

# Dangerous elites

## Protest, conflict and the future of South Africa

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The African National Congress' failure to manage elite contestation in its ranks since 2007 has seen tensions spilling out, often as 'service delivery' protests. Former president Jacob Zuma controlled this infighting, largely through patronage and repression. The sharp rise in protests from the end of 2017 suggests that President Cyril Ramaphosa does not seek nor have the same autocratic power as his predecessor. Instead he's trying to manage internal party disputes within the constitutional framework by rebuilding institutions weakened through state capture.

## Key findings

- ▶ Elite contestation within the African National Congress (ANC) has become unmanageable through its own structures and processes and is spilling into the rest of society. Rather than a spontaneous revolt of the poor, the rise in conflicts since 2009 is strongly linked to revolts in the ANC.
- ▶ Patronage and repression are the most likely reasons why protests stabilised and declined between 2013 and 2017. Keeping the ANC together has come at the expense of the constitutional framework, the economy and the capability of state entities.
- ▶ The rise of protests from 2018 suggests that President Cyril Ramaphosa does not have, or seek to have, the autocratic power to manage elite contestation in the ANC as did his predecessor, Jacob Zuma.
- ▶ The situation may worsen. As the party declines it will become less attractive to aspirant elites, who will pursue their interests through other means. Simply put, elite contestation is likely to become more violent as the cake shrinks.
- ▶ Mass unemployment, poverty and relative deprivation provide fuel for political entrepreneurs to light the spark of protest and insurrection. Although there has been a notable increase in localised protests, there has been no mass uprising of poor and working people.
- ▶ Opposition to poor service delivery and unemployment is expressed largely through ANC processes, where it becomes caught up in factional battles in the organisation itself.
- ▶ The study shows that data modelling and artificial intelligence have great potential for understanding and potentially solving public policy issues.

## Recommendations

- ▶ To reduce the scope for patronage and inappropriate politicisation, public service reform should be expedited, including the professionalisation of public administrations. This will also improve the quality of services and goods provided by the state.
- ▶ South Africa will remain prone to violent protests. In response, greater urgency and political support must be given to the security services if they are to manage the violent and criminal fallout of political conflict.
- ▶ Black empowerment must be expedited for economic expansion and transformation, rather than as a party-political resource, so that entrepreneurs can further their ambitions non-politically.
- ▶ South Africa needs a national conversation about the place of political parties, even national liberation movements, and what their legitimate role is in a democracy.
- ▶ Research is urgently needed on South Africa's political elites – who they are, their modes of organisation, the basis of their support, and their attitudes and behaviours to democracy and parliamentarism.

## Introduction

Internal contestation in the African National Congress (ANC) has become a debilitating source of violent political conflict in South Africa. This has already been suggested by the Report of the Expert Panel into the July 2021 Unrest released by the Presidency on 7 February 2022. This report goes further, however. The ANC after 1994 drew from diverse constituencies, including the exile leadership, Umkhonto we Sizwe, internal operatives, United Democratic Front structures and those of the Mass Democratic Movement. There were also civil servants, nurses and police, many from the homelands, as well as former Bantustan leaders.

The party managed the contestation internally – largely by accommodating members in government positions or within the national, provincial and municipal civil service and in state agencies and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). In addition, the massive and decentralised public procurement structure was used to tie selected entrepreneurs and capitalists into a system of rent-seeking and patronage. This was established by the State Capture Commission.

Through these internal measures, elite contestation was kept largely in check. It gave South Africa stability, while sacrificing good governance. From 2008, the pattern of conflict started to change. Whereas protests in South Africa had a local aspect – often categorised as ‘service delivery protests’ – today they are increasing national events, larger in scale and more violent. The ‘insurrection’ of July 2021 is an example of this change. Elite contestation has become unmanageable through the ANC’s own structures and is spilling into the rest of society.

The major achievement of the 1996 negotiated settlement was that almost all political parties and organised political tendencies accepted the broad constitutional framework in one key and basic respect. They accepted that political competition should proceed in and through the parliamentary system and according to the rules of democratic multipartyism.

Some, such as the ANC, did this out of principle and expedience. Many believed that the party had a historical right to govern, which victories in election after election confirmed. Even when factional conflicts in the organisation could not be resolved through internal

mediation, those who left formed new political parties and competed for power in and through parliament.

This was the case with Mosiuoa Lekota, who formed the Congress of the People in October 2008 with other disgruntled allies of former president Thabo Mbeki. Something similar happened in 2013 when Julius Malema and other ANC Youth League leaders were expelled from the party. They established the Economic Freedom Fighters, which contested the 2014 election and entered Parliament with 25 seats.

For nearly 30 years, South Africa’s democratic system has contained and moderated political competition. The ANC has been key to this stability, providing for ethnic and regional balances in its own composition and internal mechanisms for the transfer of power. In effect, the movement drew into itself much of the contestation that might ordinarily be expressed in a parliamentary system through party-political competition. The result has been a dominant party system rather than a competitive one.<sup>1</sup>

## In the 1990s elite rivalry and competition played itself out within the ANC itself, rather than in the political domain

Why did regional and local elites of various kinds and provenance reconcile themselves to a unitary, constitutional democracy? In new work, Chipkin has advanced the thesis that the ANC expanded in the 1990s, effectively absorbing diverse elites into the organisation.

Hence elite rivalry and competition played itself out within the ANC itself, rather than in the wider political domain.<sup>2</sup> Reconciliation of regional elites was accomplished partly by internal ANC processes such as mapping ANC provinces onto state provinces and allowing regional and provincial autonomy in candidate selection and sub-national leadership elections.

The broad political stability that the country has enjoyed has obscured, until recently, ANC contradictions and contestation. It has also given credence to political economy explanations of protest and conflict, rooted in grievances about access to public goods, work and resources. As will be discussed in greater detail further

on, protests, in particular, have been largely understood as local conflagrations about service delivery.

Grievance-based approaches dominate the theoretical and empirical work of South African researchers. Most studies published in the last 20 years emphasise the role of structural conditions in popular mobilisation. Ineffective service delivery, persisting poverty and inequality, high unemployment and dissatisfaction with local officials have been identified as main drivers of social unrest. Major studies on South African protests, discussed briefly below, place service delivery at the centre of investigations, theoretical and empirical, exclusively or, by some researchers, while including certain additional causes.

### Elite contestation in the ruling party is a significant cause of political instability and conflict

In a rapid-response research study of five so-called hotspots, Alexander speculated that social protests were ‘rebellions of the poor’. They suggested that they were driven by dissatisfaction and anger over basic services quality and against uncaring, self-serving and corrupt leaders. They were locally organised and placed demands on people who held or benefitted from political power. Essentially, Alexander argued, protests reflected disappointment with the fruits of democracy.<sup>3</sup>

In their later work, they wrote about a ‘twin-rebellion’, where workers and communities formed separate wings or tiers of this rebellion.<sup>4</sup> Generally, commentary treats protests as expressions of social grievances about poverty, unemployment, poor services and/or a lack of democracy (see Bond and Mottiar, 2013,<sup>5</sup> Atkinson, 2007<sup>6</sup>). This report calls this approach a traditional one.

Richard Pithouse is one of few commentators to push back against the service delivery narrative.<sup>7</sup> Steven Friedman, too, has argued that framing local government challenges thus is wrong, arguing that protests are rather assertions by citizens for participation in local decision-making processes.<sup>8</sup> Some evidence supports Friedman’s claims.<sup>9</sup>

The ANC’s own investigations into these arguments resonate with the findings of this report. Gwede Mantashe’s 2017 organisational report noted that internal democracy was ‘dead’. It stated that ‘fierce, even fatal, contestation, together with an almost endemic factionalism between and among comrades dominates our structures, causing grievous divisions in the movement as a whole.’<sup>10</sup>

We, too, question the traditional approach. What is underestimated in South Africa is the degree to which political protest is an organised activity directed by political elites, largely from within the ANC. Until recently, these elites pursued their political and economic interests within and through the ANC and, broadly, according to the rules of South Africa’s constitutional game. We found compelling evidence that elite contestation in the ruling party is a significant cause of political instability and conflict in South Africa today.

Rather than a revolt of the poor, the rise in conflicts since 2009 is more likely the result of revolts in the ANC. This interpretation resonates with the findings of the high-level review panel report that found government responses to the unrest in July 2021 uncoordinated and slow. The violence, it stated, was ‘complex, multidimensional, and obscure in its causes and manifestation,’<sup>11</sup> and reflected ‘a culture of lawlessness.’<sup>12</sup> Groups already mobilised and planning for instability used social media ‘to instigate the violence,’<sup>13</sup> having been angered by the sentencing of former president Zuma.<sup>14</sup>

The report confirmed that the incident that triggered violence was the imprisonment of Zuma,<sup>15</sup> leading to the conclusion that the internal differences within the ANC contributed to the unrest and should be addressed as a matter of national security.<sup>16</sup>

### Methodology

Rather than a focus on the events of July 2021, this report seeks to establish the most likely cause of political protests in South Africa from 2004 until now, by testing existing hypotheses and proposing a new one. Traditionally in South Africa, political conflict is studied qualitatively, either historically or sociologically. There is very little modelling and forecasting work using big datasets, although this is beginning to change (see Bekker and Lockwood).

This report studies political stability using quantitative techniques drawn from data modelling and artificial intelligence. We have used the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) database on protests as our baseline. This was supplemented and cross-referenced to others, including that of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). ISS data is organised temporally. This enabled development of time-series data on number of protests, number by type (community-based protests, labour strikes, vigilantism, xenophobia, political conflict and other crowd or inter-group activity) and number by location.

In South Africa, grievances about service delivery, unemployment and poverty ('political economy') are deemed the heart of protests. To test these hypotheses we built a database to model the relationship to protest data. We were granted access to raw data from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) social attitude survey. This allowed us to model trends according to changes in people's perceptions of government performance and their trust in institutions, and to consider how service delivery and political economy changes affected perceptions.

### We found no strong correlation between service delivery changes and/or the political economy and protest activity

Given the importance many scholars attribute to the role of the police in transforming a peaceful protest into a violent conflagration, we created a measure of police professionalism. This would reveal any correlations between protest trends and institutional changes in the police, especially those that suggested a deterioration of police capacity. This was our least-developed indicator due to lack of information other than high-level financial data from National Treasury. Nonetheless, financial reports included enough information about macro-organisational trends for a useable dataset.

We related the protest dataset to both the service delivery series and political economy dataset to establish and observe statistical correlations. A particular focus was testing whether rises or falls in protest activity

coincided with increases or decreases in municipal (government) performance and/or with improvements or deteriorations in poverty and unemployment. Results were surprising and significant. We found no strong correlation between either changes in service delivery and/or the political economy and protest activity. We believe we have debunked these hypotheses, proposing and testing an alternative.

The new view is that contestation in the ANC contributed significantly to protests, at least for the period considered. Thus, political protests are not just expressions of bread-and-butter grievances, but often reflect dynamics in the ruling party. This means that protests are often organised by powerbrokers in the organisation contesting for authority in a local/regional or national structure or seeking to maintain their power.<sup>17</sup>

To test this theory, we built a database of important ANC events organised chronologically. An ANC event is defined as originating from the organisation itself or that has a significant bearing on internal power relations. The chronology's scaffolding is provided by events dictated by the organisation's own constitution and/or internal processes. These are conferences, including national and provincial elective conferences, meetings of the national working and national executive committees, and key meetings of the leagues' organisations. This is supplemented with key elections required by the South African Constitution, national/provincial elections and local government elections.

The chronology also includes significant events such as cabinet reshuffles, court cases involving senior office bearers, criminal cases, dismissals, violence by and against regional and national figures, and assassinations or attempted killings. The database, while extensive, was limited by our inability to access detailed information about local ANC events such as branch meetings and elections.

### Protest in South Africa – understanding the baseline data

We have mentioned that analysts working on political protest found that from around 2004 the number of 'community-related' protests in South Africa increased dramatically, peaking in 2012. This analysis was based

largely on data from the police's Incident Registration Information System (IRIS).

Alexander, Runciman and Maruping explored the potential of this dataset for social scientists, concluding that, despite its limitations, it constitutes 'an unparalleled source of information for protest analysis.'<sup>18</sup> IRIS data is no longer available and the information analysed by Alexander *et al* came into the public domain via an application made by South African History Online in terms of the Public Access to Information Act.

Other scholars have been less sanguine about IRIS's usefulness. 'For one,' notes Lancaster, who runs the ISS crime information hub, 'the data is not subjected to any external or independent auditing processes.'<sup>19</sup> Secondly, IRIS trends over time seem to reflect the frequency of police activity rather than the number of crowd events. Finally, capturing of data seems to be fairly arbitrary rather than the result of adhering to systematic recording protocols, definitions and categorisations.<sup>20</sup>

### For this study, we modelled ISS data according to the type of protest recorded or grievance and location

Lancaster considered a different set of police statistics – arrests made for public violence – than those of IRIS to determine the number of peaceful crowd-related events, unrest-related incidents and public violence cases. Her results for 2004/05 to 2014/15 confirmed rather than contradicted the findings of those working from IRIS data. She, too, noted a dramatic rise of 'crowd-related' events, especially from 2008.<sup>21</sup>

In response, the ISS's public violence monitoring project started developing its own database in 2013 to 'systematically track the extent and nature of all forms of violence in public spaces.' These included 'violence resulting from community-based protests, labour strikes, vigilantism, xenophobic attacks, political conflict and other crowd or inter-group activity.'<sup>22</sup> Information is gathered from local, national and international online news sources. The ISS team also searches newsletters and notices by trade unions, political parties and universities.

Relying on media reports has been criticised because it is subject to what journalists find 'newsworthy'.<sup>23</sup> This is definitely a problem, with protests in large, urban settings more likely to be recorded than those in remote locations. This is no reason to dismiss media-driven studies of protest, however.

They are often the basis for large-scale projects that track violence. These include studies by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and ACLED, particularly if supported by rigorous validation and review protocols developed over many years. There are ways of compensating for the over-representation of urban events and preoccupation with violent incidents, leaving those that were peaceful un- or under-reported. One used in this report is to consider the size of protests against the size of local populations.<sup>24</sup>

IRIS data has more serious limitations. For example, the dramatic drop in the number of incidents recorded by the police from 2006 had little to do with an actual decrease. It had everything to do with the disbanding of the police units responsible for collecting this information. In addition, the quality of data collected for IRIS is doubtful, given that classification and capturing are done by officials who are not always trained in the associated coding requirements.

For this study, we modelled ISS data according to the type of protest recorded or grievance and location. We used ISS taxonomy, which distinguishes protests according to their chief causes – labour issues, business practices, corruption, crime and policing, demarcation, education, elections, electricity, housing, land, municipal services or political attacks.

The boundaries among these categories are sometimes subjective and some protests straddle more than one category. Moreover, the allocation of an event to a category is based on media descriptions of the central issues. Although we found that the categories scored well for internal consistency, we focused on aggregate patterns across the graphs and among issues, rather than accuracy of description. Our focus was whether a general pattern emerges.

### An anomaly in the data

The data revealed a surprising trend. While almost all studies drew conclusions from the dramatic rise of protests from 2004, 2009 or 2011 (depending on the

data source), there was almost no discussion of what happened next.

IRIS data showed that public order incidents dropped between 2011 and 2012, before rising slowly until 2015 when they stabilised at a very high level. Most were sporting events, or cultural, religious and music festivals where police were deployed. Some, however, were peaceful protests. Even though Chart 1 doesn't distinguish between protests and other events, the general shape is suggestive of changes in social and protest behaviour.

### The police's IRIS data seem to reflect the frequency of police activity rather than crowd events

The relative decline and/or stabilisation of incidents between 2011 and 2017, and especially from 2014 to 2017, was striking compared to the longer-term trend. ISS data, which started in 2013, confirmed this, showing a moderate decrease in protests until the end of 2014,

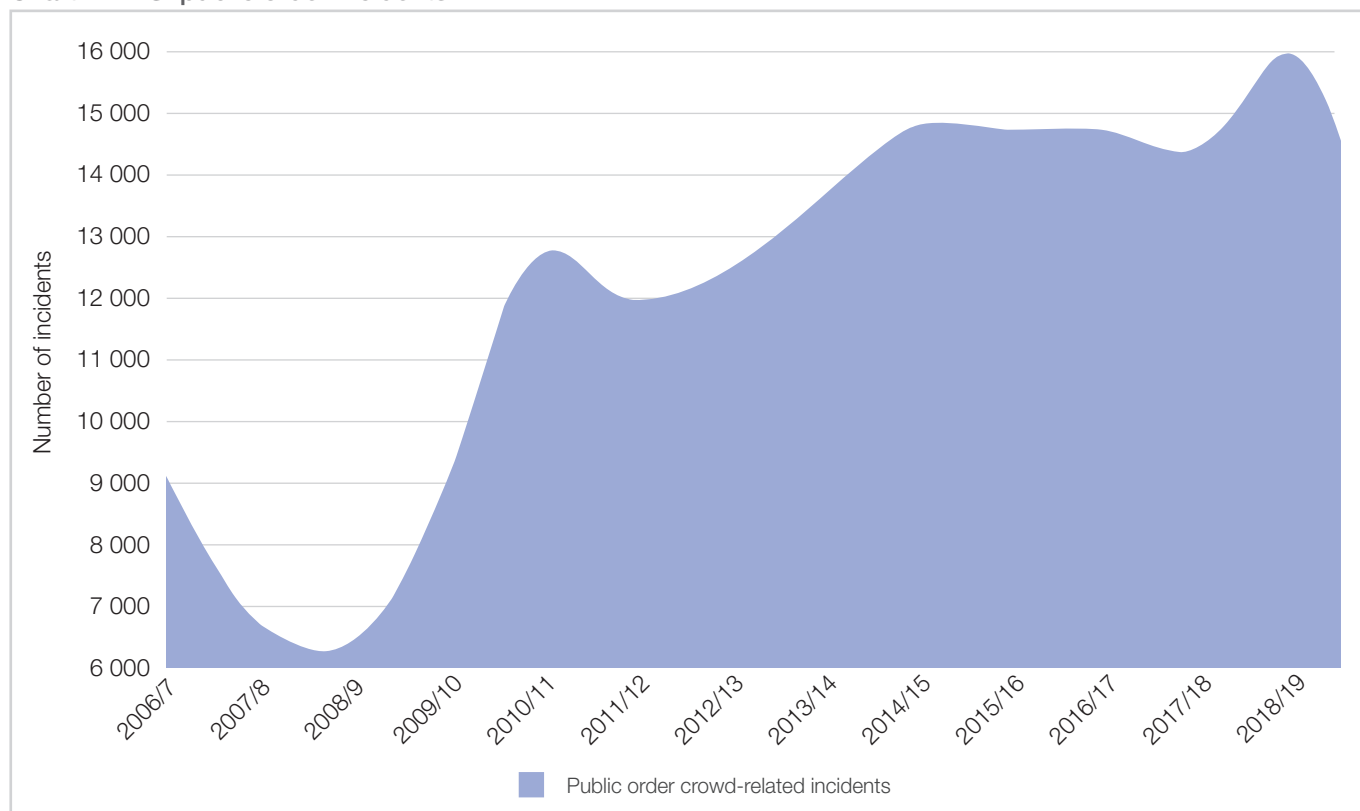
falling off until the beginning of 2017. After 2017, incident numbers rose, until 2018 when South Africa entered a period of unprecedented political unrest, culminating in the 'insurrection' of July 2021.

ACLED data broadly confirmed the trends, although showing a spike in 2016, contrary to ISS data. (ISS counts an event once while ACLED counts each day of a protest as an event, giving it more events.) ACLED also showed that the number of violent incidents rose from 2011, reaching a peak in 2015 before declining. From 2017, violent incidents rose steadily.

Chart 2 summarises the trends across grievances and provinces. The red box indicates Zuma's second term, the period before his first term and the period after with Ramaphosa's presidency. Protests were at their relative lowest in the second term of Zuma's presidency.

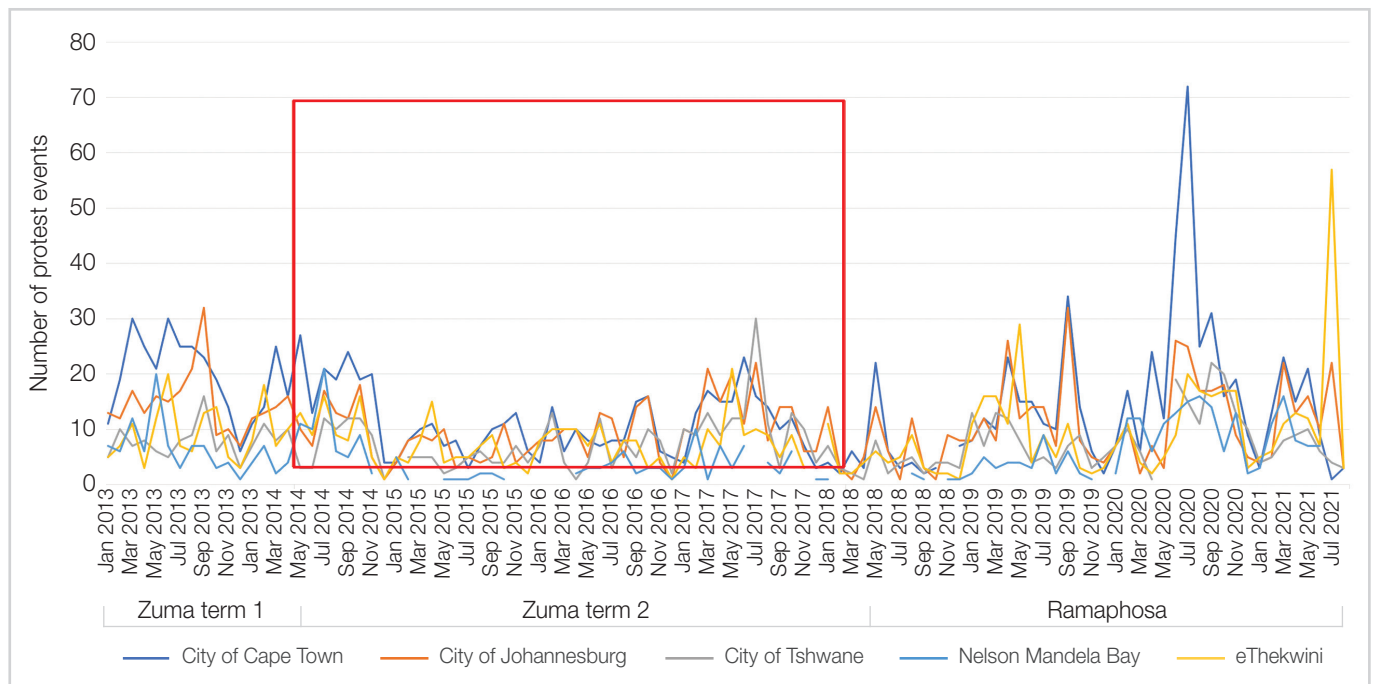
Protest numbers rose again during the last months of 2017 and the beginning of 2018. Then the protest line spiked, reflecting some of the highest and most violent protests yet recorded, culminating in the rebellion of July 2021.

Chart 1: IRIS 'public order incidents'



Source: SAPS

**Chart 2: Clear decline in protests in major areas (City of Cape Town, City of Johannesburg, City of Tshwane, eThekwni, Nelson Mandela Bay) during Zuma's second term**



Source: ISS protest and violence data

The decline in protests between 2014 and 2017 and the stabilisation in incidents from 2011, we propose, reveal the methodological limits of traditional accounts of protests and points to other determinants. In the following section we argue that protests correlate only modestly with changes in service delivery performance and that the association with deteriorating unemployment and the general political economy is not high. We show that service delivery and political economic factors certainly contribute to why people protest, but they do not explain nearly as much as contemporary scholarship would expect.

### Testing hypotheses: service delivery

If traditional analyses are correct, a protest activity decline should correlate with service delivery improvements, or at least expectations of improvements, using the concept of relative deprivation originally outlined by Ted Gurr.<sup>25</sup> Service delivery should be understood as municipal performance in general. When people complain about service delivery, they are not bemoaning intermittent water and electricity supplies, but the character of local governance, including the quality of democracy and the provision of public goods.

We have constructed a proxy for service delivery as governance, which is a broad measure of the technical performance of municipalities and the degree of democratic participation. It is based on the huge quantity of municipal financial data available for all councils across the country from National Treasury.<sup>26</sup> In particular, we followed Doreen Atkinson, who in 2007, proposed that a strong indicator of municipal effectiveness was the degree to which they maintained and repaired core basic municipal infrastructure.<sup>27</sup>

The measure of government, as with the cost of capital, is not evident simply in the visible superstructure but in the infrastructure that allows the former to work. The quality of democracy or degree to which poor and working people have a council voice may be seen against the degree to which their infrastructure is provided, maintained and repaired.

If protests are primarily responses to the degree to which councils provide municipal goods and operate cleanly, transparently and democratically we would expect fewer when governance improves. We should also be surprised if protests decline when municipal governance does not change or when it deteriorates.



## Social attitudes paradox

Since 2003, the HSRC has tracked societal values in South Africa through the annual, national South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). It explores 'the interaction between the country's changing institutions, its political and economic structures, and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations.'<sup>28</sup> For this study, HSRC researchers generously shared the survey's raw data, especially for the period for which we have protest data.

In 2015 and 2016, 'state capture' was in full swing, characterised by the weakening of state institutions

Chart 3 records responses to the statements: 'government is making progress in giving all South Africans equal access to services' and 'government is delivering on its promise of providing good-quality basic services.' The first is a comparative question, where a high score suggests that respondents believe the government is not making progress. In the second, a high score reflects pessimism that the government is keeping its promises to deliver good quality services.

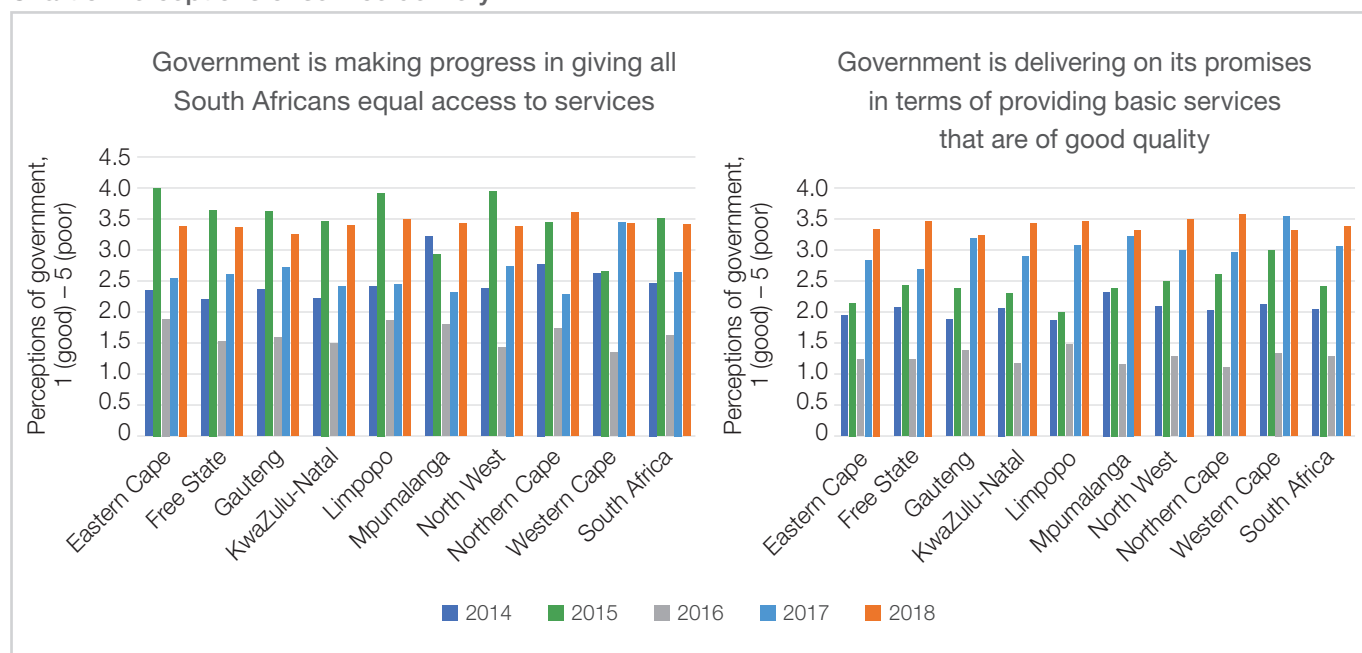
In other words, on the HSRC rating, a low score indicates more positive sentiments and a high score negative impressions.

There is a common pattern across provinces. After 2014, perceptions of the government's performance dropped, suddenly improving in 2016, then deteriorating again. This is probably the effect of political campaigning in the run-up to the 2016 local government election.

When respondents were asked questions specifically about their municipalities and service delivery, the results were similar to those above. Perceptions of municipal responsiveness to repairs and maintenance deteriorated in 2014 and 2015, then improved dramatically in 2015 and 2016 before deteriorating again in 2018.

The period of lowest protests is when perceptions of government performance are at their best. In principle, this correlation is as it should be. However, in the South African context it is improbable. In 2015 and 2016, 'state capture' was in full swing, characterised by the profound weakening of institutions across the state and at all levels.<sup>29</sup> It is likely that there was a time delay in these results and that they reflected an earlier period when institutional performance was better. In other words, it is unlikely that these results corresponded with actual improvements in governance.

Chart 3: Perceptions of service delivery



Source: HSRC SASAS

## Protests versus service delivery

As discussed above, we developed a proxy for service delivery as government performance by modelling municipal financial data, especially for maintenance and repairs. The graphs below compare protest trend lines using ISS data with service delivery changes. The trends were also modelled statistically to identify correlations.

We found a correlation between protests and municipal performance, but it was not high. There were, nonetheless, regional and local variations. In the Western Cape, protests seem to be driven by relative expectations of service delivery. Chart 4 shows no strong correlation between changes in service delivery and protests across the whole country – except in 2015 and 2016.

Nationally, spending on service delivery was relatively stable from 2013 until the end of 2016, when it became more irregular and began to decline. Protests were at their lowest, as we have seen, from 2015 through 2016, despite no real increase in recorded service delivery spending.

## Protests and the political economy

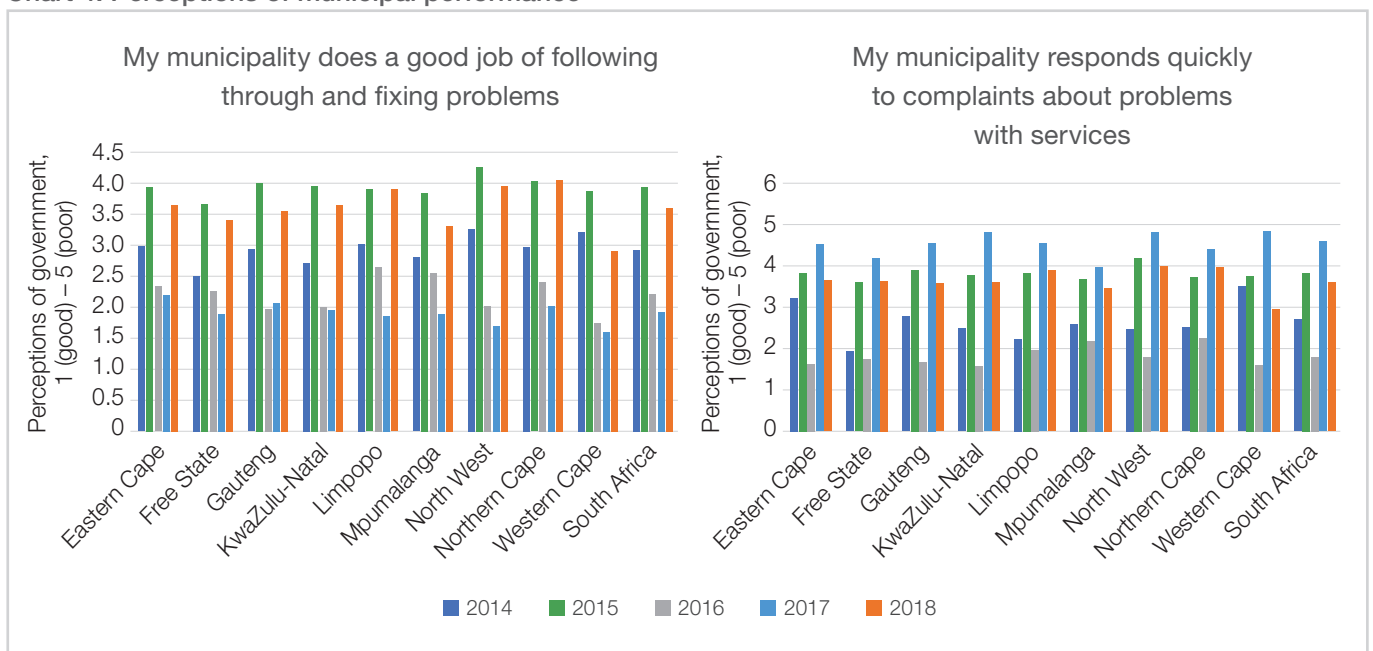
A similar result arose when protests were modelled against changes in the political economy. Using

Quarterly Labour Force Survey and household survey data from StatsSA, unemployment levels were modelled against protest incidents. The results are presented in Chart 6.

Despite the relatively large spikes, protest action is close to stationary over the period considered, meaning that the average level of protest is relatively constant over the time period under consideration (see the trend line in Chart 6). Similarly, although unemployment has shown a slightly upward trend over the period considered, the upward trend is gentle, except during the COVID-19 epidemic. As such, the both time series have close-to-zero gradient, and this results in a relatively high correlation between the two time series (56%). However, this correlation is a reflection of the fact that these two time series are both substantially time-invariant on average over the observation period, and does not imply that these variables are actually strongly causally related.

Together, service delivery and political economy factors do not sufficiently explain the pattern of protests. When Martin Bekker, a University of Johannesburg sociologist, modelled protests as a measure of inequality for his doctoral thesis he found, however, that the correspondence was higher than for

Chart 4: Perceptions of municipal performance

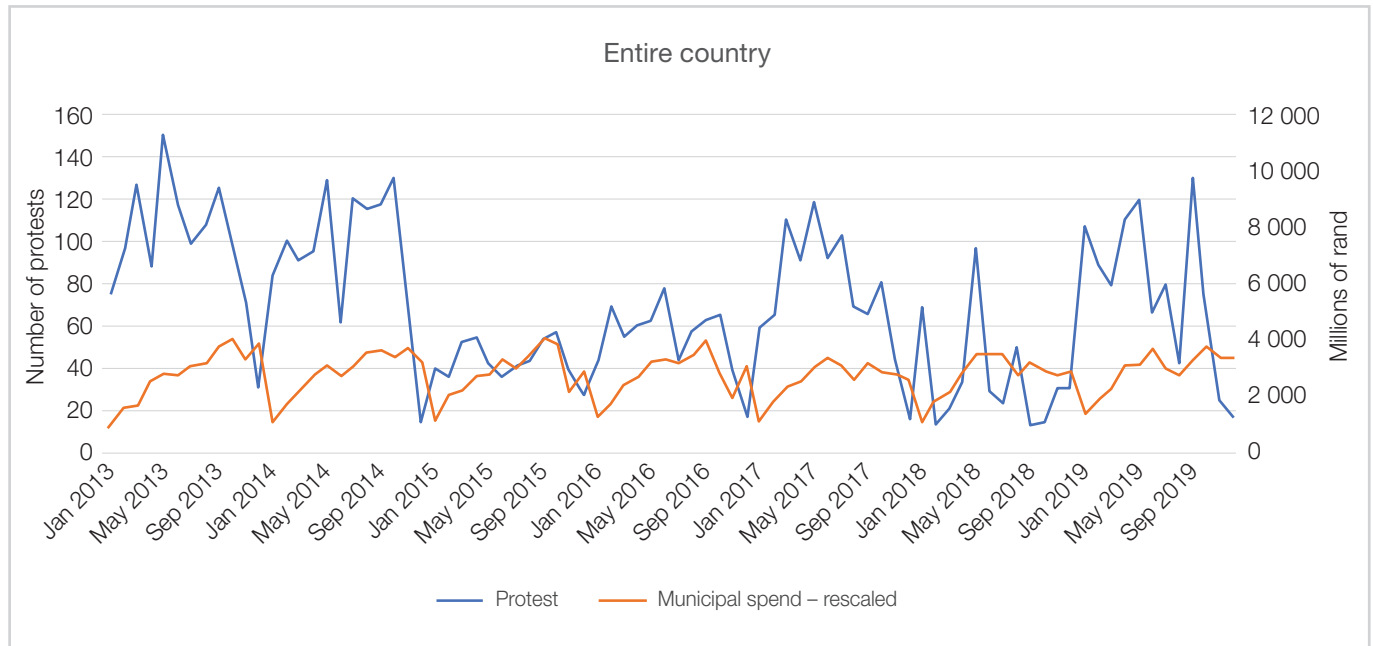


Source: HSRC SASAS

all other variables. Using municipal Gini and Palma-like measures, he calculated a rich-poor ratio to assess the proportion of richest and poorest income groups in a municipality. He found that ‘the general propensity for protest is a function of local inequality, unemployment and voter participation.’<sup>30</sup>

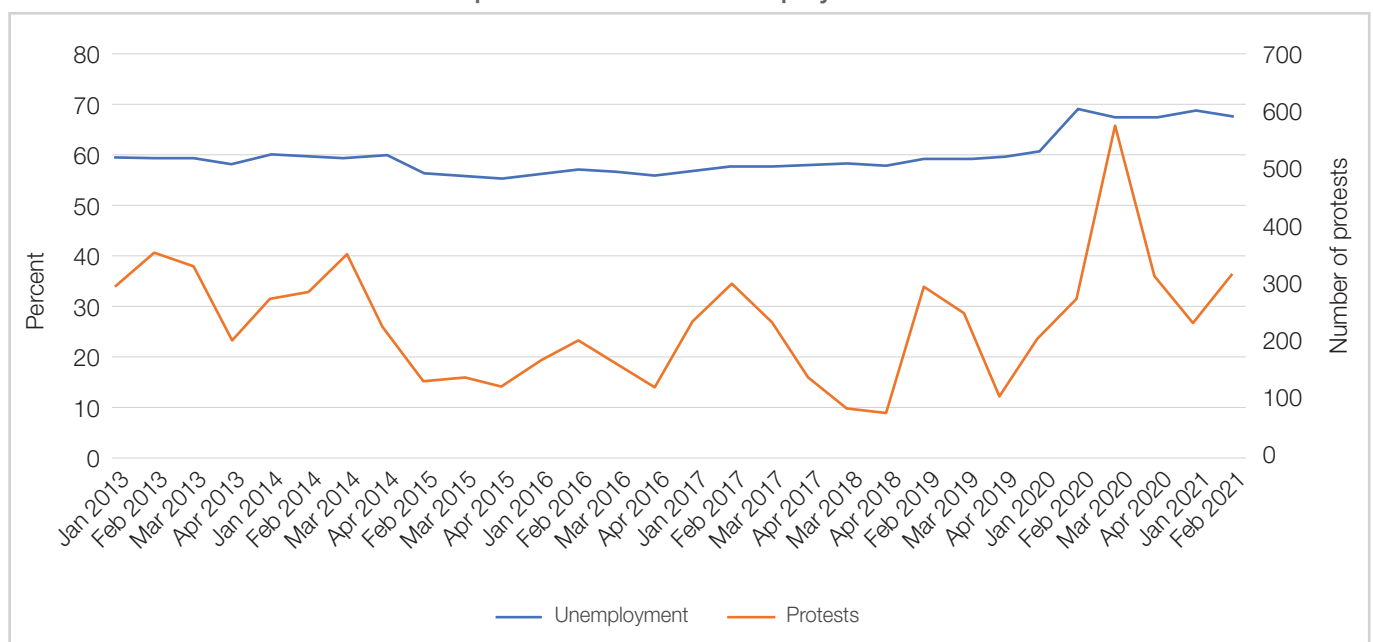
This finding goes some way to support the hypothesis that South Africa faced a ‘rebellion of the poor’. Our analysis suggests that the character of protests has either changed over time or, more likely, that these interpretations have underestimated the (party-) political character of protests.

**Chart 5: Changes in service delivery and protests**



Source: National Treasury municipal financial data

**Chart 6: National correlation between protest events and unemployment**



Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey

## The ANC and elite contestation

In 2010, Richard Pithouse proposed that ANC electoral dominance meant that local politicians faced little threat at the polls. Instead, the real threat ‘comes from contestation within the movement.’ This ‘is often acute and sometimes violent. Leaders of the party, at all levels, are generally far more concerned with shoring up support within the party than with managing dissent outside of it.’<sup>31</sup> This suggests that political protests were expressions of intra-ANC contestation between competing elites.

The following year, qualitative studies undertaken by von Holdt and colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and University of the Witwatersrand corroborated this. Researchers found that ‘the ANC itself, as the locus of many of these struggles and contestations, has become a profoundly unstable organisation.’<sup>32</sup> Violent protest, thus, reconfigures relations within the ANC, resulting frequently in the reabsorption of ‘protest leadership’ into the party and into senior positions in municipalities or other state bodies. Local social movements or ‘civil-society’ groups associated with the original protest frequently fade away.<sup>33</sup>

The study found a close relationship between internal ANC contestation and xenophobic attacks. This is associated with a ‘repertoire’ of protests that included violence aimed at municipal offices and public infrastructure (libraries, halls, clinics) and the blocking of major roads and highways.<sup>34</sup>

More recently, Chipkin argued that post-apartheid, the ANC tried to resolve two historic challenges. First, it attempted through black economic empowerment to change the class structure of South Africa by creating mobility for black South Africans into the middle and capitalist classes. Simultaneously, it sought to consolidate the territory of the republic by amalgamating the homelands back into a unitary state. In so doing, the party became ‘the nodal or pivot point between a vertical process of transformation and a horizontal process of integration.’<sup>35</sup>

It came to occupy the central place of politics in South Africa not simply as the most popular party. In addition, various elites of multiple provenance have competed for

access to resources, to public office and for recognition within and through the ANC. In this sense the ANC has been coincident with the public domain, more so than parliament, for example.

In testing this hypothesis quantitatively we built a timeline of ANC events, drawing on media reports, ANC publications and other public information. We gathered details of national and provincial executive committee elections and meetings, including when and where they happened, who contested for what posts and the results. We tried to do this at branch level but did not have a sufficiently longitudinal dataset. This means that the ANC dataset is biased towards national and provincial events.

National, provincial and municipal elections were factored in, as were dismissals of or charges against ANC officials or politicians. Also included were violence in ANC meetings and assassinations or killings of ANC politicians and officials.

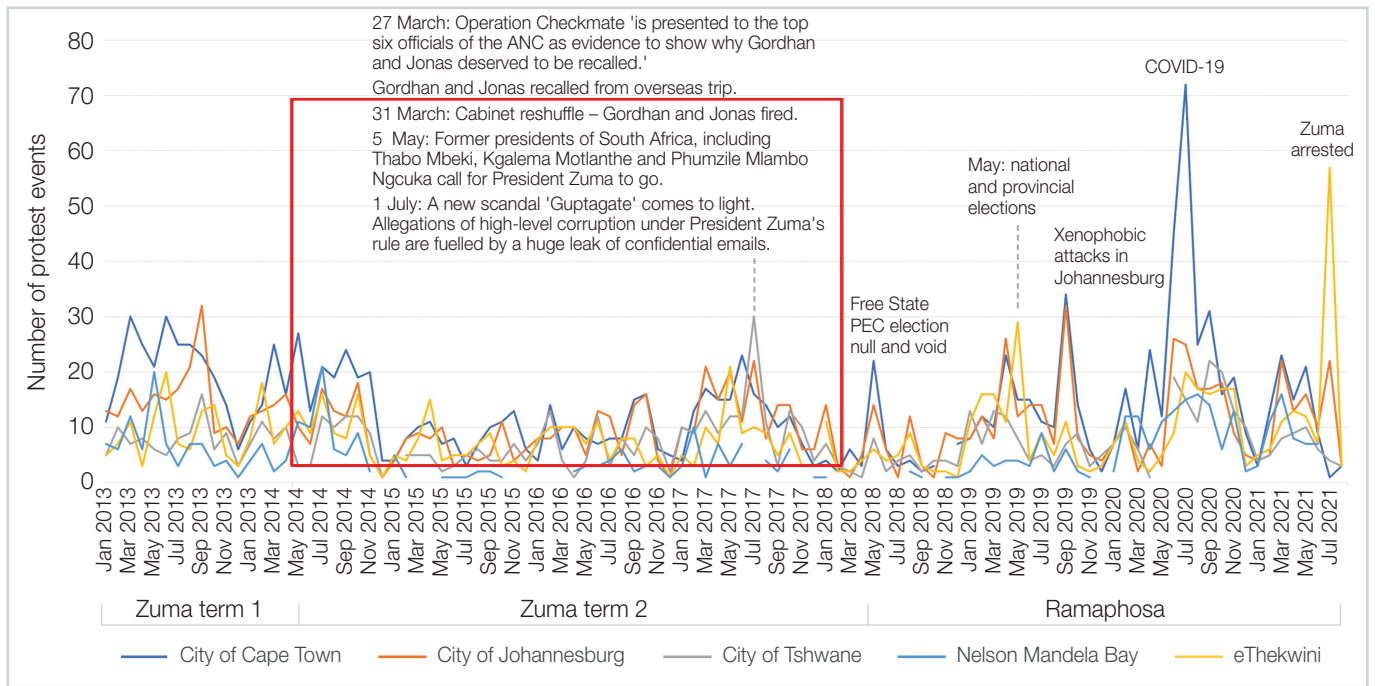
ANC leaders are more concerned with shoring up support within the party than managing dissent outside of it

The time-series data used plotted protests, changes in service delivery, unemployment and perceptions by date. Thus, the data were compared with the chronology of ANC events. Using simple observation, the coincidence between escalation of protests and moments of ANC drama was clear and straightforward.

Protests usually spiked when contestation in the ANC was especially intense and/or had come to a head. Chart 7 shows that after a long period of relative political quiet protest events rose from March 2017, spiking in July of that year. This coincided with strong conflict in the ANC about growing opposition to ‘state capture’ and to Jacob Zuma’s rule. Zuma fired Pravin Gordhan in March 2017 and the Betrayal of the Promise report was published, which helped galvanise opposition to South Africa’s ‘silent coup’. ‘Save South Africa’ mobilised against state capture at this time and opposition groups and parties marched on the Union Buildings.

In KwaZulu-Natal, the worst-affected province, protests showed a similar pattern. They spiked in April 2016,

**Chart 7: Protests coincide with major national/ANC events**



Source: ISS protest and violence data/Government and Public Policy (GAPP)-ISS chronology

which was when the National Prosecuting Authority was deliberating whether to charge Zuma with corruption. It decided not to. There was a motion to impeach Zuma and the Constitutional Court delivered its damning judgment on Nkandla. Protests occurred in the build-up and aftermath of elections in 2019.

Gauteng mirrored the pattern, albeit the epicentre of protests against state capture in 2017 and the xenophobic violence of September 2019.

The coincidence between protests and the chronology was also modelled statistically. The model identified and weighted variables on their statistical coincidence with the explanandum (protest).

We calculated the explanatory power of the datasets used to create the machine learning model that forecasted protest action. A correlation value rates the *predictiveness* of a variable with regard to protests. It scores the likelihood that a protest will occur if, for example, there were protests in the past in that area, or government

**Chart 8: Statistical correlations with protest incidents<sup>36</sup>**

Historical protests	0.655
Service delivery	0.092
ANC database	0.253

services deteriorated or the ANC had an event. These relative explanatory powers are set out in Chart 8.

The factor with the greatest explanatory power was 'historical protests'. This is a measure of whether a protest in a particular area was preceded by a protest event in the previous 12 months. The correlation coefficient was high (0.655), suggesting a significant correlation. This confirms a well-established principle that protesting has a strong path dependency. The variable, however, doesn't reveal what triggered these protests. Many could have been caused by service delivery grievances. They could also have been triggered by internal ANC contestation. The explanatory power of service delivery data on protest action was low (0.092). It was even lower for the political economy and protest data.

A dataset of ANC events over time and keywords to describe these events was included in the model. Although this dataset is not a comprehensive representation of ANC activity, its explanatory power is still relatively high at 0.253 – almost triple that of service delivery data.

This result is remarkable in that the ANC chronology is not weighted in favour of any kind of event.

It gives the same weight to a public speech by an ANC leader as to a cabinet reshuffle. It does not distinguish between events related to the ANC as a political party and the ANC as government.

It is evident, however, that certain events are politically more significant than others. Had we selected those alone the correlation coefficient would have been much higher. It would, however, have opened the chronology to the critique of subjectivism: selecting or scoring events based on our own sense of their importance.

### Protest activity until 2013 wasn't driven by ANC events, suggesting it was indeed a 'rebellion of the poor'

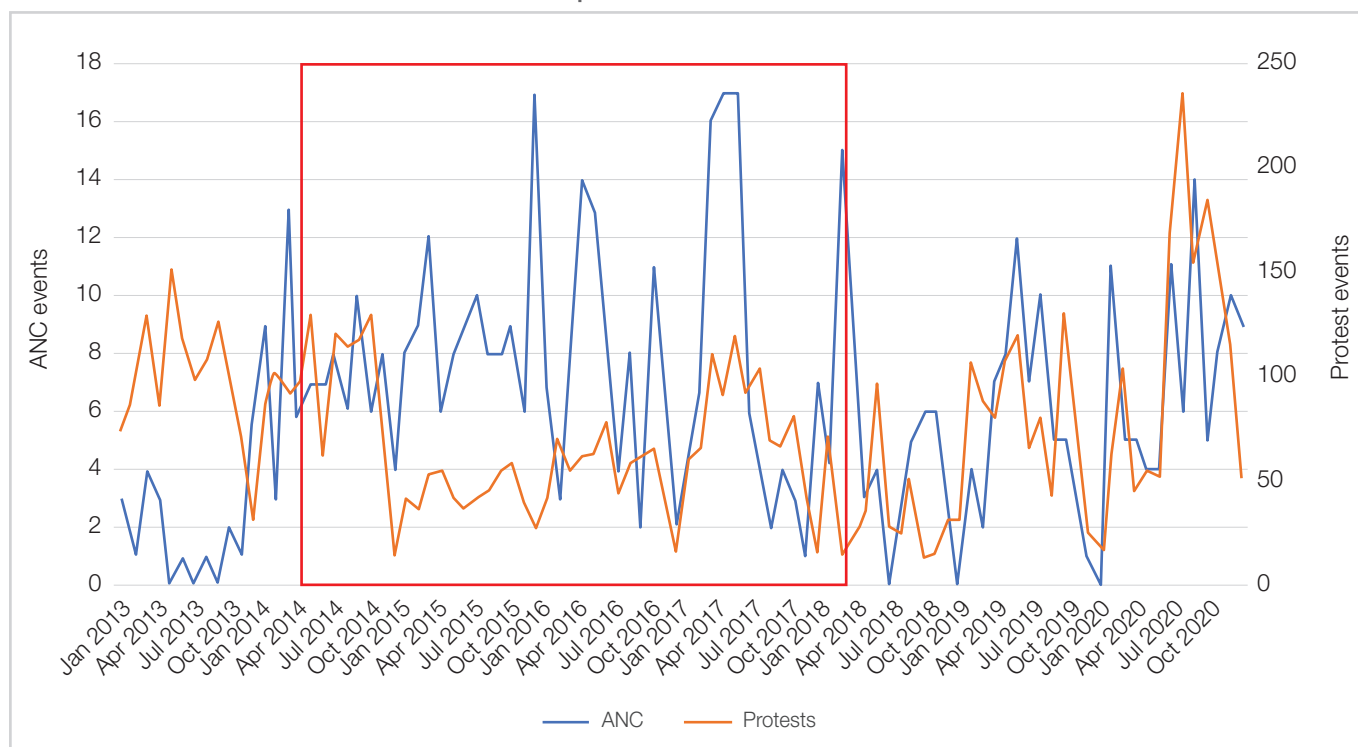
Chart 8 shows the ANC events database alongside protest data. In 2013, when ISS data collection started, protest activity was high and the number of ANC events low. This is the end point of the dramatic rise in protests starting gradually in 2007 and then rising dramatically from 2011 (according to ACLED data). It raises tantalising questions for further research.

It suggests that protest activity until 2013 was not driven by ANC events, giving credence to protest action being indeed a veritable 'rebellion of the poor'.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, it reflects the methodological limits of the ANC database, which, as mentioned, does not include granular information about branch meetings or elections etc. Would this change if such data were added?

Chipkin has shown elsewhere a dramatic rise from 2011 of local ANC politicians (with community experience or with modest regional experience, often teachers) entering the cabinet, a trend more pronounced provincially.<sup>38</sup> In other words, there was much local jostling for political positions, much of which detail has not yet made it into our database.

From 2014, the pattern reversed. The number of ANC events rose dramatically through 2015, 2016 and 2017 before rising at a lower rate from 2019. Intuitively this makes sense. The Zuma presidency was associated with many more cabinet reshuffles, changes in leadership and court cases than the Ramaphosa administration. For all that, protest activity was relatively low. From mid-2017, the correlation increased and from mid-2018 the positive correlation was high.

**Chart 9: Correlation between ANC events and protests**



Source: GAPP ANC chronology

An importance difference emerges when comparing the coefficient correlations between protest and ANC data according to presidential terms. During the Zuma period, the statistical correlation was only 0.1, which as a coefficient suggests almost no correlation. So despite high contestation in the ANC there was muted protest. This began to change from mid-2017. From 2018, the correlation between these datasets rose, with protest data tracking ANC events data, at almost 0.4.

### Patronage and repression

One way of making sense of this pattern is to consider the historical moment. Zuma’s second term was also the height of opposition to his rule. It was also the period of state capture. Protest activity, however, was muted. Are we seeing the effects of state capture: the role of patronage and repression in the political life of the ANC and the country? We need further qualitative research to understand how these mechanisms worked.

This study also compiled data on political attacks and assassinations, showing an unmistakable rise in both during Zuma’s second term. The rise was especially dramatic in KwaZulu-Natal from 2015, off an already-

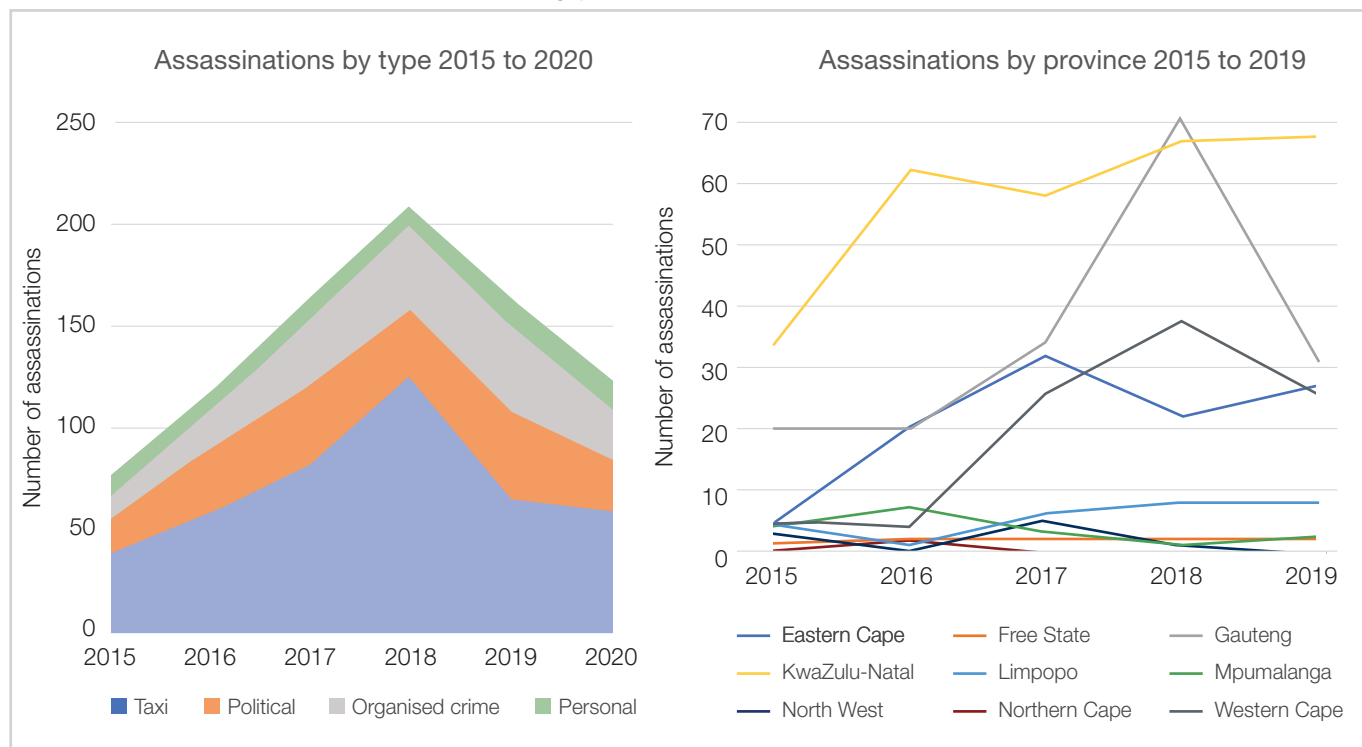
high base. The number of killings then stabilised at around 60 a year. In Gauteng, assassinations increased steadily through 2016, surging to a high of 70 in 2018, before dropping.<sup>39</sup> During the same period, the ISS noted a marked increase in what it calls ‘political attacks’, that is, the killing or attempted killing of a politically important person.

While a direct link between the decline in protest activity and the rise in politically targeted killings is not certain, it provides an intriguing hypothesis for further research. There is little doubt, however, that protests in South Africa are becoming more violent.

The link between the drop in protest and the rise in politically targeted killings needs further research

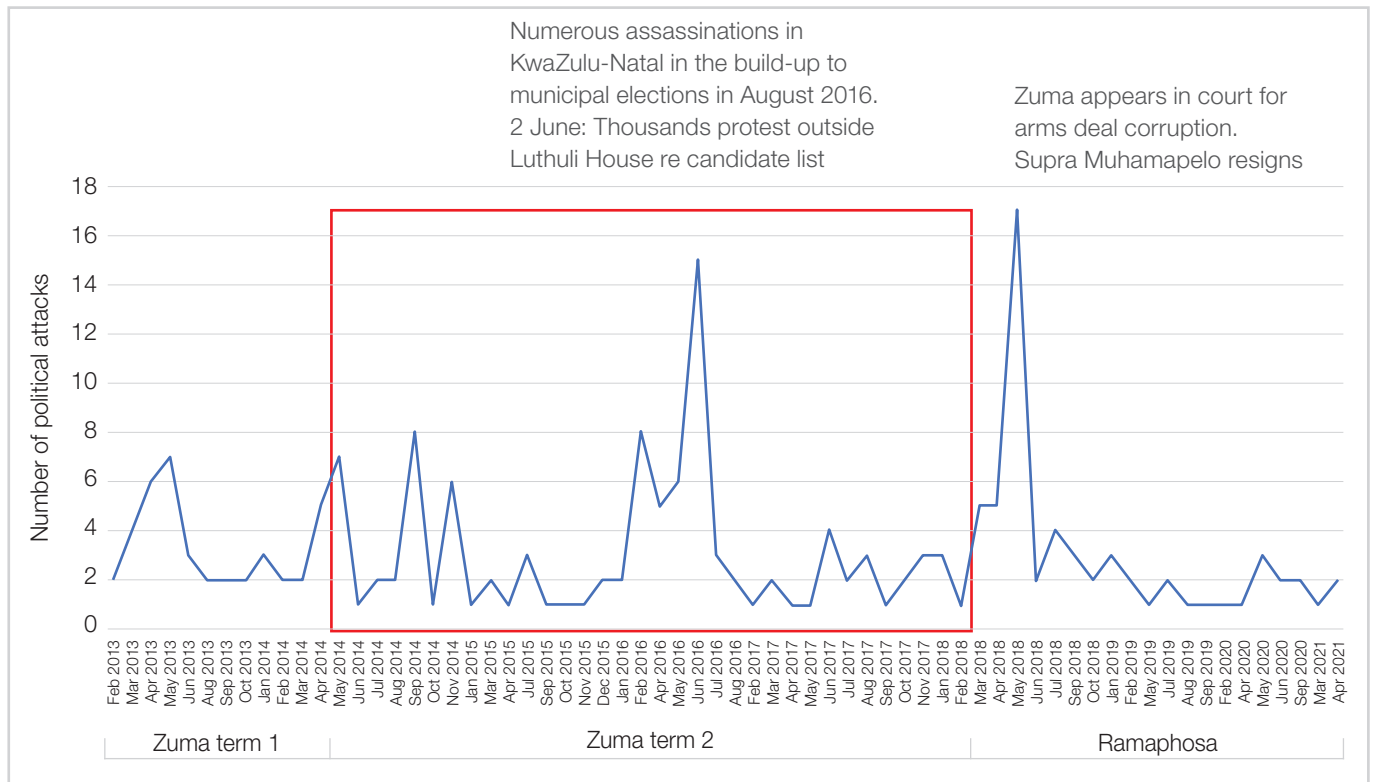
The police record what is called ‘public order policing crowd management interventions.’ These are incidents where violence has broken out, frequently related to protests. There was a sharp rise in violent events from

Chart 10: Assassinations 2015 to 2020 and by province



Source: HSRC SASAS

**Chart 11: Attempted and actual killings of politically important persons**



Source: ISS protest and public violence data

**Chart 12: Unrest incidents 2006 to 2019**



Source: SAPS

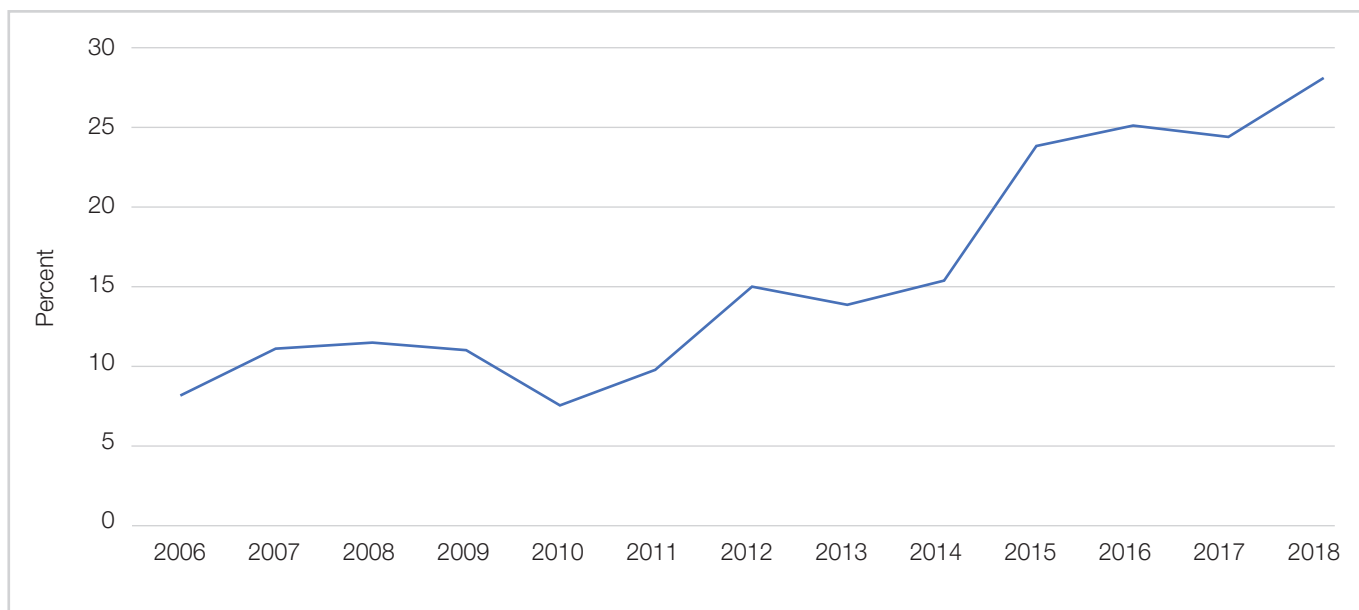


2011/12, followed by an increase from 2015. Then came stabilisation, even a modest decline in 2017, before the dramatic rise in 2018, culminating in the ‘insurrection’ of 2021. Moreover, the percentage of violent events against total incidents rose significantly, from below 10% in 2006 to nearly 30% in 2018. See charts 13 and 14.

The researchers tried unsuccessfully to obtain detailed information on national and provincial police departments,

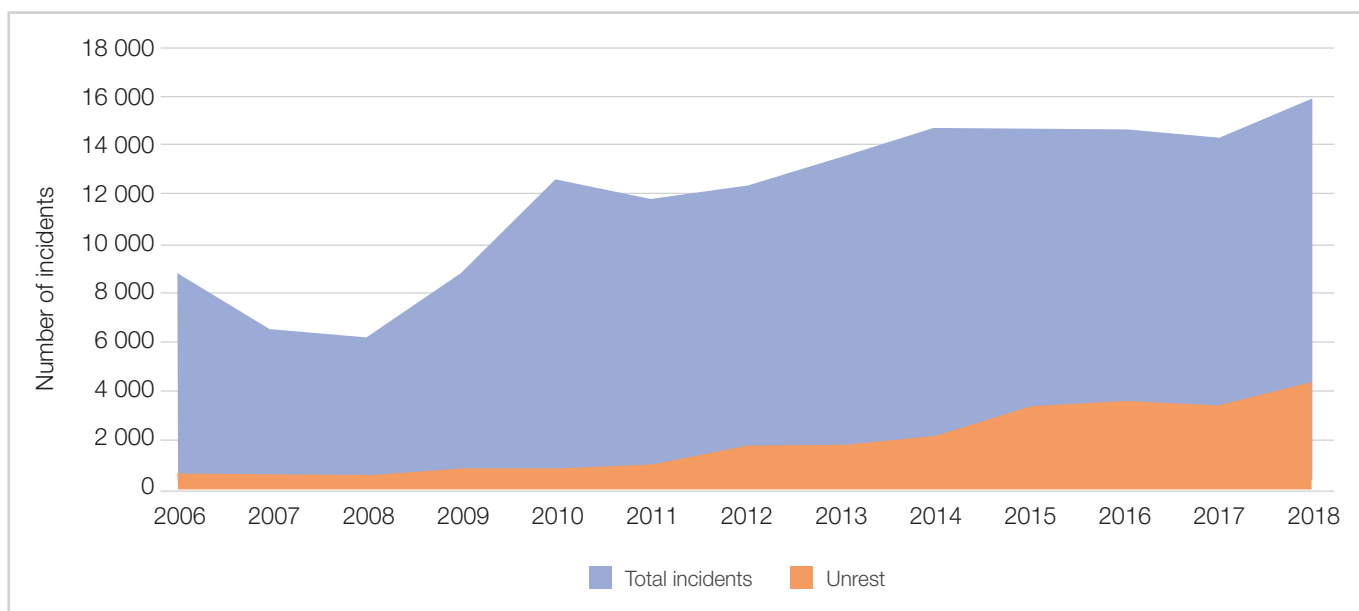
and police stations, especially for areas with many protests. Nonetheless, National Treasury publishes departmental budgets and spending revenues, which for the police include high-level organisational data. When we modelled this data, we found that the rise in political violence coincided with a decline in ordinary policing. The most we can say, in this regard, is that as police capacity deteriorated, especially at the street level, so their ability to stop political violence declined too.

**Chart 13: Violent incidents relative to all incidents**



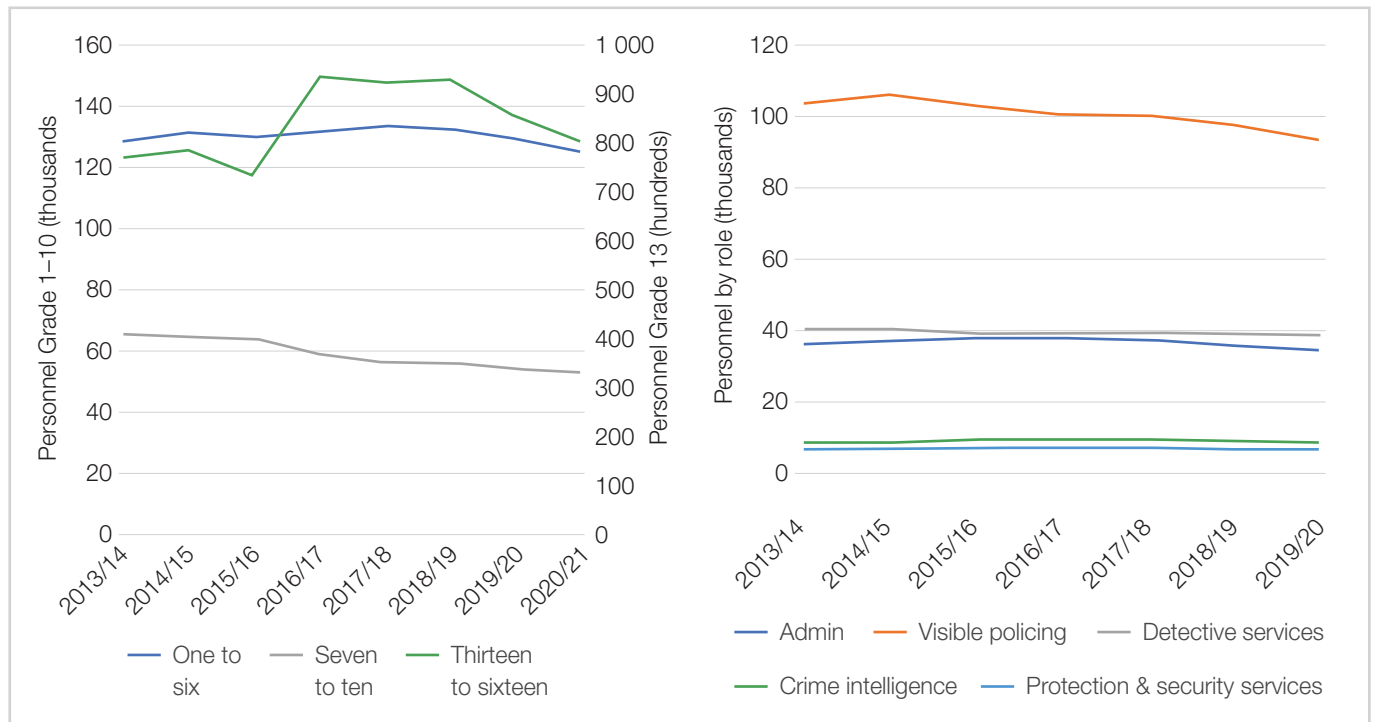
Source: SAPS

**Chart 14: Violent incidents relative to total incidents**



Source: SAPS

Chart 15: Decline of rank-and-file policemen and -women between 2013/14 and 2020/21



Source: National Treasury

Even more suggestive is that during the period, when allocations to ‘visible policing’ and ‘detective services’ decreased, the budget for ‘protection and security services’ rose modestly. Evidence was led before the Zondo Commission that the State Security Agency took control of such SAPS units and deployed them illegally. This included contributing to a private militia directly controlled by then-president Zuma.<sup>40</sup> From the sharp rise in violence from 2015 to end-2017, we speculate that political repression reduced the likelihood that elites would encourage protests.

From 2011, contestation between ANC factions became uncontrollable, hence the rise in protests

Evidence from the Zondo Commission and from other work suggests that patronage played a significant role in keeping local elites within the political fold. The rise in protests from 2018 to insurrection in July 2021 suggests that Ramaphosa does not have the same authority in the ANC as did Zuma.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion: the near future of South Africa

This report arose from a mutual interest between GAPP and the ISS in the better use of large datasets and data modelling to understand current social phenomena and in policy analysis. It is unusual and innovative, the authors believe. It combines collation of large, publicly available datasets with the building of others that are not.

In conclusion, we make exploratory and provisional arguments. From around 2006, political protests started rising, reaching around 200 events in 2009. From 2011, there was a massive increase in protests, to well over 530 in 2013. ISS data show stabilisation, followed by a decline until end-2017. According to ACLED, protests spiked in 2016 before coming down. These data indicate that protests settled at the very high rate of around 500 a year between 2013 and end-2017. Since 2018, protests have risen to unprecedented levels. In 2020, ACLED shows, they hit 1 000 events annually.

We argue that this step-like structure of activity unsettles traditional accounts of protest in South Africa as driven primarily by socio-economic grievances. We found no significant improvements in service delivery, employment

or poverty alleviation when protests stabilised from 2014 to 2017. Indeed, we know that material conditions deteriorated significantly in South Africa during this time.

We tested the hypothesis, first suggested in 2010, that protests are expressions of elite contestation within the ANC. We built a timeline of ANC events, drawing on internal ANC documents, and reports from newspapers, academic publications, the Independent Electoral College and research non-governmental organisations. As we were unable to obtain detailed information about the life of ANC branches, the timeline is weighted towards national and provincial happenings. Despite this, the correlation of periods of intense protest with key moments of contestation in the ANC was very high.

This suggests four provisional conclusions:

- Since 1994, the ANC has largely contained and moderated elite contestation in the country, keeping it for the most part within the party and in the boundaries of the democratic system. From 2007, elite contestation proved increasingly difficult to manage through internal processes and started to spill out as protests. From 2011, contestation between different factions in the organisation became uncontrollable, hence the dramatic rise in protest activity.
- Under Zuma there were significant moves to control internal contestation. His term coincided with the repurposing of SOEs and other government entities to generate rents for personal enrichment but primarily to finance factional political activities. This suggests that unprecedented patronage played a key role in managing tensions.

## The rise in protests from 2018 to insurrection in July 2021 suggests that Ramaphosa does not have the same authority in the ANC as did Zuma

Assassinations also rose during this period, indicating that violence and intimidation played a key role with patronage in keeping hostilities in check. Patronage and repression were the most likely reasons for protest stabilisation and decline between 2013 and 2017. Keeping the ANC together came at the expense of the constitutional framework, the economy and the capability of state entities.

- The sharp rise in protests from end-2017 suggests that Ramaphosa does not have the same autocratic power over ANC grandees regionally and locally as did Zuma. The ANC also has fewer resources for patronage and under Ramaphosa may be less likely to pursue such a model of politics. South Africa is likely to have entered a phase of ongoing, violent instability.
- Recent local government election results may aggravate this situation. As the party declines, it may become less attractive to local and regional politicians, businesspeople and idealists with ambitions and interests.

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PATRONAGE AND  
REPRESSION LIKELY EXPLAIN  
PROTEST STABILISATION  
AND DECLINE FROM

2013 – 2017

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Some might form new parties (or join other existing parties). Some might turn to extra parliamentary and non-constitutional activities. Simply put, elite contestation is likely to become more violent as the cake shrinks.

A counter-intuitive conclusion also follows from this analysis. Unemployment, poverty and relative deprivation provide fuel for political entrepreneurs to light the spark of protest and insurrection. On the whole, however, there has been no spontaneous uprising of the poor. Instead, protests are largely expressed through ANC structures, where they become embedded in the political contests of the day by party members competing for positions and opportunities both in the organisation and in government.

How the ANC declines in the future will determine the country's medium- and long-term outlook. Most widely discussed is a parliamentary scenario.<sup>42</sup> It considers which factions are likely to gain the upper hand and what this will mean for electoral performance. It considers whether the losing faction will remain in the party and contest power from within or lead a breakaway structure. It factors in opposition party performance and growth. Much of this speculation takes place at national level, although there are potentially dozens of permutations provincially.

This preoccupation obscures the fact that contestation for power and political authority in South Africa happens as much through the parliamentary system as outside it. Disgruntled party-political factions may break away from

the ruling party and form a new party. But they may not. There are other routes to political power outside the constitutional framework. Elite groups unable to realise their goals in the state and/or aspirant capitalists unable to pursue their class ambitions through rent-seeking in government may look elsewhere for opportunities.

## Contestation for power in South Africa now happens as much in the parliamentary system as outside it

Many of these will be in illicit or criminal activities: repurposing public institutions and securing and maintaining power through violence, intimidation and patronage. There is already evidence of links between politicians and organised criminal networks, some transnational. ANC renewal could go either way, managing internal divisions by deepening the organisation's ties to an obscure and illegal world. Rejuvenation could also see the organisation reconcile itself to the constitutional system as a reduced political force vying for power with other parties.<sup>43</sup>

These two systems – one that operates primarily through ideological contestation, the other through repression – are able to co-exist, albeit in constant tension about boundaries. South Africa's democratic future lies in reducing the scope of this secondary political system and bringing more of the country under the jurisdiction of the first.

## Acknowledgements

The Human Sciences Research Council, in a gesture of academic big-heartedness, made available to this team the raw data of the South African Social Attitudes Survey. We are especially grateful to Jare Struwig and Mercy Ngungu. Our gratitude also goes to the ISS team, including Jakkie Cilliers, Lizette Lancaster, Gareth Newham and Alize Le Roux, for its extensive and detailed comments. These contributions speak of a generosity of spirit and a commitment to rigorosity. The technical data modelling was done by the team at Safe Passage, notably Laurence Rau and Daniel Saksenberg. Safe Passage is an initiative of GAPP and Emerge, committed to bringing the best of data modelling and artificial intelligence to (predictive) policymaking.

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- 25 T Gurr, *Why men rebel*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- 26 Municipal data is controversial, especially given the corruption and irregular expenditure in local governments. It should be used with caution. Nonetheless, we are satisfied that for identifying general trends over time the data is usable. This is a view supported by National Treasury officials. We used only audited data. Moreover, in longitudinal datasets of this size, anomalies, gaps and discrepancies are not too difficult to identify, especially in expenditure patterns that, generally-speaking, tend to change only slowly from one year to the next. There is also a concerted push back in government on reports of the Auditor-General, especially as they concern 'irregular expenditure'. A finding of 'irregular expenditure' is not confirmation that money was stolen or that a good or service was not acquired or provided. It is a finding that the correct process was not followed in procuring it.
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- 36 A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to describe the strength and direction of the relationship between variables. The strength of a correlation is expressed as a value between -1, 0 and 1, where 1

indicates a strong positive relationship, -1 indicates a strong negative (or inverse) relationship and zero indicates no relationship.

- 37 Martin Bekker's work found that, from 2004 to 2012, there was a strong correlation between protest events and inequality (Bekker, 2020). The year 2008 brought the global financial crash, which saw growth in South Africa plummet from a high of 4.2% per annum (the highest rate on record) to negative growth of almost (-)2%, recovering to an average (but falling) growth rate of 1.7% a year between 2010 and 2018.

As Covid hit, the South African the economy contracted by 7%, a crash from even these paltry growth figures. Yet the austerity measures that followed did not affect social spending or capital investment in industrial projects. As Michael Sachs has noted, government planners had extraordinary confidence in the longevity of a commodities supercycle, which they assumed would return the country to high growth. Government salaries continued to rise steeply and capital investment, especially through SOEs, expanded dramatically.

Austerity measures really bit, however, in departmental budgets for the provision of goods and services, maintenance and capital budgets – especially in health and education (see M Sachs, Fiscal Dimensions of South Africa's Crisis, Working Paper 5, *Southern Centre for Inequality Studies*, University of the Witwatersrand, 2020, 22). The combination of rising public service wages and austerity in departmental budgets saw a dramatic decline in the quality of service and goods offered by public institutions. Most South Africans are dependent, however, on these public goods to sustain themselves and their households. They suffer in absolute and relative terms.

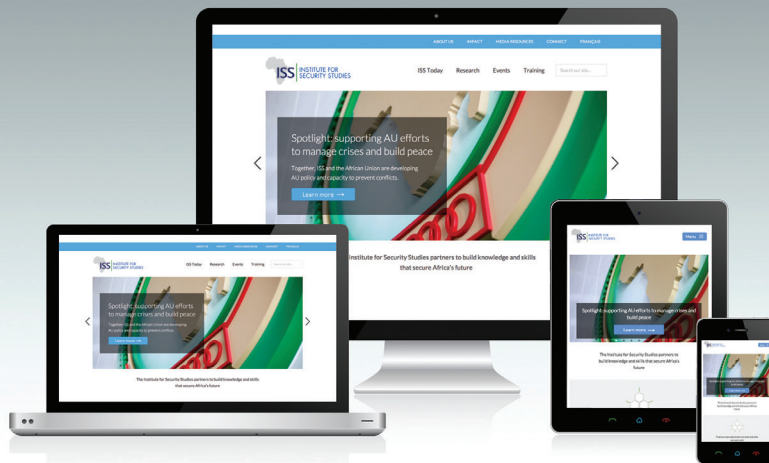
This general decline was experienced unevenly as better managed departments, local governments and agencies deteriorated more slowly than their less-well-managed counterparts, producing unevenness in goods and services across areas. This goes some

way to support Gurr's arguments about relative deprivation as an important underlying cause of protest. ANC members and officials are acutely affected by such dynamics, increasing contestation within the organisation for positions that are a route to government appointments or resources. In other words, the growing inequality exacerbates elite contestation in the ANC itself.

- 38 Ibid, 27.
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