

Democratic centralism: The root cause of poor municipal performance in South Africa

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Abstract: This paper is a product of a Doctoral study that applied grounded theory to derive a performance improvement model for a particular Municipality in South Africa. Drawing from this study, this paper argues that democratic centralism, which manifests in politicised bureaucracy and implemented through the ANC policy of cadre deployment, is the root cause of poor performance across South African municipalities. In advancing this argument, the paper interrogates public management literature to conceptualise poor municipal performance and justify the relevance of the politics-administration dichotomy as a framework for positioning democratic centralism as the root cause of poor performance in South African municipalities. In addition, interrogating public management literature allowed the author to identify methodological limitations of past studies and select grounded theory as the most appropriate research design to address these limitations. In applying grounded theory, the author used purposive sampling to identify research participants who were subsequently interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. In preparation for data analysis, the author recorded and transcribed the information obtained from the interviews. Thereafter, the author used open coding with particular emphasis on constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling. The use of these techniques allowed the author to move the level of abstraction from open codes through to empirical categories leading to generation of empirical explanations that link democratic centralism to poor performance in South African municipalities. To this end, the paper empirically linked poor municipal performance, often displayed through violent protests, to democratic centralism, a phenomenon entrenched into the South African public service through the ANC policy of cadre deployment.

Key words: Democratic Centralism, Poor performance, South African Municipalities, Cadre deployment

1. Introduction

Following years of oppression and conflict, South Africa attained democracy when the African National Congress (ANC), a political party that had been the face of the struggle for liberation, assumed power in 1994. When the ANC came to power, its priority was to dismantle the apartheid architecture and create a democratic and inclusive government (Gumede, 2015) for improved delivery of basic services to all. To achieve this objective, the ANC introduced a range of public management reforms known as New Public Management (NPM) anchored on liberal ideology. Although the ANC has managed to build a democratic administrative structure, through a comprehensive policy and legislative framework, it has failed to fulfil its promise of improved service delivery. The escalating wave of service delivery protests common in poor black communities (Alexander, 2010), is indicative of the failure of the ANC in addressing the apartheid legacy of racial discrimination in service delivery. This failure has triggered a debate within South African public management scholars with most attributing poor municipal performance to corruption, nepotism, lack of skills, and political interference (Kariuki & Reddy, 2017; Kgatle, 2017; Makole, 2022; Mamokhere, 2021; Mngomezulu, 2020; Nzimakwe & Ntshakala, 2016).

Without negating the contribution of past studies, this paper argues that democratic centralism is the root cause of poor performance across all South African municipalities. Therefore, the factors outlined above are consequences of democratic centralism expressed through violent protests, which communities use as a means of expressing frustration over poor service delivery. The paper further argues that inadequate recognition of democratic centralism as the underlying cause of poor municipal performance has resulted in ineffective empirical solutions to performance challenges that engulf South African municipalities. To address this problem, the paper applies grounded theory with particular emphasis on constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling. The use of these techniques comes against realisation that previous grounded theory studies on performance management in South African public institutions (Ndevu, 2019; Pretorius & Schurink, 2007) have not adequately used them to generate empirical explanations on factors that impede performance in South African municipalities. In undertaking a journey towards generating empirical explanations in this regard, the paper interrogates key dimensions of poor performance in South African municipalities. Thereafter, it outlines the research strategy, procedures, and methods used for collecting and analysing empirical data before presenting and discussing the empirical results.

2. The analysis of poor performance in South African municipalities

Poor performance in South African municipalities is intertwined with the history of racial segregation introduced by the Dutch after occupation of the Cape in 1652. According to Govender and Ramodula (2020), municipalities established during this period were designed to protect the interests of the white settlers at the exclusion of indigenous people. This exclusion manifested in different forms that included depriving the indigenous people of their political rights (Tsatsire, Raga, Taylor, & Nealer, 2009) and deliberately providing them with poor services (Govender & Ramodula, 2020). This situation intensified with the expansion of municipalities during the British rule from 1795 with Ordinance 9 of 1836 used as a framework for institutionalising racial discrimination in which municipal positions were reserved for English males (Marais, 1989). Racial inequalities continued through 1910 with the creation of the Union of South Africa and gained momentum in 1948 when the National Party came to power.

In pursuit of its policy of racial segregation, the National Party promulgated the Group Areas Act (Act 41 of 1950) as an instrument for institutionalising poor service delivery in black communities. Through this Act, communities were transplanted to other areas, which due to their total lack of development or facilities have rapidly assumed the slum characteristics (Mabin, 1992). Failure to provide descent services coupled with the growing discontent over political exclusion and social injustice of the apartheid regime resulted in a wave of violent protests across the country in the 1970s and 1980s. These protests ushered in a new era of transition from discriminatory local government system to a democratic and inclusive system that came after the 1994 elections. The Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 is the founding pillar of democratic local government system anchored in liberal ideological posture associated with New Public Management. Specifically, the Act provides the basis for Integrated Development Planning (IDP), which according to Mathebula (2018) and Mamokhere (2021) is a tool for implementation of New Public Management in South African municipalities. While New Public Management dominated management literature in the 1980s as panacea for poor performance in public institutions, its adoption in South African municipalities has not been successful. The increasing wave of violent service delivery protests that have become a common phenomenon across South African communities bears testimony to the failure of New Public Management in improving service delivery in South African municipalities. These protests often include blockading of major highways, erection of barricades, burning of public buildings and politicians' houses (Mamokhere, 2021). The fact that these protests originate from poor black communities (Alexander, 2010) shows that the ANC led municipalities have failed to improve service delivery in communities that were deliberately excluded from decent service delivery during the apartheid era.

The failure of the ANC led municipalities in turning the tide of poor service delivery in black communities has generated a heated debate on the issue of poor municipal performance in South Africa. This debate has divided South African scholars into two camps. On one hand is a group of scholars such as Cloete (2009) as well as Kariuki and Reddy (2017) who attribute poor performance in South African municipalities to inadequate use of evidence for decision-making owing to a fragmented approach to performance management. On the other hand, another group of scholars identifies political interference as the main reason for poor performance (Ndevu, 2022; Maqoko, 2015; Masiya, Davids & Manga, 2021). In corroborating this view, Kgatle (2017) attributes poor performance in Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality to interference of the ANC in the administration of the Municipality. Similarly, studies conducted in other municipalities in different provinces (Bless, 2023; Maqoko, 2015; Mngomezulu, 2020) reported a similar trend. What is common in most studies that highlight political interference as the main service delivery constraint is the notion of cadre deployment. As Shava and Chamisa (2018) point out, the ANC's policy of cadre deployment has eroded accountability mechanism. Elaborating on this, Gumede (2015) argues that political appointees are loyal to political structures that appointed them thereby creating an impression that the ANC is bigger than the government. This mentality has weakened human resources management practices and created a corrupt system of political patronage (Shava & Chamisa, 2018). Consequently, political patronage gives rise to incompetence due to the appointment of unqualified people to strategic positions within municipalities (Makole, 2022; Mlambo, Zubane, & Thusi, 2022; Shava & Chamisa, 2018).

While most scholars give an impression that political interference is a recent phenomenon that came with the ANC government (Kgatle, 2017; Mngomezulu, 2020; Shava & Chamisa, 2018), this paper traces political interference to the apartheid era. To support this thinking, the paper draws from Gumede (2015) who posits that the apartheid government under the National Party was characterised by top-down management based on centralised power in pursuit of racial segregation. This means that political interference was the hallmark of the apartheid regime. Looking at the original values of the ANC pillared on accountability and transparency (De Jager & Steenekamp, 2015), there was an expectation that this culture would end in the new democratic dispensation.

However, the ANC government displays similar tendencies of centralism characterised by inward looking, self-seeking, and self-preserving that defined the apartheid administration (De Jager & Steenekamp, 2015).

Suttner (2003) describes democratic centralism as the principle where a few leaders make decisions and send out commands to members who obey them unquestionably. As Gumede (2015) points out, this is how the ANC governs itself and it extends its tendencies into government by employing its loyal cadres to strategic positions. Evidence supporting this view indicates that the ANC micro-manages the government and decides on who should get government contracts (Ndevu & Muller, 2018). In addition, the ANC has intensified efforts to control state institutions including the Judiciary (De Jager & Steenekamp, 2015). While the Judiciary has largely been resilient, most institutions of democracy have succumbed to political interference leading to the demolition of politics-administration boundaries. The deliberate breach of the politics-administration divide has created a culture of poor performance characterised by corruption, lack of accountability, and nepotism. Therefore, this paper argues that improving performance in South African municipalities requires a shift from democratic centralism to liberal democracy that embraces collective and transparent decision-making.

3. Theoretical framework

The principle of democratic centralism, which defines the structure and operational behaviour of political parties aligned to Marxism, provides a theoretical foundation for this paper. Ideas about democracy and centralism emerged from Marx (Angle, 2005) but Lenin combined the two to formulate a theory that explains organisational behaviour of revolutionary political parties. Specifically, Lenin argued for a revolutionary communist party organised according to military principle of democratic centralism (Morgan, 2015) in which an authoritative leadership takes decisions on behalf of ordinary members (Suttner, 2003). Under this system, loyalty to the party and leadership is sacred (Gumede, 2015). In view of these characteristics, Morgan (2015) maintains that democratic centralism promotes dictatorship and abuse of power. Despite this limitation, Marxism-Leninism ideology continues to influence the political behaviour of the ruling elite in Africa (De Jager & Steenekamp, 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that the ANC displays a political behaviour associated with democratic centralism. As Gumede (2015) points out, this behaviour starts from within the ANC where decision-making is a vested in a few elites with ordinary members expected to implement decisions religiously. Through its policy of cadre deployment, which is a practice of employing loyal party officials to strategic positions within the government, the ANC has extended its tendencies of democratic centralism to all aspects of the South African public service (De Jager & Steenekamp, 2015). As implied in several studies (Madumo, 2015; Makole, 2022; Mafunisa, 2003; Ndevu, 2019), the collapse of the politics-administration boundaries has given rise to poor services across South African municipalities. Therefore, this paper is explicit in its understanding of manifestations of poor performance in South African municipalities from the perspective of the politics-administration dichotomy.

In order to provide the context to the politics-administration dichotomy as the underlying theoretical framework for this paper, the author draws from Woodrow Wilson's study on Administration. Published in 1887, this study marks the first stage in the evolution of Public Administration (Bartholomew, 1972) but evidence suggests that separation of politics and administration was already a topic of discussion long before this publication. Outlining the history of this notion, several scholars (Gruening, 2001; Lee, 1995; Waldo, 1948; Rosenbloom, 2008) maintain that discontent over the spoils system planted a seed for transformational ideas expressed in the American Civil Service Act of 1883, which paved the way for a career public service separate from politics. Based on the strength of this evidence, it is clear that Wilson gave impetus to ideas that had already been advanced by the reformers of the U.S civil service in the 19th century (Van Riper, 1987). Therefore, what made Wilson's publication famous is that it appeared at the time when the American people began to express dissatisfaction with government policies and rampant corruption (Lamidi, 2015). Despite the controversy about its origin, the politics-administration dichotomy remains popular amongst South African scholars.

Mafunisa (2003) used the politics-administration dichotomy to answer the question of whether senior public servants should be political or non-political when performing their duties. This study established that South Africa follows a model of politicised bureaucracy where elected office-bearers have a mandate to control the public service. In view of this, Mafunisa (2003) concludes that there is no distinction between politics and administration and between party and state leading to abuse of political power. In another study, Madumo (2015) used the politics-administration dichotomy as a framework to understand service delivery impediments in South African municipalities. This study attributes poor service delivery to unrestricted interference of ANC leaders in administrative and managerial affairs of municipalities. This attribution is consistent with the findings of recent studies that have applied the politics-administration dichotomy as an interpretive framework. For

example, Mngomezulu (2020) established that inappropriate political interference in administrative matters is at the centre of poor municipal performance in South Africa. In addition, Makole (2022) revealed that cadre deployment undermines the capacity of state to improve the quality of service delivery. Based on the foregoing, it is clear that the ANC uses cadre deployment as an instrument for extending democratic centralism to all aspects of public service to the detriment of service delivery. Therefore, it is important to understand service delivery challenges in South African municipalities within the theoretical boundaries of politics-administration dichotomy.

4. Research methodology

The author of this paper believes in subjective epistemology and subscribes to an ontological posture that recognises the existence of multiple realities. This declaration comes against Chun Tie, Birks and Francis' (2019) advice that researchers should reflect their philosophical beliefs and interpretations of the world prior to commencing research. Most importantly, this declaration is consistent with Guba and Lincoln's (1994) view that those who embrace the existence of multiple realities and subjective interpretation of phenomena belong to the constructivist research tradition. For this reason, this paper adopts a qualitative research strategy anchored on constructivist grounded theory design to explore the root cause of poor performance in South African municipalities. There are two main reasons that influenced the author's decision to use constructivist grounded theory. First, it allowed the author to use literature review to conceptualise the study and frame the research questions (Strauss, 1987). Second, this approach acknowledges a strong interrelationship between the researcher and the participants (Charmaz, 2014) thereby allowing the author to use personal experience and knowledge to enrich the discussion in this paper.

The next step after defining the research strategy and design is to describe the research target group, which in this case consists of all employees of the Municipality that formed the research setting for the study that informed this paper. However, due to limited time and resources, it was not possible to include every member of the general population in the study. Therefore, the author selected a subset of the general population believed to be knowledgeable about the subject matter of relevance to this paper. This group included senior municipal officials ranging from Group Heads, Heads of Divisions, Directors and Deputy Directors. In order to get a balanced perspective, the author included Specialists responsible for different areas within the Municipality as well as general workers and representatives of labour. These participants were drawn from a staff list obtained from the Municipality. Although there is no consensus on the appropriate sample size for grounded theory studies, most researchers suggest a sample of 10 to 30 participants (Bernard, 2006; Boddy, 2005; Guetterman, 2015; Morse, 1994). Therefore, this paper used a sample size of 30 but at the end only 24 participated in the study as others did not show interest.

Based on the desire to obtain in-depth information as required in qualitative research, the author used a semi-structured interview guide. This instrument allowed the researcher to obtain deep insights (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009) on key dimensions of municipal performance. Subsequently, the author recorded and transcribed information obtained from research participants in order to facilitate data analysis. In line with key tenets of grounded theory, the author adopted an iterative process of data collection and analysis that began with open coding to identify incidents and events in the data. A comparison of incidents and events in the first batch of transcripts informed further data collection and triggered an iterative process of comparing properties of newly collected data to the initial data. At this point, similar data properties were grouped together to create concepts that were further compared against each other to inform further data collection and iterative comparison of initial codes and newly created concepts. This iterative process of data collection and analysis culminated in what Strauss and Corbin (1998) refers to as selective coding. At this point, all data properties converged on political interference as the underlying cause of poor municipal performance. After collecting further information through theoretical sampling, cadre deployment emerged as a critical enabler of political interference. After embarking on further literature review and reflecting on the relationship between the empirical data and the theoretical framework underpinning this study, the author discovered that democratic centralism provides a theoretical foundation for use of cadre deployment as an instrument for political interference in South African municipalities.

5. Study results

The research results presented in this paper represent the views of the research participants regarding factors that hinder performance in South African municipalities. In the main, the participants highlighted cadre deployment as the main reason behind poor performance across South African municipalities. In this regard, the participants' views confirmed the findings of previous studies (Shava & Chamisa, 2018; Makole, 2022; Mngomezulu, 2020) that attribute poor service delivery in South African municipalities to the ANC culture of appointing its loyal members to strategic positions within municipalities. Upon further probing, the participants pointed to a number of ways through which cadre deployment impedes service delivery. First, the participants noted that deploying politicians to strategic positions within municipalities creates opportunities for corruption. As one participant pointed out, "politicians put pressure on management to award contracts to particular individuals". This statement reiterates the findings expressed in Nzimakwe and Ntshakala (2016) who state that it is common for politicians to interfere in procurement decisions in South African municipalities.

Elaborating on the issue of corruption, another participant said, "irregular awarding of contracts for procurement of goods and services leads to delays in service delivery because such contracts are often challenged at huge cost to the City". On this point, the results are similar to evidence showing that corruption is the main source of wasteful expenditure in South African municipalities (Moeti, 2014). In expressing this view, the participants acknowledged that there is a direct link between political interference and corruption in South African municipalities. Thus, the participants' view underscore the findings of previous studies that highlight political interference in procurement processes as the main reason for rampant corruption in South African municipalities (De Visser & Akintan, 2008; Moeti, 2014).

Second, the participants connected the issue of corruption to lack of accountability. Generally, the participants mentioned that political appointees deliberately disregard established accountability protocols within municipalities because they have political protection. In this regard, the results reiterate Shava and Chamisa's (2018) finding that cadre deployment has eroded accountability and created a fertile ground for corruption and impunity. The results further confirm Gumede's (2015) argument that politically deployed cadres are more loyal to the political party that appointed them than government entities in which they are deployed. In addition, the results further corroborate the finding that cadres regard themselves accountable to the ANC committees that deploy them and not the public (Twala, 2014).

The third issue closely related to lack of accountability and corruption is the abuse of state resources for political expediency. In this regard, the participants mentioned that political parties appoint their loyal members to municipalities in order to ensure that politically connected businesses get tenders and subsequently finance political activities of the ANC. On this issue, the results are consistent with Madumo's (2016) findings that ANC uses cadre deployment as a mechanism for controlling state resources for political gain. Further, the results reiterate Gumede's (2015) view that the ANC is increasingly governing in the interest of its own constituencies.

Fourth, the participants highlighted nepotism as a consequence of cadre deployment. Upon probing on how this affects performance, the respondents mentioned that nepotism has created a culture where politicians appoint their friends and relatives to positions for which they do not qualify thereby constraining effective delivery of services. In this regard, the results are similar to Shava and Chamisa's (2018) finding that cadre deployment has weakened human resource practices in municipalities and reduced staff morale because appointments and promotions are based on political considerations not merit. Closely related to unfair recruitment and promotion practices is the issue of incompetence, which as the research participants pointed out, is a direct consequence of cadre deployment. The participants' views in this regard corroborate the argument expressed in Twala (2014) as well as in Shava and Chamisa (2018) that cadre deployment leads to appointment of incompetent individuals who are unable to perform their functions effectively. These results reflect a departure from the original values of the ANC, which according to Twala (2014) had resolved in its KwaBe conference in 1985, that implementation of cadre deployment should at all times guard against favouritism.

The last aspect of cadre deployment that has a direct bearing on the performance in South African municipalities is lack of trust between politicians and career public officials. In articulating this issue, the participants mentioned that political appointees come with a political mandate, the implementation of which is often in conflict with professional ethics and standards governing public administration. As one participant pointed out, "politicians always insist on implementing a political agenda even if it is an illegitimate agenda". The results further show that conflicts arise when public officials are directed to implement such a mandate and this fuels mistrust between politicians and public officials and creates a toxic work environment characterised by discontent and poor performance". These results corroborate Ndevu's (2019) findings that cadre deployment

has eroded trust between politicians and public officials. The results are also similar to Maqoko's (2015) study, which found that competent public officials are often purged from service due to mistrust between politicians and senior municipal officials.

6. Discussion

In the main, the findings of this study corroborate Gumede's (2015) and Twala's (2014) argument that cadre deployment, which is the practice of appointing political loyalists to strategic positions within municipalities, is a strategy used by the ANC to entrench democratic centralism within the South African public service. Derived from Lenin's idea that revolutionary communist party are organised according to military principles, democratic centralism promotes dictatorship and abuse of state power thereby giving rise to corruption and lack of accountability. In particular, the participants mentioned that through its policy of cadre deployment, the ANC directly influences appointments to strategic positions within municipalities and controls distribution of resources through corrupt interference in procurement decisions. De Jager and Steenekamp (2015) describe these tendencies as signs of democratic centralism similar to the apartheid bureaucracy. Elaborating on this, Gumede (2015) argues that democratic centralism tendencies originate from the belief amongst the ANC members that their liberation credentials give them entitlement to government spoils. In view of this, the paper argues that the ANC's attitude has destroyed the politics-administration boundaries to the detriment of service delivery.

As noted in Gruening (2001), transcending the politics-administration divide was the main reason for corruption, maladministration, nepotism, and poor performance in the American public service in the 19th Century. This shows that the rampant corruption, nepotism, and poor performance that defines South African municipalities is a reflection of the administrative problems that characterised the American public service before its transition from politicised bureaucracy to a hybrid model that includes an independent and professional civil service and a few political appointments. As was the case in the American public administration, this study found out that corruption is rampant in South African municipalities. Linking corruption to democratic centralism, Mantzaris and Pillay (2014) associates corruption in South African municipalities with the ANC Polokwane Elective Conference of 2007 that placed the ANC as the centre of power. This means that the ANC dictates on what its cadres in government should do. Therefore, the resolutions of the Polokwane conference firmly placed tendencies of democratic centralism at the centre of government administration. Highlighting one such tendency, Maqoko (2015) posits that the ANC Regional Executive Committee in Eastern Cape instructed the recruitment panel to appoint a far less qualified and experienced person than any of the other candidates the panel had shortlisted for the position of a Municipal Manager in one Municipality.

Direct interference in the appointment of senior municipal officials is an indication that cadre deployment has eroded accountability mechanisms. Therefore, this paper concurs with Shava and Chamisa's (2018) assertion that political interference has weakened human resource practices in municipalities. It further agrees with Moeti (2014) that political interference has created opportunities for corruption and nepotism. Thus, the paper defines nepotism as one of the main service delivery impediments because it has created a culture where politicians appoint their friends and relatives to positions for which they do not qualify. This means that nepotism leads to a shortage of critical skills required for effective delivery of services within South African municipalities. Nepotism is not limited to appointment of staff but extends to promotions and staff development. As the findings of this study revealed, nepotism has affected staff morale because hardworking professionals are overlooked for promotions and staff development opportunities. While nepotism is at the heart of cadre deployment, it is important to note that the ANC had long resolved to guard against nepotism in its implementation of cadre deployment policy (Twala, 2014). Therefore, the rampant nepotism reported in different studies and corroborated in this paper is a clear indication that the ANC has failed to implement its resolutions. As De Jager and Steenekamp (2015) point out, the ANC has moved away from its founding principles of accountability and has adopted an inward looking and self-serving behaviour. This paper argues that this behaviour has paralysed service delivery across all spheres of government.

Last, the study results revealed lack of trust between politicians and career public servants in municipalities. This paper attributes this problem to bluntant disregard of established human resources principles for political expediency. As the results pointed out, political meddling in administrative affairs creates a perpetual state of conflict between public officials and politicians. This means that more time is spent on addressing conflicts rather than focusing on service delivery.

7. Conclusion

In sum, this paper traced the origin of democratic centralism back to Marxism and argued that it has entrenched politicised bureaucracy in South African municipalities. In addition, the paper presented cadre deployment as an instrument through which the ANC dispenses patronage and nepotism to the detriment of service delivery. In this regard, the paper outlined corruption, nepotism, and lack of accountability as key manifestations of poor performance in South African municipalities. Most importantly, the paper argued that these challenges are similar to administrative problems that engulfed the American public administration in the 19th Century. For this reason, the paper advocates for a complementary administrative model that embraces an independent and professional public service while retaining political appointments to enable political parties to implement their programmes in government. However, as noted in advanced democracies such as the United States, successful implementation of such a model rests on a strong political will to instil a culture of performance and accountability at the local government level. A recommendation for adoption of a complementary model is indicative of the impracticality of the politics-administration dichotomy not only in South Africa but also in advanced democracies such as the United States, which recognises the distinct contribution of political office-bearers and public servants to the democratic process. This recommendation comes against the author's concurrence with Mafunisa (2003) that South Africa requires a politicised model to redress the imbalances of the past discriminatory policies and practices.

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