

**The Persistent Protest Cycle:**  
**A Case Study of Contained Political Incorporation**

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## **Abstract**

For more than a decade, widespread protests have erupted within South Africa's impoverished black townships and informal settlements. The mobilizations resembled what Tarrow (2011) refers to as a "cycle of contention" or "protest cycle," as they represented a diffusion of heightened conflict across society. In contrast to Tarrow's protest cycle, however, resistance failed to converge around "objective coalitions" and a generalized challenge, and it persisted rather than reaching exhaustion. Drawing on a case study of protest and organizing in Bekkersdal, I argue that the fragmentation and localization of resistance reinforced this peculiar combination. Bekkersdal activists responded to democratization by seeking administrative fixes to local government. Political parties also pulled activists in different directions, yet without facilitating bridges to activism in other areas. While providing a highly visible example for activists in other areas to replicate, the Bekkersdal resistance thus failed to produce broader concessions that might have discouraged protests elsewhere. The case study shows how local containment of political incorporation processes may enable the persistence of protest cycles.

## **Keywords**

cycle of contention, protest cycle, democratization, political incorporation, local government, political parties, service delivery, demobilization, social movements, unions

In late 2013, the residential area of Bekkersdal – a low-income and predominantly black township outside of Johannesburg in South Africa – erupted in protest. A host of grievances underpinned the unrest, such as high grave site fees, poor sewerage infrastructure, infrequent waste collection, overcrowding, unemployment, and government corruption. Protesters burned tires, barricaded roads, vandalized local municipal buildings, and disrupted school activities. Far from unique, the Bekkersdal resistance reflected a wave of highly localized and militant protests for improved public service delivery. While the precise grievances varied across local contexts, demands for government recognition and public resources resonated across the country (Paret 2018a). Between 2009 and 2017, the media reported more than 3,000 such local protests – close to one protest per day – and police incident reports suggest that actual numbers were likely at least four times this amount (Alexander et al. 2018:35).

This widespread mobilization resembled what Tarrow (2011:199) refers to as a “cycle of contention” or “protest cycle.” Extending beyond a single organization or campaign, a protest cycle entails “a phase of heightened conflict across the social system.” Consistent with Tarrow’s analysis, local protests in South Africa developed new frames of contention as they diffused throughout society. The notion of “service delivery” became a familiar rallying cry, as residents pushed the government to deliver on promises associated with the previous transition from apartheid to democracy. Also consistent with Tarrow’s analysis of protest cycles, local protests combined both “organized and unorganized participation” (Tarrow 2011:199).

Yet the longer trajectory of South Africa’s local protests illustrated a different pattern than Tarrow outlines. Crucially, they did not converge into “objective coalitions,” leading to an appearance that “entire societies were rising up in unison” (Tarrow 2011:200). Instead, resistance remained highly localized and fragmented (Paret 2018a). This fragmentation, in turn, limited the

extent to which the state had to “devise broad strategies,” and there is little evidence that widespread protests produced “general outcomes that [we]re more than the sum of the results of an aggregate of unconnected events” (Tarrow 2011:199). South Africa was also different due to the limited evidence of “exhaustion” (Tarrow 2011:198, 206), which refers to a common pattern of declining participation within protest cycles. Instead, protests increased in the late 2000s, stayed prevalent through the 2010s, and show no signs of abating (Alexander et al. 2018:35).

How did South Africa’s protest cycle perpetuate itself without presenting a broader challenge to the state? I argue that it is important to consider the political dimensions of protest, including the ways in which democratization and party politics reinforced the fragmentation and localization of resistance. Isolation made activists vulnerable to incorporation within “routines of organized politics,” as Tarrow (2011:190) underscores is common within protest cycles, but it also confined that incorporation to the local level. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, in this paper I illustrate these political dynamics through a focus on the Bekkersdal case. Bekkersdal activists responded to the elusive promises of post-apartheid development by seeking administrative fixes to local government. Party politics pulled activists in different directions, yet without facilitating bridges to activism in other areas. While providing a highly visible example for activists in other areas to replicate, the Bekkersdal resistance failed to produce broader concessions that might have discouraged protests elsewhere. The case study shows how local containment of political incorporation processes may enable the persistence of protest cycles.

## **Democratization and the politics of local protest**

South Africa's dramatic transition from apartheid to democracy marked a substantial opening of the political system to black residents. The new constitution abolished legalized racial exclusion and enshrined new rights for all citizens, regardless of race, including civil and political rights as well as rights to goods such as housing, health care, and water. The democratic state mirrored what Goodwin (2012) refers to as a "newly sympathetic government," where "the statements of certain political leaders prior to their ascension to power" encourages "a belief that authorities [will] react favorably to organized pressure from below." In South Africa the African National Congress (ANC), the black-led national liberation movement turned political party, assumed power after the collapse of apartheid. The ANC promised to reduce racial inequality, to deliver material improvements in daily livelihood, and to provide a "better life for all."

The ANC's legitimacy rested heavily upon both the legacy of anti-apartheid struggle, and the appearance that the party was effectively improving the lives of the black majority. Between 1994 and 2019, the ANC won five consecutive national elections and remains in power today. Yet, challenges such as widespread unemployment and poverty, corruption scandals, and the very important Marikana massacre – where police killed 34 striking mineworkers – signaled difficulty for the ruling party. In Bekkersdal, activists referred to the local taxi rank as "Marikana" because it was where they often faced off with police. Against this backdrop, the ANC began to suffer at the polls, declining from a high of 70 percent support in 2004 to a new low of 57.5 percent in 2019. This combination of dominance and decline (Booyesen 2015) shaped local protest by generating varied political orientations and complex relationships to the ruling party. Within current scholarship, three prominent perspectives – rebellion of the poor, the ballot

and the brick, and ANC factionalism – underscore the deep connections between popular resistance and party politics. I take each in turn.

Coining the term *rebellion of the poor*, Alexander (2010) characterizes local protests as a “massive movement” from below. Rooted in shared material conditions and grievances, for Alexander the rebellion stemmed from “disappointment with the fruits of democracy,” and particularly with the ANC, due to poverty, unemployment, poor living conditions, and the self-serving actions of local officials. Deeper causes included policies that prioritized privatization over public goods and exacerbated inequality, as well as deployment processes that tethered officials to party bosses. While noting similar underlying grievances, other scholars underscore important political obstacles. Mottiar and Bond (2012) point to the lack of a “political orientation to movement-building,” the isolation of protests from each other, and the willingness of protesters to work within the framework of existing neoliberal policies. Similarly, Sinwell (2011) argues that local struggles frequently fail to challenge either neoliberalism or the ANC, and that the ruling party uses material concessions to reproduce the existing order.

Picking up some of these challenges, Booysen’s (2012) *ballot and brick* perspective suggests that protests enabled poor residents to re-engage the ruling party through collective action from below. In her view, residents deployed a “dual repertoire” of the “ballot and the brick,” using votes to keep the ANC in power and protests to engage ANC officials between elections. Operating separately from formal channels of political competition, this dual repertoire “signifies a parallel political world in which voters directly engage with *their* ANC” (2012: 296). This suggests that protests may reinforce the power and legitimacy of the ruling party. On the ground, however, growing patterns of abstention, independent candidates, and small opposition parties suggest otherwise (Alexander 2012). At the national level, the emergence in 2013 of the

Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an opposition party founded by expelled former leaders of the ANC Youth League, represented a new avenue for residents to channel their frustration. Survey evidence provides mixed results. Some instances of protest adhere to Booyesen's thesis, while others show that protesters aligned with opposition politics (Paret 2018b).

The *ANC factionalism* perspective suggests that protests stem from elite divisions within the ruling party. Von Holdt (2013, 2014), for example, agrees with Booyesen that the ANC leveraged protests to regenerate power, but places greater emphasis on internal competition over scarce resources and the subsequent corruption of democratic institutions. Elite struggles to control the ruling party and state institutions, he argues, generate a dangerous mix of authoritarianism, clientelism and populism (2013: 591,602). While von Holdt acknowledges that protests do often express popular grievances, he emphasizes how elites use them to weaken opponents and "reconfigure power within the local ANC" (2013: 135). This enables the ANC to absorb resistance and prevent the development of durable oppositional organizations.

These accounts are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Hannah Dawson's (2014a, 2014b) brilliant ethnographic case study of the Zandspruit informal settlement, for example, attests to the merits of all three perspectives. In this case, youth disappointment with the realities of democracy, struggles from below to restore patronage from the ruling party, and internal ANC battles, all underpinned repeated protests. The three perspectives highlight the complexity of protest politics, which may emerge in response to popular frustration with democracy and the ANC, but also become deeply entangled with the ruling party and its logics of governance. The fact that local protests often overlap with xenophobic attacks, in which residents may affirm nationalist discourses and state-driven identities, attests to the latter (Paret 2018c; Neocosmos 2010). Whereas popular frustration points towards the possibility of a unified movement or

rebellion, I argue that state entanglements and political party competition may reinforce the fragmentation and localization of resistance. These processes shape the broader protest cycle because they confine political incorporation to the local level. This means that protest in one area may have limited consequences for other residential areas with similar economic conditions.

### **Bekkersdal: A South African case study**

This study draws on a long-term ethnographic and interview-based research project into the politics of local protest in South Africa, with a specific focus on impoverished residential areas in and around Johannesburg. My central goal was to better understand the organizational dynamics, everyday experiences, and political attitudes that underpinned escalating protests. I conducted the research between 2007 and 2019, through a series of fieldwork trips that ranged in length from one week to eighteen months. I went to places where protests occurred and I engaged the activists and residents that propelled and experienced them. I walked around and drove through residential areas, met with activists and ordinary residents, shared meals, attended meetings, participated in protests, conducted formal interviews, and had thousands of informal conversations. Overall, I completed 28 months of ethnographic observation in varied residential areas, and I collected 105 in-depth interviews with activists and ordinary residents. I also collected 182 short interviews of less than fifteen minutes each, primarily at protest events. While this paper focuses on a single case, the broader study informs my thinking.

I focus here on Bekkersdal, a predominantly black township of 47,000 residents located in the West Rand section of Gauteng province, the economic hub of the country. The government built Bekkersdal as a formal township in the 1940s, though beginning in the late



1980s, a large informal settlement formed within the area. In 1993, on the eve of the democratic transition, nearly half (46 percent) of the population lived in free-standing shacks in informal settlements, one-third lived in backyard shacks behind formal houses, and one-fifth lived in formal houses built primarily by the local town council (Crankshaw 1996: 54-56). The area initially served the small local town of Westonaria and the booming gold mining industry. Yet the population grew as mining employment stagnated. As of the 2011 census, the expanded unemployment rate (including discouraged work-seekers) in the municipality stood at 37 percent, and the upper-bound poverty rate (below approximately US\$130/month) was 51 percent. These figures underestimate the extent of economic hardship, as they include nearby areas of the municipality that were more affluent than Bekkersdal.

I first visited Bekkersdal in early 2014, a few months after the major protests of late 2013 had dissipated. I visited the township consistently for several months in 2014, including attendance at public events, and conducted follow-up visits in 2015, 2016, and 2017. I made contact with and interviewed members of the Greater Westonaria Concerned Residents Association (GWCRA), the main activist organization in the township, as well as political party and union activists, shop owners, and ordinary residents. In total, I collected 43 interviews related to the Bekkersdal case. This included 11 interviews with GWCRA activists, 8 interviews with activists with weak connections to GWCRA or none at all, 6 interviews with activists who were not actively involved in GWCRA but actively involved in political parties, 4 interviews with owners of small shops, 4 interviews with union officials, and 10 interviews with ordinary residents with limited connection to activism. In October, 2017, I held a workshop in Johannesburg with about fifty activists, researchers, and undergraduate students from across

Gauteng province, including four activists from Bekkersdal. Through the workshop, I gathered critical feedback on the main findings of my research.

### **Oppositional insurgence**

Consistent with the rebellion of the poor perspective, resistance emerged in response to popular frustration with the ANC and the disappointments of democracy. Oppositional identities and organization had a long history in Bekkersdal. Like many low-income black areas, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the township became an important site of both anti-apartheid resistance, and bloody political violence between competing forces. The latter often pit the ANC against the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). In Bekkersdal, however, the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) figured prominently as well. Until 1990, by one report, AZAPO "was unquestionably the dominant organization in the township" (Gotz and Shaw 1996:220). AZAPO's strength represented the prevalence of Black Consciousness ideologies, which contrasted with the ANC's nonracialism (MacDonald 2012:108-123) and laid a foundation for later opposition to the ruling party.

Political division developed a spatial dimension. Activists frequently identified the large informal settlement as dominated by migrant outsiders and ANC loyalists from the Eastern Cape. They also associated migrants from the Eastern Cape with the ANC-dominated local municipal government. This reinforced a sense of detachment between the local government and residents of the formal housing area. Matsobane – a prominent GWCRA activist who grew up in Bekkersdal "under the ranks of AZAPO," and had recently joined the EFF – explained that local officials were not "bonafides" from the area, but rather ANC members deployed from outside

(Interview 65; April 17, 2014; male, 31 years old). Charles, another GWCRA activist who grew up in Bekkersdal and aligned with EFF, affirmed this interpretation: “the people who are from the Eastern Cape are the ones in charge of the municipality ... it’s the bonafides versus the people who come from outside ... it’s bonafides up in arms with the people who came here because of job settlement” (Interview 47; March 12, 2014; male, 28 years old). In practice, local organizing and protests drew support from both the formal and informal areas. Yet the formal housing area represented the epicenter of popular resistance, which drew upon the legacy of organizing beyond the ANC.

Matsobane contrasted the Bekkersdal experience with the nearby Mohlakeng township, which in his view was much better developed: “It has developed far better than Bekkersdal, and yet it was developed after Bekkersdal ... It has recreational structures. Infrastructure is 100% satisfactory. They may have certain issues of service delivery here and there, but it is not like us. We have been neglected in Bekkersdal.” He attributed Mohlakeng’s better fortune to the fact that their local officials were “bonafides” who lived in the area and knew “the dos and don’ts.” In contrast, he argued, in Bekkersdal “you find people whom we don’t know ... It becomes a problem when you deploy someone who does not come from that area because that person does not have the interest of that community at heart” (Interview 65; April 17, 2014; male, 31 years old). Such comparisons were common across areas. Residents often justified their resistance by noting both developmental successes elsewhere, and the poor performance of local officials.

Economic insecurity and poor living conditions underpinned growing frustration and protest. Among other issues, residents complained about the dearth of jobs and educational opportunities, overcrowding and infrastructural problems, and a lack of recreational facilities. A decision by the municipality to raise the fee for gravesites, making it more than seven times the

previous amount, provided the initial trigger for the explosion of protests. Yet frustration quickly spilled over into other issues. Charles described the expanding scope:

You see, in the process of the struggle, one issue will open up another issue. For example, when the protest started there was an issue of the grave fees. The first day the grave fees were R270, and the next day when we woke up the grave fees were R1960 ... We wrote a letter and submitted it to the Minister and said we have a problem of service delivery and guys who work in the municipality do not collect waste and we also have a problem of sewer. You cannot tell the difference between sewer water and rainwater. (Interview 47; March 12, 2014; male, 28 years old)

Running sewerage became a hot-button issue. The media seized upon it. Once the lid on the boiling pot of poverty and frustration blew open, however, a whole host of issues emerged. New to activism and not affiliated with any political party, the twenty-three-year-old Tumelo thrust herself into the protests. Several months after the protests, her excitement about the possibilities for change were palpable as she described her reasons for protesting:

My demands specifically were: you can see I have a baby; our kids cannot play, they are not safe, we needed our municipality to come and unblock the drains. Secondly, unemployment rate, we needed them to do their job and employ youth. Thirdly, as they had promised to assist us with schools we heard the money was out, but the municipality, we hear, misused that money. So, we thought if we speak our voice, we will be heard. (Interview 80; June 20, 2014; female, 23 years old)

As Tumelo's comment hinted, widespread perceptions of government failure added to popular frustration. Residents complained that maladministration, mismanagement, and nepotism within the ANC-run municipality undermined local development and services.

The Bekkersdal Renewal Project (BRP) also became a touchpoint. Launched by the ANC in the early 2000s, the BRP was part of a national urban renewal program that provided for large development projects in specific local nodes. By the time I arrived in 2014, it was a common understanding among activists that state officials had squandered the money for the project. They alleged that some funds had disappeared, while the rest went towards "white elephant" projects that did little to benefit the community. Sizwe, a prominent GWCRA activist, grew up in Bekkersdal in the 1970s and 1980s and joined the anti-apartheid struggle as a member of AZAPO. He explained:

Ten years down the line, we still get nothing for the R1.2 billion that you can see ... [the buildings they built] have not been utilized ... That's how some of them were even vandalized. They are just white elephants; and we said, but look, we cannot continuously have problems caused by government and not speak out. (Interview 53; March 26, 2014; male, 44 years old)

During one protest, frustrated residents vandalized a new community hall that some said the municipality only reserved for ANC members. The vandalism captured popular frustration with state neglect. In explaining the incident, one EFF member and local activist complained that, "They don't want to listen to us ... they don't take us seriously" (Interview 70; May 6, 2014; Bekkersdal; male, 31 years old).

Activists in Bekkersdal were often at pains to convey that they were challenging the state, not the ruling party. Yet the ANC dominated the local municipality, as well as the provincial and national governments. This made it difficult, as Charles underscored, to distinguish between party and state:

We are not fighting [with the ANC]. But we are trying to raise our concerns towards government, and government is led by the ANC. But the struggle is not posed to any political party; it is posed to our local government. But now our local government is led by the ANC. Now the ANC thinks that the struggle is directed to them. (Interview 47; March 12, 2014; Bekkersdal; male, 28 years old)

Opposition to the ANC became more explicit as resistance unfolded. A key moment occurred in October 2013 when Nomvula Mokonyane, the Premier of Gauteng province, visited Bekkersdal. In a heated exchange with frustrated residents, Mokonyane snapped back: “People can threaten us and say they won’t vote, but the ANC doesn’t need their dirty votes.” GWCRA spokesperson Thabang Wesi retorted to the press that residents would take their dirty votes “to other political parties that will wash them and once they are clean utilize them effectively, taking care of the voters, unlike the ANC” (Lekgowa and Nicolson 2013).

The infamous “dirty votes” comment resonated throughout popular media, and amplified the already sizzling tension within Bekkersdal. Several months later, residents still referred to the incident when expressing their frustration with the ANC and the local state. In March 2014, residents protested when the ANC attempted to campaign in Bekkersdal for the upcoming national government elections. The clash made headlines after police and armed ANC bodyguards moved to suppress the resistance. Things came to a head again just before the

election, when a group of residents chased away ANC Youth League members attempting to rally in public park. In explaining the incident, Themba – a long-time Bekkersdal resident and AZAPO member who helped to launch the GWCRA – made clear his special disdain for the ruling party: “We started to say we don’t need ANC around here because of our dirty votes ... EFF was here. AGANG was here. COPE was here. AZAPO was here. All of these political organizations. But I said there is no way that we gonna allow ANC to come and canvas around” (Interview 75; May 30, 2014; male, 41 years old).

Specific hostility towards the local ANC permeated and bolstered local organizing and popular resistance. Activists consistently called for disbanding the ANC-dominated municipal government, and especially for removing the mayor. Such frustration hinted at the possibility of a broader struggle in opposition to the ruling party, which might have brought about the kinds of “objective coalitions” that Tarrow’s (2011) theory of protest cycles anticipates. Instead, however, the Bekkersdal struggle – and the processes of political incorporation that it produced – remained highly localized.

### **Localization, governance, and incorporation**

Consistent with the ballot-and-brick and ANC factionalism perspectives, the local struggle in Bekkersdal failed to produce a durable organization that was independent and autonomous. Instead, protest and organization eventually led to political incorporation and decline. Crucially, though, this process was about more than simply entanglement with the ANC. It also stemmed from the dynamics of party competition and faith in the democratic state more broadly.

In Bekkersdal, the opposition party EFF represented the best hope for outward-looking solidarity. With a strong emphasis on black empowerment, the EFF aligned with the locally prominent Black Consciousness tradition. Matsobane argued that firebrand EFF leader Julius Malema was “saluted by the AZAPO members because the EFF policies and manifesto are similar to that of AZAPO, and that is why the ANC hates us so much” (Interview 65; April 17, 2014; male, 31 years old). While some prominent local activists were EFF members, however, the party remained distant from local organizing, and did little to link the local struggle in Bekkersdal to activities beyond the township. Rather than an opposition party, activists instead emphasized “community” as their primary political identity. This was common across local protest movements (Paret 2018a). Sello grew up in Bekkersdal, joined the EFF after its formation in 2013, and was active in protests. He explained: “If I am fighting for service delivery, I am not fighting for me. I am fighting for the whole community. Everyone living in the community is community. So if one is going there, another there, then it is not working” (Interview 50; March 12, 2014; male, 33 years old).

Embodying this emphasis on a unified community voice, the GWCRA eschewed party politics, which would have divided residents. Charles explained:

We are apolitical as a structure. But we have representatives from different political parties ... they are accommodated here, as a mandate that comes from a public meeting to say that: if we want to push the struggle, this struggle cannot be pushed by a certain group or political party or a group of people, but we need to amalgamate as a community in concern. (Interview 47; March 12, 2014; male, 28 years old)



An “apolitical” stance served multiple purposes. It downplayed opposition to the ANC, which remained the most popular party in the area despite growing frustration. This helped activists to reduce repression from ANC loyalists both inside and outside the state. Even more importantly, though, in a context of deepening political party competition, appeals to place-based community enabled activists to build solidarity between residents with varied political affinities. Finally, notions of community affirmed the purity and authenticity of local protests, helping activists to avoid claims that they were seeking narrow personal gains such as government positions.

The emphasis on community over party politics eventually led towards a self-governance project. Within the local area, residents knew the GWCRA, and the one-room building that served as the group’s headquarters, as “The Parliament.” The label reflected activists’ belief that they knew best how to govern the area. Vuyo was a long-standing Bekkersdal resident and activist who affiliated with the Socialist Party of Azania, a breakaway from AZAPO, as well as the EFF. In explaining the origins of the name, Vuyo recalled social gatherings with “guys that are thought to be the brains of Bekkersdal.” Echoing the stories of other prominent local activists, he explained their realization that, “we are a government ourselves. That’s how the concept of Parliament came about.” (Interview 74; May 14, 2014; male, 41 years old). Notions of local community control and self-governance underpinned hostility towards broader movements, which some activists understood as opportunistic attempts to use the community for narrow ends. As one activist explained: “You cannot come and want to orchestrate a struggle of the community that you don’t stay in and want to lead it. Give the communities the power, the power is within us, we are the government” (Field notes, Johannesburg workshop; October 14, 2017).

The Parliament's self-governance project peaked on Freedom Day in 2014 – a national holiday celebrating the democratic transition of 1994 – when activists sought to launch a new hub for creating local development solutions. GWCRA spokesperson Thabang Wesi explained that, “This will take our grievances and issues to a higher level. We cannot depend on government to deliver in terms of the effective services they should render to us.” Launching a broader attack, GWCRA chairperson Wonder Modise remarked that, “This is the first thing in 20 years where the community of Greater Westonia can claim to say they have freedom. There was nothing to celebrate before today” (Watson 2014). After speeches about the value of self-governance and potential development projects, the crowd of a couple hundred people broke into working groups to discuss service delivery, local economic development, education, and the environment. Time was short, limiting opportunities for discussion. The working group I visited revolved more around the ideas of prominent leaders than it did around genuine dialogue and widespread participation. Yet the significance was clear. Local activists were *asserting* their ability to resolve local development problems, despite their very limited capacities.

The project stalled, as the GWCRA was a small organization with few resources, no clear membership base, and limited ability to implement development projects. Further, the prospect of participating in official governance proved enticing. Sizwe, for example, argued that state officials “should not underestimate” the capacity of residents to do more than just protest, and emphasized the need for deeper state-community collaboration. He explained: “We need to have a continuous engagement with government, so as to have clear solutions and guidelines within the policy frameworks of the country ... We must better the communications of communities and government for us to have a proper democratic country” (Interview 53; March 26, 2014; male, 44 years old). State engagement reached new heights in June 2014, when GWCRA activists met

with provincial-level government officials. The engagement built on previous meetings in late 2013 with representatives of the ruling Alliance – the ANC, South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – during which Bekkersdal activists agreed to quell the ongoing protests.

The goal of the June 2014 meeting was to discuss plans for local development, and the activists looked forward to sharing the results of their Freedom Day event. After a closed-door meeting, GWCRA activists and government officials jointly presided over a press conference in the Westonaria Municipality boardroom. The officials ran the conference, and assured the media that government would address all of Bekkersdal’s issues in due time. Activists expressed confidence in government’s ability to deliver, and affirmed their own cooperation. Spokesperson Wesli exclaimed that the meeting was “very much fruitful.” When a reporter asked the activists if, given the official cooperation, they were going to denounce violent protests, Wesli responded: “We are leadership, we are not hooligans. That is why we are always engaging with relevant stakeholders.” Echoing the sentiment, GWCRA General Secretary Wonder Modise noted that, “as a community we will not necessarily have reason to protest anymore.” He also affirmed Wesli’s optimism, expressing hope that, “the lack of services that has been raised is going to be addressed in a new manner moving forward.” (Field notes, June 5, 2014, Westonaria).

In the wake of the meeting, the Parliament began to lose steam as popular energy dissipated. Some residents complained that GWCRA leaders no longer held regular meetings or provided feedback about government projects. Rumors began to circulate about them abandoning the struggle and accepting bribes. While the evidence was thin, some GWCRA activists did manage to secure access to jobs and subcontracts through a new sewer project, which was the most visible consequence of the 2013 protests. When combined with the official meetings

between GWCRA leaders and government officials, such evidence of patronage demonstrated the power of the ruling party to coopt and incorporate local movements. Years later, one young EFF activist remarked with no hesitation that the Parliament was *ifile* (dead). She complained that local leaders had “sold out” the struggle for their own personal benefit (Interview 109; May 24, 2017; female).

The 2016 local government elections further fragmented local organizing. Rather than maintaining unity across party lines, activists went separate ways by supporting different parties, including ANC, EFF, AZAPO, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and others. The GWCRA did not produce their own candidate. A few days after the elections, Sizwe was visibly disappointed. Noting the fragmentation of activists who were working separately on different tasks, and suggesting the influence of bribery and patronage from local officials and the ANC, he remarked that the Parliament was no longer the formidable entity that it once was. He expressed hope about forming a “shadow community council” to monitor the official town council, though it was unclear from where he would draw the popular energy to make it work. With residents isolated from broader movements and racked by internal division, mobilization was absent.

The focus on governance in Bekkersdal led to an emphasis on administrative or bureaucratic fixes that was entirely compatible with ANC rule. This left activists vulnerable to incorporation into official governance procedures, as demonstrated by the joint press conference featuring GWCRA and ANC leaders. Division and competition between political parties underpinned a parallel emphasis on place-based community. While this approach did help to unify residents across party lines, at least initially, it also weakened the movement by encouraging isolation from activism in other areas. Over time, party divisions resurfaced and

further weakened the movement. These processes helped to contain resistance and incorporation at the local level, rather than shaping the politics of the broader protest cycle.

### **Labor-community fragmentation**

The local labor movement in Westonaria municipality brought into focus the ANC factionalism perspective. Whereas the Bekkersdal protests emerged from outside of the ANC, labor resistance developed in conjunction with a mounting divide within the ANC and its Alliance partners, particularly COSATU. While this might have led to labor-community solidarity, the collaboration never came to fruition. Mirroring the process with the GWCRA, labor leaders focused on administrative fixes rather than mass mobilization. When combined with underlying political divisions, this reinforced the separation of labor and community struggles.

Employment divisions came to the fore when Bekkersdal protesters deployed “stay-aways,” a tactic akin to a general strike in which they sought to prevent residents from leaving the township for work or school. This fueled tension between unemployed protesters and employed residents who wanted to go to work. In some instances, protesters physically attacked workers who attempted to skip protests. Tumelo explained: “So it turned out that those that are unemployed were fighting the employed ones. They did not want them to go to work ... if they find you in the taxi or on your way to work, they beat you up” (Interview 80; June 20, 2014; female, 23 years old). Reinforcing claims to represent “the community,” some activists appealed to the fact that all residents, including workers, would benefit from the protests. Dumisani, a younger and unemployed GWCRA activist who had lived all his life in Bekkersdal, and sought to organize Bekkersdal youth, echoed Tumelo’s account: “So for all the community members

that are working, [they] were stopped that day to go to work, and take part in the protest; because it benefits us all, not certain individuals” (Interview 77; June 12, 2014; male, 21 years old).

In the wake of the late 2013 protest surge, an opportunity to build solidarity between workers and residents emerged. The local branch of the South African Municipal Workers’ Union (SAMWU) went through a leadership change, in which workers who were critical of the municipal government won five of eight positions on the union’s executive committee. The shift represented an internal division within the ruling Alliance. As a COSATU affiliate, SAMWU was formally aligned to the ANC. While all eight leaders were ANC members, only some supported the officials who ran the local state, which employed municipal workers and thus SAMWU members. As Siphso, an ANC member and SAMWU shop steward, put it, five of the new union leaders “know their role” while the other three, “they are in the pockets of the management, because [they] are saying we are the members of the ruling party.” He continued: “Yes, we all agree we are [ANC members]. But if I come here I am a worker, and we have to protect the people’s rights” (Interview 78; June 18, 2014; male, 39 years old).

Focused on poor local governance, SAMWU’s criticism of the municipality aligned with the grievances raised by Bekkersdal protesters. While some SAMWU members joined the protests, the union did not support them as a collective. When SAMWU began to have its own protests aimed at local municipal officials, following the leadership change, some activists were frustrated. Dumisani remarked that, “they had a march to the municipality and they wanted the community to be part of that march because they did not get their salaries. So, they did not support as a union when we were protesting, but they wanted the community to go and support them” (Interview 77; June 12, 2014; male, 21 years old). He associated the union with an older generation of anti-apartheid activists – “our granddads” – who he blamed for the grim situation

of youth in the post-apartheid era. Others, however, were more appreciative. Matsobane, for example, argued enthusiastically that, “they are supportive of the struggle! They are also the vanguards of the poor and the working class; and the working class are also the members of this community. And they have raised [a] number of issues with the municipality” (Interview 65; April 17, 2014; male, 31 years old).

Some SAMWU leaders expressed concern about the vandalism that took place during the Bekkersdal protests. Noting that, “we cannot condone such behavior,” Siphon worried that community activists might taint their own struggles, such as by throwing stones at the municipality (Interview 78; June 18, 2014; male, 39 years old). Further, while SAMWU officially shared the concern of Bekkersdal activists regarding poor municipal government, some union leaders did not agree with their demand to place the local state under national or provincial control. They wanted to focus, instead, on improving hiring procedures, removing irresponsible officials, and restoring local bureaucratic capacity. Ultimately, SAMWU sought to play an insider role. This meant using their employment at the municipality, their workplace organization, and their ANC affiliation to stimulate change. Arthur, a member of the SAMWU executive, recalled a meeting with GWCRA activists: “We advised [them] to say ... You tell us what should happen and *we will be able to push it inside*. You will back us up so that at the end of the day, when we fail, we fail as a collective, and nobody will blame each other” (Interview 76; June 12, 2014; male; emphasis added). Rather than working together to build mass mobilization, the union offered instead to use their own connections to improve the municipality. There was little evidence that even this limited form of collaboration came to fruition.

In June 2014, a SAMWU protest to highlight poor municipal management included a march through town and a rally outside the municipal offices. Union leaders used chants to

affirm their loyalty to the ANC and its official partners: “Viva, ANC, Viva! Viva, SACP, Viva! Viva, COSATU, Viva!” (Field notes, Westonaria; June 20, 2014). Referring to the ruling party as “our fearless organization the ANC which has no interest separate and apart from those of our community,” their memorandum reminded the local, ANC-affiliated officials of their “responsibility to ensure that the quality of this government lives to the standards of our movement as entrusted to you.” Balancing a fine line between unity and opposition, the memorandum remarked: “We stand here not as an opposition to the people’s movement [i.e. the ANC], but we call upon those entrusted by our movement to do what is right” (SAMWU Westonaria 2014). It was clear that the union understood the ruling ANC, and not the activism that underpinned the Bekkersdal protests, as the most important “movement.”

The protest was remarkable in its focus on general community interests, rather than narrow worker interests. The memorandum centered on issues of municipal administration and poor service delivery. Yet the union continued to view itself as a privileged insider, as indicated by its prefacing of demands with, “We the workers *in vanguardism to our communities*, we demand the following ...” (SAMWU Westonaria 2014, emphasis added). Despite the broad framing of the mobilization, however, most participants were union members. None of the leading Bekkersdal activists attended. On their way to the municipality, SAMWU leaders halted the march outside of a shopping center while one leader excoriated residents for not joining their protest:

Residents of greater Westonaria: we are here again, marching for what belongs to us, not only as SAMWU members but as the community members. Those who do not want to support this march, you will be crying and saying services [fees] have been increased ...



Do not cry tomorrow when you come to the municipality and are told to pay R1200 for water, because you thought we are crazy. (Field notes, Westonaria, June 20, 2014)

Failing to secure a large turnout of non-union residents, the speech captured SAMWU leaders' frustration with their own inability to lead.

Lacking significant ties to mobilization within Bekkersdal, the union's main strategy appeared to center on working with the ANC's official partners. The local SAMWU branch asked COSATU to intervene to put pressure on the ANC-affiliated municipal officials. A COSATU representative who attended the protest affirmed that the union's grievances were genuine, and that the local municipality lacked competence. He also affirmed their confidence in working with the ANC to improve the situation: "We are convinced as COSATU that so far, the ANC is willing to deal with the issues ... That is why the march is not to undermine the ANC. It is to say ... 'ANC, please be aware that these issues are very important'" (Interview 79; June 20, 2014; male). Despite claims about a broader community struggle, in the end the union focused on working with the ruling party, rather than building mass mobilization.

There were likely many reasons why Bekkersdal residents did not participate in SAMWU protests. At a concrete level, the union was not actively involved in organizing on the ground. This might have meant participating in community mass meetings, building rapport with local activists, and collectively supporting protests. At a more ideological level, the SAMWU leaders that spearheaded the union's mobilization identified as both workers and ANC members, whereas unemployment and opposition to the ANC loomed large within Bekkersdal. Overcoming such identity gaps would have required greater commitments to grassroots organizing on both sides. Finally, at a pragmatic level, the SAMWU protests accelerated as the

Bekkersdal resistance was already beginning to dissipate. For all of these reasons, worker and community struggles remained isolated.

Given the lack of practical solidarity with non-union residents, the municipal union's claims to represent the community rang somewhat hollow. This was not unique to Bekkersdal, but rather reflected a broader pattern for SAMWU across the country (Paret 2015). The fragmentation of labor and community struggles represented a missed opportunity to use the wide reach of the union to help extend popular struggles beyond the local area. Not only did this reinforce the collapse of collective mobilization in Bekkersdal, but it also had important implications for the protest cycle. Pace Tarrow (2011: 200), greater labor-community solidarity, in Bekkersdal and beyond, might have led to a broader coalition of forces and the appearance of a unified societal uprising. Instead, fragmentation and localization went hand-in-hand, limiting the extent to which the state had to "devise broad strategies" in response.

## **Conclusion**

To understand the persistence of South Africa's protest cycle, it is useful to dig deeper into local politics. The Bekkersdal case reveals two interweaving patterns. One pattern is fragmentation. Party affiliations and employment status divided residents, and while activists sought to counteract division through appeals to community, such appeals reinforced separation from activism in other areas. Community-based organization through the GWCRA also proceeded separately from labor-based organization through SAMWU. The second and related theme is pursuit of narrow administrative fixes. Rather than mass mobilization and broader political shifts, both community and labor activists eventually prioritized working with ANC officials to

improve local governance. This approach, which facilitated processes of political incorporation, served to reinforce the fragmentation, localization, and eventually demobilization of popular resistance. Indeed, some Bekkersdal activists even rejected broader movements as forces of cooptation.

What does the Bekkersdal case tell us about protest cycles? Most importantly, it underscores the important and dynamic interaction between local and national politics. As Tarrow (2011:190) explains is true of protest cycles, the mobilization in Bekkersdal did give way to interweaving processes of “facilitation” (satisfaction of movement demands), “institutionalization” (incorporation into the “routines of organized politics”), and “exhaustion” (declining participation due to weariness and strains within movements). Yet these were local, rather than national, patterns. The national context, including democratization and the ANC’s rise to power, helped to raise both expectations and disappointments. In channeling popular frustration, however, activists set their sights primarily on administrative fixes to the local municipal government. Precisely because the Bekkersdal mobilization was so localized, it did not produce any noticeable shifts in national-level politics, and it did little to quell mobilization elsewhere. In short, facilitation, institutionalization, and exhaustion did not extend to other areas where similar grievances were prevalent.

A comparison with South Africa’s recent student protests is instructive. The student movement exploded in 2015 and quickly escalated to the national level. What began as a movement at the University of Cape Town to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes, a British mining capitalist, transformed within months into a nationwide movement against growing university fees. While the movement certainly featured localized clashes with university officials about campus-specific issues, the core demand for reduced fees revolved around national level policy.

Indeed, a high moment for the movement was a protest at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the seat of the national government, by students from various campuses. At this protest, President Jacob Zuma responded by announcing the cancellation of fee increases for the following year, a major concession that applied to students across the country. This very brief example hints that processes of facilitation and institutionalization, as they related to the student movement, were not locally contained as they were in cases such as Bekkersdal. Notably, the student movement stalled after 2015-2016, and nationwide political incorporation likely played a role.

There was little evidence of collaboration between local protest movements around service delivery, such as the one in Bekkersdal, and the national student movement. Collaboration between student- and community-based movements may have enabled a broader process of political incorporation, and in turn the eventual exhaustion of the protest cycle. Instead, mobilizations such as those in Bekkersdal likely encouraged further mobilization because they signaled that protests worked. Democratization fueled competition over scarce resources, and many residents of impoverished urban areas were frustrated with what they perceived as their own exclusion from progress and development happening elsewhere. The way in which some Bekkersdal activists spoke longingly about the nearby township of Mohlakeng signaled this frustration, but similar frustrations appeared in all the protest sites I visited. Local protests challenged such exclusion, even if only temporarily and to a very limited extent. Not only did the Bekkersdal protests demand substantial media attention – and thus an audience of potential protesters in other areas – but they also sparked a positive response from government officials and a new sewer project. Residents elsewhere could, and did, replicate this approach, keeping the protest cycle alive through local mobilizations.

The two peculiar features of South Africa's ongoing protest cycle – the lack of “objective coalitions” presenting a more generalized challenge, and the lack of exhaustion – were therefore two reinforcing sides of the same coin. Precisely because it did not demand a unified national response, localized resistance enabled the perpetuation of the protest cycle as mobilization jumped from one area to the next. The South African case thus demonstrates a specific variant of Tarrow's protest cycle. This localized version is simultaneously, and paradoxically, both weaker and more resilient, regenerating itself while at the same time confining organization and coordination to circumscribed geographic areas.

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