



Civic Protests Barometer 2007-2014

By DM Powell and M O'Donovan J De Visser

Civic Protests Barometer 2007-2014¹

DM Powell, M O'Donovan and J De Visser

© Copyright DM Powell, M O'Donovan, J de Visser – Civic protests barometer 2007-2014- CAPE TOWN: MLGI – www.mlgi.org.za

The cover images are courtesy of IOL.

This Project was made possible with the assistance of the Ford Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.



FORDFOUNDATION

*Working with Visionaries on the
Frontlines of Social Change Worldwide*



CHARLES STEWART
MOTT FOUNDATION

¹ Dr Powell is the principal investigator and M O'Donovan the statistical analyst for the project. The Civic Protest Barometer builds on data in D Powell and J De Visser (2011) Municipal Service Delivery Protests barometer, but has comprehensively refined and developed the methodology for data collection and verification and extended the analysis.

1. General trends

- In 2014 there was an increase in the number of protests, reversing the downward trend that was evident after 2009.
- The number of protest in 2014 reached an all-time-high of 218. The previous maximum was 204 in 2009 (which was also an election year).
- The increase in 2014 is only partly due to the election held on May 7. Although April and May saw 25 and 30 protests respectively, almost as many protests (28) took place in August, three months after the election.
- In the three year period 2012 - 2014 Gauteng experienced more protests than any other province. Since 2007 Gauteng's share of protests has been rising more rapidly than any other provinces'.
- Cape Town was the most the most protest-prone municipality with 84 protests, followed by Johannesburg, eThekweni, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni. Between them these five metro municipalities accounted for half of all the protests recorded.
- The prevalence of violence associated with protests has continued to increase. The number of violent protests reached a record high in 2014. In 2007 just less than half the protests were associated with some violence. In 2014 almost 80% of protests involved violence on the part of the participants or the authorities.
- Issues relating to municipal services and the administration of municipalities were cited more often as cause of protests than all other grievances put together.

Civic protest barometer 2007 to 2014

2. About the barometer

The Civic Protest Barometer (CPB) measures trends in protest action in South Africa's municipalities. The data covers the period 2007 to 2014 (inclusive) and tracks four variables

1. trends in the number of protests: 2007 to 2014
2. geographical spread of protest: 2007 to 2014
3. trends in violent civic protest: 2007 to 2014
4. grievances behind protest action: 2012 to 2014

In addition the barometer tests one hypothesis about the causes of protests, namely that it signals a “rebellion of the poor”, against the empirical data.

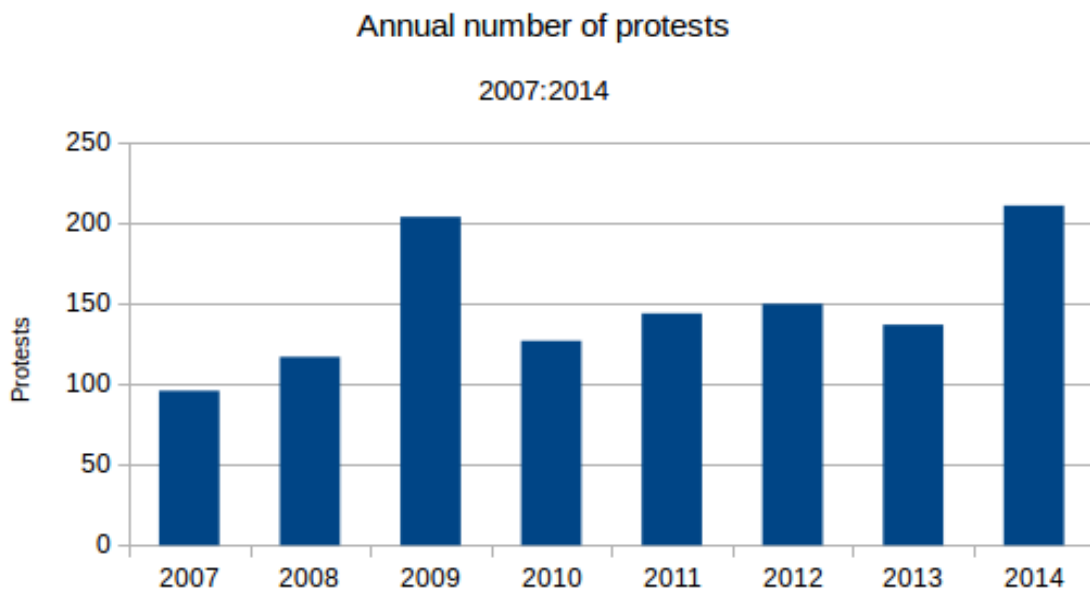
The barometer defines the protest action as “civic protests,” which is a sub-category of the concept of “civic conflict” that is used in the international literature on conflict to distinguish serious conflict that is not civil war or war between states. In our context civic protest is given a narrow definition, referring to organised protest action within a local area which directly targets municipal government or targets municipal government as a proxy to express grievances against the state more widely².

Understanding the protests as a form of civic conflict locates the South African experience within the broader field of comparative international scholarship on conflict in fragile and conflict affected countries, which is useful for purposes of comparative research. Internationally, civic conflict is regarded as a symptom of both social exclusion and the fragility of state institutions. The link between civic protests and the quality of state institutions is apposite because the South African Constitution creates obligations on the state to put people, and especially the poor and vulnerable, at the center of social policy. The regime for developmental local government in the constitution, for example, obliges municipalities to be responsive, accountable and inclusive governments. Systemic civic conflict is clearly incommensurate with the constitutional commitment to building developmental local government, and thus a signal not only of institutional weaknesses, but of a breach of constitutional obligations.

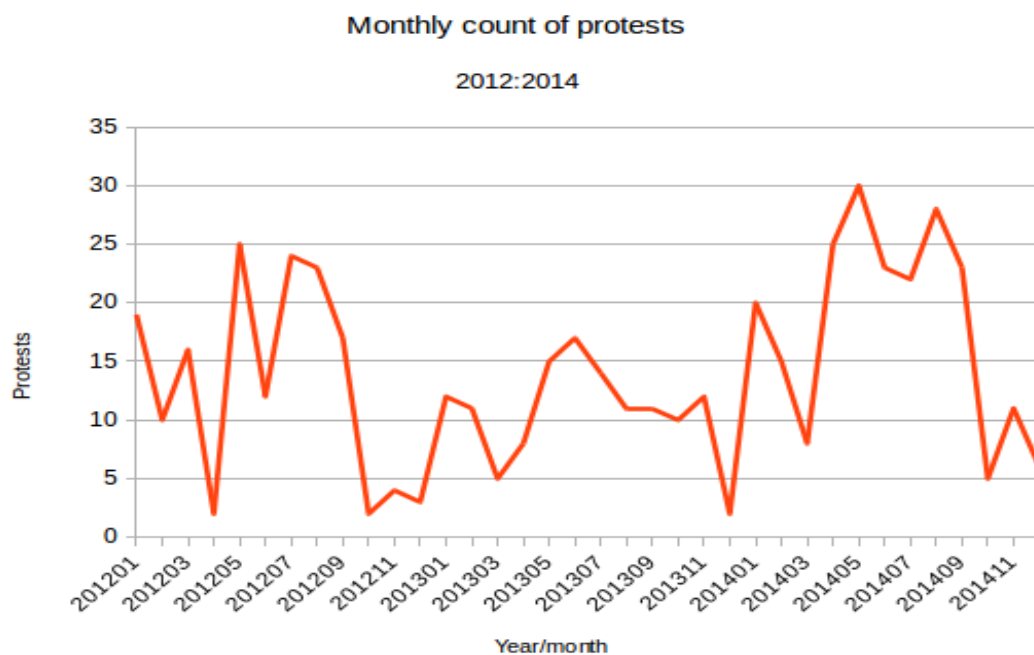
2 The definition draws on “Beall and Goodfellow's definition of “civic conflict” as a third category of systemic conflict after sovereign war and civil war. The authors define civic conflict in broader terms than we do. For Beall and Goodfellow “Civic conflict involves the violent expression of grievances vis-a-vis the state or other actors. It refers to diverse or recurrent forms of violence between individuals and groups and can include organised violent crime. Gang warfare, terrorism, religious and sectarian rebellions and spontaneous riots or violent protest over state failures such as poor or absent service delivery.” J Beall and T Goodfellow (2014) “Conflict and post-war transition in African cities” in S Parnell and E Pieterse *Africa's urban revolution* (Claremont: UCT Press), 18-34. This definition is far too broad for our purposes and we confine civic protest to conflict that is public in nature and commonly oriented to local of government or the state through local government. Excluded from our definition are forms of protest linked to private interests like wage disputes, contractual failures etc. and protest that forms part of wider civil disobedience.

3. Trends in protest 2007 to 2014

The barometer measures annual and monthly trends in protests between 2007 and 2014. The previous version of the barometer showed the start of a broad downward trend for the period 2009 to 2011. However, as the first graph shows, that general trend reversed in 2014, and the upward trajectory has resumed, with an all-time-high of 218 protests in 2014.³ The previously recorded maximum was in 2009, which saw 204 protests.



The second graph shows the monthly count of protests between 2012 and 2014. It shows that in this period the highest count of protests was in May 2014, the month in which the fifth national and



³ Had we included civil disobedience (like protests against the introduction of eTolls in Gauteng and the so called “poo protests” in the Western Cape) in our definition of civic protest the actual level of protest action would have been somewhat higher than indicated above. The inclusion of these civil disobedience campaigns would have resulted in approximately a 3% escalation in the total count of protest action.

provincial elections were held. Can the spike be attributed to election-related factors?

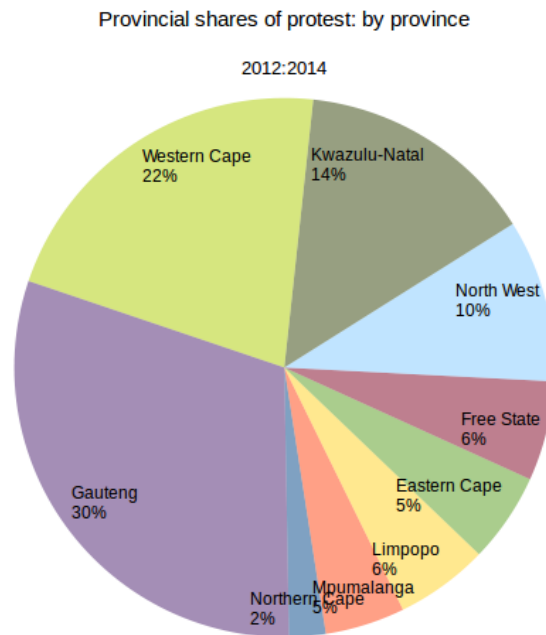
In May 2014, 30 protests were reported and, in the run up to the election, 25 protests were reported in April. The spike cannot be attributed to the election alone because three months after the election the total number of protests almost equaled the May high (i.e. 28 protests in August).⁴

⁴ The May total of 30 had only been exceeded twice before, in July 2009 and March 2010. The fourth national election took place in 2009 – three months before the spike in that year, a further indication that elections are only a partial explanation for the general pattern.

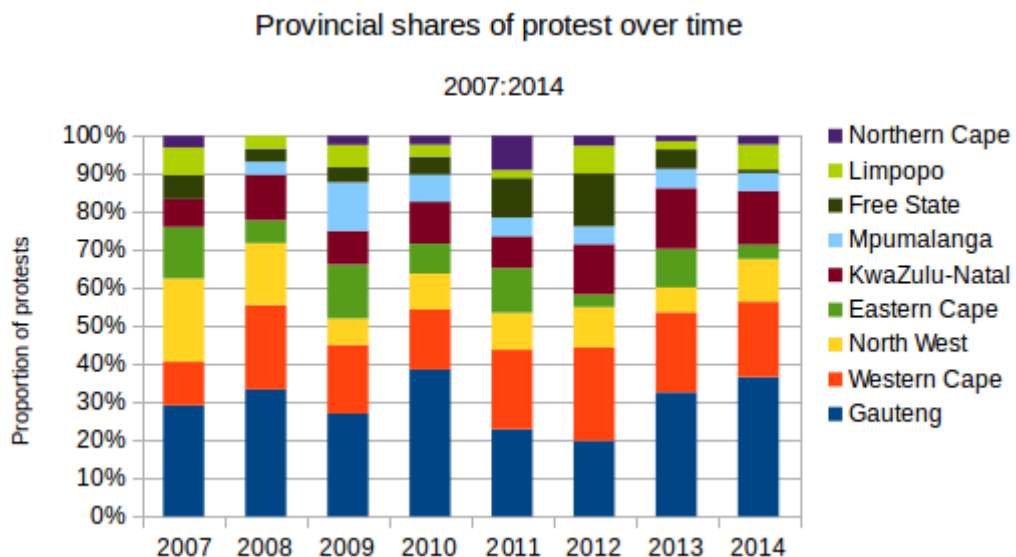
4. Geographic spread of civic protests

The barometer measures the spread of protests among South Africa's 278 municipalities and nine provinces for the period 2007 to 2014.

The first graph shows the provincial spread of protests for the period 2012 to 2014. Gauteng is the most protest-prone province, with 30 percent of all protests taking place in that province. The next most protest prone province was the Western Cape (22 percent). The lowest share of protests took place in the Northern Cape. However, the Northern Cape also has the smallest population with about two percent of the country's population. As its share of protests approximates its share of the population and that its residents are not particularly averse to protesting.



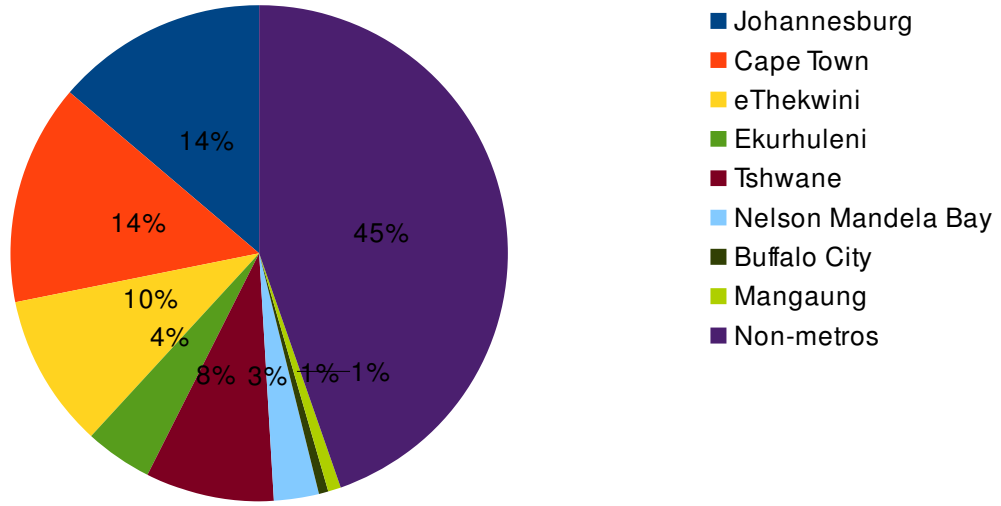
The second graph shows the trend in provincial shares for the period 2007 to 2014. It shows that since 2011 Gauteng's share of protests has been rising more rapidly than anywhere else. In 2012 only 20 percent of protests took place in that province. By 2014 this proportion had increased to 36 percent.



The third graph shows the spread of protest shares within the eight metropolitan municipalities, which are the largest cities in the country, as well as the metro's share relative to all other municipalities. In 2014 Cape Town and Tshwane tied as the most protest prone municipalities with 28 service delivery protests each. During the combined period of 2012 to 2014 the most protest prone municipalities were, in descending order, Cape Town, Johannesburg, eThekweni, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni. Between them these five metropolitan municipalities accounted for 50 percent of all protests.

Protests 2012:2014

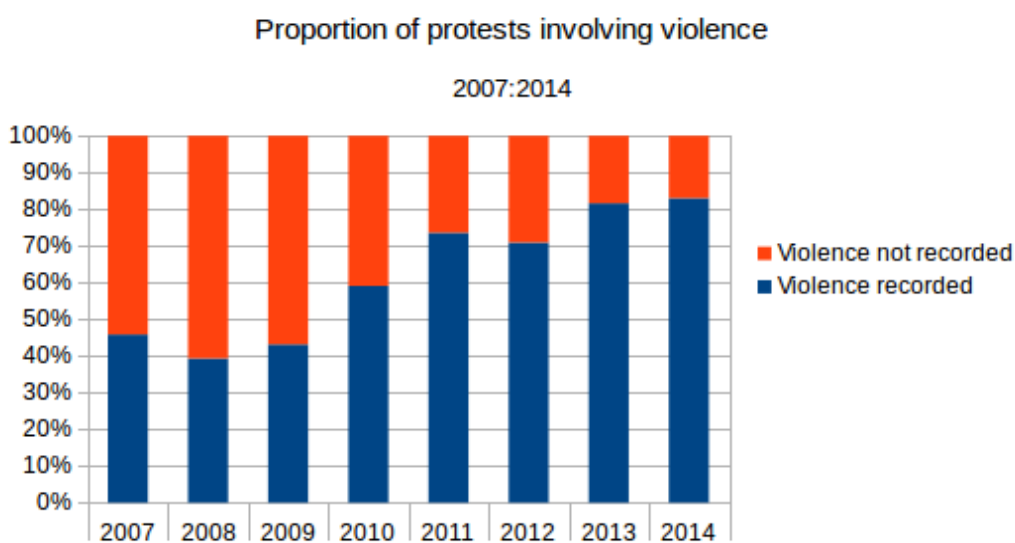
Metros and other areas



5. Trends in violent civic protest 2007 to 2014

This barometer measures the proportion of protests involving some element of violence, the total number of violent protests, and compares the prevalence of different forms of violence. Violent protests have been defined in this study “as those protests where some or all of the participants have engaged in actions that create a clear and imminent threat of, or actually result in, harm to persons or damage to property.”⁵

The graph below shows the proportion of protests involving violence. Ever since data was first recorded in 2007 it is clear that an ever increasing proportion of protests involve violence. This trend continued until 2014. In 2007 just less than half (46 percent) of all protests were associated with some form of violence. By 2014 83 percent of protests involved violence on the part of the protesters or the authorities.



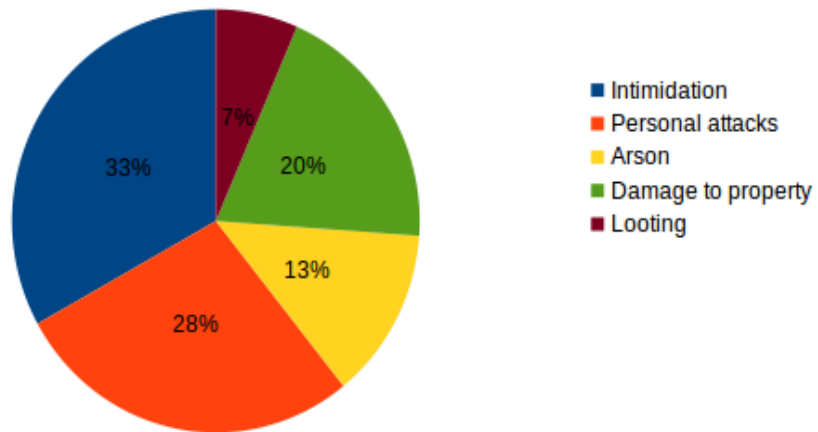
The escalation in levels of violence is vividly illustrated in the graph. The number of violent protests has risen at a faster rate than the total number of protests. In 2007 the total number of violent protests was 44. Seven years later this number had increased more than fourfold to 181.

The next graph measures five forms of violence: Intimidation, personal attacks, arson, damage to property, and looting. Intimidation was the most frequently cited form of violence (376 protests) associated with protest in the 2012 to 2014 period. Physical attacks on individuals were less prominent (315 protests). The destruction of property (including arson) was recorded more often than attacks on individuals (a combined total of 372 protests). Two thirds of the types of violence recorded at protests thus went beyond “mere” intimidation and involved the destruction of property, assault, looting and even death.

5 See Powell and De Visser (2011).

Breakdown in forms of violence associated with protest

2012 : 2014



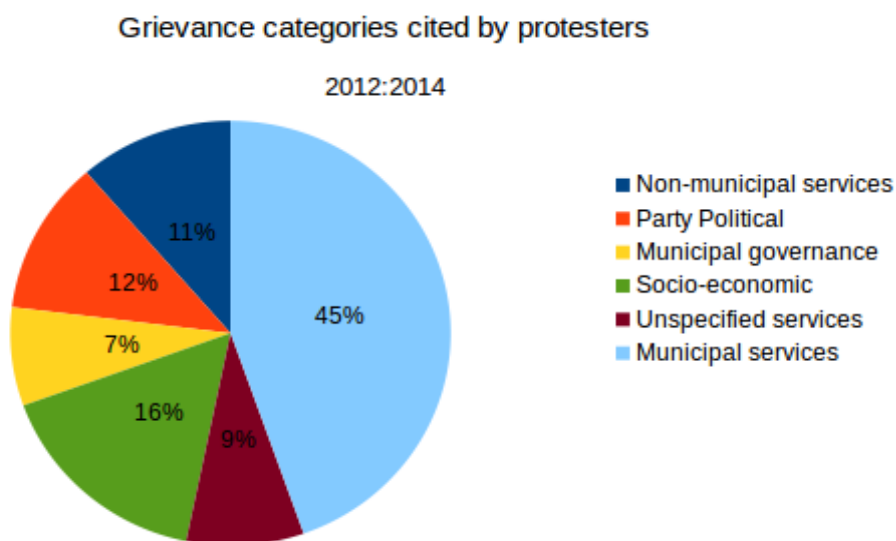
6. Grievances reported to be behind protests

The barometer measures the grievances reported to be behind protests. These reasons are categorised into six categories, reflecting how protesters expressed their grievances. The six categories are:

1. Municipal services (services in schedule 4b and 5b of the constitution like water, electricity)
2. Municipal governance (issue related to the political or administrative management of the municipality (eg. grievance relating to financial mismanagement and corruption)
3. Non-municipal services (services that are the responsibility of either national or provincial governments, including state owned entities, eg. education and policing services)
4. Party political (grievances relating to matters within and between political parties including competition for public office)
5. Socio-economic (this category reflects grievances relating to broader issues like jobs and land distribution)
6. Unspecified services (the grievance was not reflected in records)

The single most prominent category of grievances cited by protesters relate to municipal services (45 percent). Collectively over half (52 percent) of grievances clearly relate directly to municipal services or issue of municipal governance.

About one-in-ten grievances cited involve non-municipal services, which indicate that protesters often treat municipalities as a proxy responsible for the failures of higher tiers of the state. This category includes grievances relating to services at schools and the quality of policing.



It is noticeable that a high percentage (12 percent) of grievances relate to party political issues.

7. Are civic protests a sign of “a rebellion of the poor?”

In recent years, noticeably after the 2010 “Arab Spring,” the hypothesis that the protests are a forewarning of an impending “rebellion of the poor” has begun to surface in some public debates, political statements and even academic publications.

Two propositions are implicit in the hypothesis. The first is that the causal explanation for the civic protests can be found in the extremely high levels of poverty in the country. The latest official statistics put the poverty head count at 56.8 percent.⁶ High levels of inequality accompany the high levels of poverty. Official statistics put the country’s Gini coefficient at 0.7.⁷ Poverty on this scale is a serious concern, and eradicating poverty is a cornerstone of the National Development Plan published in 2011 and has been a major priority in government policy since the Mandela government of 1994.

Secondly, the hypothesis contains a predication that the protests signal an impending crisis in the country, what some have called a “ticking time bomb,” an uprising of the poor that will undermine the stability of the country as a whole, if not addressed. Civic protests are certainly common, widespread and increasingly violent, as the CPB data shows. They signal alienation and exclusion among a segment of the population. The prevalence and violence of the civic protests, in what are generally labeled municipal service delivery processes, is sometimes used as evidence for making a wider argument that the South African state has “failed” or is “failing.”⁸

The rebellion of the poor hypothesis and its variants thus makes a generalised claim about both the cause and implications of the civic protests. For that reason it must be tested against factual evidence. The question we are interested in is whether the empirical evidence supports the claim or not. Before looking at the data, it is necessary to make two points about the concepts in play in the hypothesis.

The first is that “rebellion” is a concept of international law that carries a specific meaning. A rebellion “involves violence that [is] of limited duration and which could be rapidly suppressed by the police without the need to resort to military units.”⁹ The category is important when legal questions arise about the recognition of certain kinds of conflict by the international community. Rebellion is viewed as domestic conflict. As the CPB shows, however, not all protests are violent, and that fact alone means the concept should be applied with caution in our context.

The second point is that concepts such as the failed state or fragile state are concepts used in the field of international relations, and issues related to international peace and security in particular. A failed state is one that presents a threat to international peace and security because it lacks any government at all. Somalia is the classic example of a failed state. Since about 2005 the concept of a fragile and conflict-affected state has emerged to denote states suffering from major institutional failure of the kind that could present a threat to international peace and security. These are usually countries that have experienced major protracted civil war, such as the two Sudans, the DRC and Libya. Various indices of fragility have emerged in recent years to measure countries against indicators of fragility, but there is no uniform measure. South Africa has government and public institutions and is not included on any of the lists of fragile states, and in consequence caution is required when using these concepts to explain institutional weaknesses in our context. The state is also not a monolithic entity. It is a complex system composed of multiple interacting systems. It is possible that elements of the state can be dysfunctional while other elements are more resilient. Not only is measuring this complex interacting system a complex matter, there is no uniform way of doing so that we know of.

6 See the StatisticsSA website, http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=739&id=1, viewed on 13 February 2015.

7 See the StatisticsSA website, http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=739&id=1, viewed on 13 February 2015.

8 For example, see A Borraine (2014) *What’s gone wrong: On the brink of a failed state* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers (PTY) Ltd, 7.

9 S Sivakumaran (2012) *The law of non-international armed conflict* (Oxford: OUP).

The graphic below engages the hypothesis that the protests are a forewarning of an impending “rebellion of the poor” by testing its explanatory force against protest data for the period 2012 to 2014. It shows the size of the poor population (the green circle) and the number of people that took part in protests (the red circle). If the hypothesis is correct and poverty is the dominant cause of protests then the number of protests in any area should be proportional to the number of poor in that area. A region containing, say, 20 percent of the poor population would be expected to have 20 percent of protests. We should then see an overlap between the red and green circles. This correlation should be constant irrespective of the units of aggregation. In practice this correlation is not observed. For example, the proportion of protests taking place in metropolitan areas is well in excess of their proportion of the poor population. Conversely, rural areas have a far lower proportion of protests than can be expected of their proportion of poor. Examining the mismatch between protest levels and poverty levels points to the extent that poverty has explanatory value as a cause of protests.

MLGI collects data on protests at the level of local municipalities, and it is at this level that the analysis is conducted.

The data shows that there is very poor correlation between the size of the poor population and the prevalence of protests in general. The green circle represents 7 million poor households. This number is calculated using 2011 census data, where the poor population is defined as those living in the poorest 25 percent of households, counting only those aged 16 to 59.

The red circle shows the number of people that participated in protests. The number is derived by calculating the average number of people involved in protests using the MLGI database (300) and multiplying that number by the total number of protests recorded for the period. The graphic shows that approximately 150 000 people were involved in protests in the period 2012 and 2014. This number corresponds to 2 percent of the 7 million, or 1 in 50 poor.

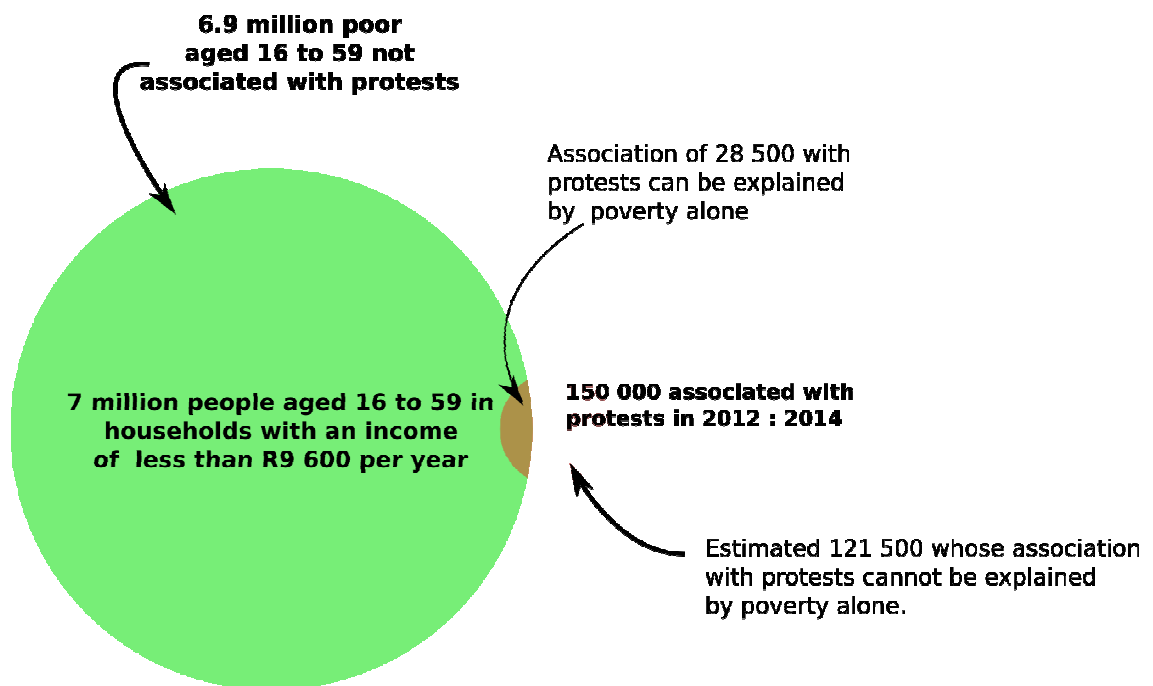
The green and red circles do not perfectly overlap, as can be seen. The overlap of the circles represents the proportion of protests that can be explained by poverty alone. It shows that only 19 percent of the protests (or 26 000 protesters) can be ascribed to poverty alone corresponding to 0.4 percent of the 7 million population in green circle.

The part of the red circle that does not overlap represents that proportion of protests that is not explained by poverty alone, namely 81 percent of protests. The remainder of the green circle represents the 99 percent of the poor who were not involved in protests. The poverty hypothesis must also explain why the vast majority of the poor in many municipalities do not protest at all or protest at rates lower than their numbers imply. This is frequently the case in municipalities in predominantly rural areas which generally have far fewer protests than would be expected given the number of poor in those areas.¹⁰

The poverty hypothesis therefore has poor explanatory value in accounting for who is involved in protests. The 81 percent of protests that cannot be explained by poverty alone need to be understood through other factors, possibly presented in conjunction with income levels. Further research will be required to explain the participation of the “not poor” in protests and how factors such as how well they are represented politically, the extent to which their expectations are met, urbanisation, and, pivotally, service levels, impact on protest levels.

10 The distribution of the poor population was derived from the poorest quartile of households in the 2011 census. This corresponds to all households earning less than R9 600 a year and approximates the official definition of poverty recent figures released by StatsSA indicates that 21 percent of the population is in “extreme poverty”. The definition used here slightly exceeds their benchmark.

If poverty was a adequate explanation for protests there would be a strong correlation between the number of protests and the incidence of poverty. The small circle below would then be entirely encompassed by the larger one. However there is only a 19 percent correlation between protest counts and the number of poor in municipalities.



While poverty is certainly a factor contributing to protests it is far from a sufficient explanation. The “rebellion of the poor” hypothesis seems wanting and we need to look for other explanations for the extensive involvement of the non-poor in protests.