordinary people through councillors that was being buried⁸.”

One of the fundamental problems for any radical movement of discontent is the question of how to relate to the existing power structures. The recognised mode of engagement may be via ‘official’ channels such as petitioning local government or voting for alternatives. However, radical movements often either find that these channels are ineffective, or they fear that such modes of engagement will inevitably water down or co-opt their movement. Consequently, they tend to reject such modes of political action in favour of direct action and protests, instead of polite lobbying and backroom engagements. There is also a very real sense that ‘civil’ discourse is simply not possible when people are living in utter poverty, subject to terrible conditions within a political and economic system that allows and entrenches such suffering.

One of the fundamental assumptions of civil discourse is that politics can be depersonalised – all of the actors within a debate can reasonably state their positions without taking offence or straying outside of the bounds of ‘polite’ society. However, to people who live in unserviced shacks, such ideas are laughable. Attempting to depersonalise the politics of sanitation and housing in a discussion with people who have access to neither is effectively impossible. Sanitation is intensely personal for people who do not have it, and this is where the anger and outrage of organizations such as *Ses’khona* emerges from. Dumping faeces in public places is disgusting and outrageous to many people, but for those who live in areas that are literally inundated with filth due to the lack of toilets, they are simply bringing their problems into the public domain. If their residential areas are unacceptable, why should everyone else’s public areas be free of such an intrusion?

However, despite their refusal to be co-opted by *conventional* politics, it must be understood that these groups are not avoiding politics. Indeed, they are intensely political, but their politics are the politics of the poor⁹.

As one group of academics write:

“Overall, social movements offer an alternative vision of the struggle for development and poverty reduction compared to mainstream NGOs, one that is politicised, emerging from those who are marginalised, and enable poor people to

engage in efforts to turn this vision into action¹⁰.”

As this quote highlights, it is important to distinguish these social movements from more conventional NGOs and Community Based Organizations. Social movements differ from these organizations in that they tend to be populated by poor or marginalised people (by contrast with more white collar, professional NGOs) and they also tend to operate around a program of direct action and protest in order to pressurise authorities and other actors to respond to their demands.

4. Abahlali Basemjondolo: From Kennedy Road to National Prominence

Abahlali Basemjondolo was founded 2005 in the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban, but its roots can be traced to an earlier organization known as the Kennedy Road Development Committee. Kennedy Road is an informal settlement that has come under serious pressure from the Durban Municipality, which has repeatedly attempted to break up the settlement and evict its inhabitants. According to Richard Pithouse, Kennedy Road was initially a solidly pro-ANC settlement. However, relationships between the community and the ANC municipality soured as impatience with the slow pace of service delivery grew, and the government began to swing towards a ‘pro-suburban’ policy of protecting property prices and ratepayers by destroying informal settlements and relocating the inhabitants to distant locations. These were simply too far from employment and education opportunities, and the community refused to move.

Abahlali Basemjondolo first rose to prominence when it engaged in a series of protests that involved blockading roads in the region. However, its defining moment was quite possibly the attack on Kennedy Road in 2009, where a group of unknown assailants attacked the settlement, robbing houses and killing two people¹¹. *Abahlali Basemjondolo* claims that the attack was by forces loyal to the ANC.

Following this incident, *Abahlali Basemjondolo* has grown and gained major prominence in South Africa. It is in alliance with similar groups such as the Rural Network, and it has established a Western Cape branch.

5. Coming in from the Cold?

Among these movements there is clearly a sense of radical discontent with the established system. Given that the system has failed so many people so utterly, to legitimise it by working with established political parties would apparently undermine the principles upon which these groups are founded.

However, in recent years it appears that some cracks have appeared in this structural dissent. *Ses’khona* (which was founded by ANC members Andile Lili and Loyiso Nkohla) appears to be a departure from this model. The DA argues that *Ses’khona* is simply a front for the ANC to engage in illegal attacks upon the DA’s service delivery initiatives in Cape Town’s informal settlements. In a press release the DA went so far as to call *Ses’khona*’s tactics “nothing more than desperate ANC thuggery in disguise¹².” At one point the ANC expelled the leaders of *Ses’khona*, only to reinstate them in the run-up to the 2014 elections.

Ses’khona cannot really be considered an affiliate of the ANC, or a formal alliance partner in the same way as COSATU and the SACP. Despite this lack of formal affiliation, its links to the ruling party cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence.

However, in terms of connections to formal politics, it is *Abahlali Basemjondolo*’s endorsement of the DA in KZN that has garnered the most attention. The DA trumpeted this as a major victory, while the ANC claimed that *Abahlali Basemjondolo* had just become a stooge for the DA. The association’s leader, S’bu Zikhode, stated in an interview that this move was tactical, and based solely around challenging the ANC. In his own words:

“The ANC has consistently demonstrated that it lacks the political will to take the issues of the poor seriously...This decision is not one that is based on ideology. Poor people do not eat ideology, nor do they live in houses that are made out of ideology.

So for this decision, we have decided to suspend ideology for a clear goal: weaken the ANC, guarantee the security and protection of the shack dwellers¹³.”

This move has not been entirely smooth, however. Confusion and dissent have emerged, with the Cape Town branch insisting that it has not endorsed the DA, and pointedly noting that it has received very little satisfaction from its

engagements with the DA government in the Western Cape.

This decision and its outcome leave some questions for the future. It may well be a strategic decision, but is it because life outside of mainstream politics has become too harsh? Will endorsing the DA provide protection for *Abahlali Basemjondolo*'s members in KwaZulu-Natal? How will *Abahlali Basemjondolo* square this move with its experiences in the Western Cape?

Abahlali Basemjondolo began its trajectory by clearly separating itself from any political affiliation. However, despite gaining momentum and publicity, it appears to have made the decision that entering mainstream politics to some extent is a necessary move.

6. Conclusion

It seems that there are limits to the political effectiveness of social movements. The TAC was generally successful, but it is unlikely that either *Ses'khona* or *Abahlali Basemjondolo* will see their demands met to their satisfaction in the near

future; likewise, the Landless People's Movement and the Anti-Eviction Campaign. Delivery is hindered by too many factors – globalisation, government inefficiency, weak economic growth, the entrenchment of neo-liberal frameworks, and the de-industrialisation of the economy.

However, movements such as these are still extremely important. They act as a voice for the poor. Although it may be strident at times, it is important that the voice of the poor and marginalised is not simply sidelined or co-opted by the more powerful. The fierce independence of these movements is an important element in making sure that they remain the voices of the poor, as opposed to becoming the voices of the NGO sector, or the voices of political parties which find them convenient for the sake of winning elections. Social movements act as a conscience for society, and help ensure that the plight of the most marginalised and vulnerable is not forgotten or overlooked.

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¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2002/jun/26/guardiansocietysupplement.globalisation>

² <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/india/111228/anti-corruption-bill-anna-hazare>

³ Richard Ballard, Adam Habib, Imraan Valodia and Elke Zuern provide an important taxonomy of social movements in their work entitled *Globalisation, Marginalisation and Contemporary Social Movements in South Africa*. It is one of the key works in this field and is well worth reading for a scholarly perspective on this topic.

⁴ It is worth considering the question of whether the government's shift in anti-retroviral policy was entirely as a result of the TAC's campaign. The provision of Nevirapine in order to prevent mother to child transmission was due to a successful court action by the TAC, but Health Minister Manto Tshabalala- Msimang's departure only took place after Thabo Mbeki's departure from office. Nonetheless, the TAC's ability to raise awareness and mobilise around this issue cannot be denied.

⁵ <http://www.pmg.org.za/docs/2004/appendices/041018lpm.htm>

⁶ The Red October movement is a right wing, white Afrikaner movement that articulates grievances around the perceived victimization of white people in relation to issues such as farm attacks and Black Economic Empowerment.

⁷ Pithouse, Richard. 'Our Struggle is Thought on the Ground, Running: The University of Abahlali Basemjondolo' <http://abahlali.org/files/RREPORT_VOL106_PITHOUSE.pdf> p18

⁸ Pithouse, p22

⁹ See Campbell et al, pp 1 – 2

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/29695/1/_Libfile_repository_Content_Campbell,%20C_Heeding%20the%20push_Heeding%20the%20push%20%28sero%29.pdf

¹⁰Campbell *et al* p 2

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/24/south-africa-shack-bahlali-basejondolo>

¹² <https://www.capetown.gov.za/en/MediaReleases/Pages/SesKhonaPeoplesRightsMovementnothingmorethandesperateANCthuggeryindisguise.aspx>

¹³ <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-05-05-groundup-why-abahlali-endorsed-the-da-sbu-zikode-speaks/#.U3sl3SjYkv0>

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