

Civic Protests and Local Government in South Africa

Working Paper Series No. 2

The Civic Protests Barometer 2007 – 2016

TC Chigwata, M O'Donovan and DM Powell*

© Copyright TC Chigwata, M O'Donovan and DM Powell – Civic Protests and Local Government in South Africa, Working Paper Series No. 2, The Civic Protests Barometer 2007 – 2016, 2017, Cape Town: ACSL, Dullah Omar Institute – dullahomarinate.org.za

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

* TC Chigwata and DM are the principal investigators in this project and M O'Donovan is its statistical analyst. The project was led by TC Chigwata. The 2016 Civic Protests Barometer builds on data from the previous civic (municipal service delivery) protests barometers of 2011 and 2014. The methodology for data collection and verification has been refined and the analysis extended.



1. General trends

- Against a background of rising protest action in South Africa, the number of protests directed specifically at local government has decreased drastically.
- In 2009 South Africa experienced a total of 204 civic protests, whereas in 2015 they decreased to 126.
- Extrapolations from the first six months of 2016 indicate that the number of civic protests will drop significantly this year.
- Although civic protests are decreasing, many of them are covering wide areas and lasting a long time.
- Contrary to popular belief, there is no apparent direct relationship between an impending election and the number of civic protests.
- Gauteng is the most protest-prone province in South Africa.
- More than half of all protests took place in metropolitan municipalities.
- More than 90% of civic protests are associated with violence and intimidation.

2. Civic Protest Barometer 2007 to July 2016

About the Barometer

The Civic Protest Barometer (CPB) measures trends in protest action in South Africa's municipalities. The 2016 CPB is an update of the CPB published in 2014 (Working Paper Series No. 1), which covered the period 2007 to 2014. The current CPB (Working Paper Series No. 2) analyses data from January 2007 to July 2016 (inclusive).

It reveals chiefly that, against a background of increasing protest action throughout the country, the number of civic (municipal service delivery) protests has decreased significantly.

As in previous editions of the CPB, the 2016 CPB tracks four variables:

1. Trends in the number of protests (2007 to July 2016).
2. The geographical spread of protest (2007 to July 2016).
3. Trends in violent civic protest (2007 to July 2016).
4. Grievances behind protest action (2012 to July 2016).¹

Two key events dominated the public domain between 2014, when the last CPB was published, and July 2016, when the CPB was updated: the local government elections held on 3 August 2016, and nationwide university protests. Both have had an impact on the 2016 CPB.

With regard to the first event, a general perception is that civic protests increase with the approach of a local government election. Taking the correlation between civic protests and local government elections as the fifth variable under analysis, the 2016 CPB establishes whether the available data support this perception.

With respect to the second issue, no account of protest in South Africa is complete without discussion of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall campaigns. They have involved university students across the country protesting against the rise in fees and inequalities in tertiary education. What, then, is the distinction between these protests, on the one hand, and civic protests, on the other, which are the

¹ Comprehensive data about the nature of grievances are available only from 2012. The review period is thus limited to 2012-2016.

CPB's focus of interest? As explained below, for the purposes of this study the latter are categorised as "civic protests" and the former as "civil disobedience campaigns".

"Civic protest" is a sub-category of "civic conflict", which the literature defines as serious conflict that is not civil war or war between states. In the CPB, "civic protest" refers to organised protest action in a local area which targets municipal government, either in itself or as a proxy for the state.²

Understanding civic protest as a form of civic conflict is useful for situating the South African experience within the comparative scholarship on conflict in fragile countries. Internationally, civic conflict is regarded as a symptom of both social exclusion and the fragility of state institutions, and South Africa serves as a key case study in this regard.

The link between civic protests and the quality of state institutions is especially pertinent given that the South African Constitution places an obligation on the state to focus its social policy on the poor and vulnerable. The Constitution provides a regime for developmental local government that obligates municipalities to practise responsive, accountable and inclusive government.

Systemic civic conflict, however, is a sign of institutional weakness and breached constitutional obligations, conditions that are clearly at odds with the constitutional imperative to build developmental local government.

The definition of civic protests adopted in the CPB excludes protests that are part of civil disobedience campaigns. This limitation is based on the need to link protest action to aggrieved communities and so define protest action in terms of grievance, agents and geography.

By contrast, civil disobedience campaigns resulting in protest action tend to draw on grievances that are widely felt but which may not be specific to the area where the

² This definition draws on Beall and Goodfellow's definition of "civic conflict" as a third category of systemic conflict after sovereign war and civil war: "Civic conflict involves the violent expression of grievances vis-à-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" (Beall J and Goodfellow T (2014) "Conflict and Post-war Transition in African Cities" in Parnell S and Pieterse E *Africa's Urban Revolution* (Claremont: UCT Press), 18-34). As this definition is too broad for our purposes, we narrow the term "civic protest" to refer to conflict which is public and commonly oriented towards local government or, through local government, towards the state as a whole. Our definition excludes forms of protest linked to private interests, such as wage disputes and contractual failures, or protests that form part of wider civil disobedience movements.

protest action occurs. For example, the “poo protests” that took place in 2013 at Cape Town International Airport and on the nearby highway involved protesters living in local communities. However, the protests were prompted by inadequate sanitation services, a grievance widely shared by poor communities in South Africa: linking only these particular local communities to the protest action lends little insight into it.

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests fall into the same category of civil disobedience campaigns. Because they are not directed at local government, they are excluded from the 2016 CPB.

Thus, fewer protests are reflected here than are reported by other organisations monitoring protest action in South Africa. In addition, to keep measures consistent, it was necessary to re-examine earlier Civic Protest Barometers and, where possible, exclude civil disobedience campaigns from enumeration. This report therefore, in certain cases, shows different trends to those published previously.

Another reason why the CPB records fewer protests than other institutions is that it is not an incident-based instrument: instead, it measures distinct protests rather than the many individual incidents relating to a protest. As a result, the CPB categorises protests that last for several days as a single protest, which makes it possible to analyse them more clearly in various ways.

For example, prior to the elections in August 2016, the Vuwani district of Limpopo province saw widespread protests against the redemarcation of municipal boundaries. Violence continued for several weeks and entailed the destruction of public property, including schools. In effect this was a single protest, albeit one that lasted a long time and covered a massive area.

While the CPB thus attempts to be specific about the number of protests that occur, an important implication that must be noted is that small and large protests are treated as equivalent. This could mask an escalation in their size and duration.

This last issue relates to the distinction between violent and non-violent protests developed in earlier versions of the CPB. The Social Change Research Unit at the University of Johannesburg has conducted very important research on protest activities relying on the South African Police Service Data, which does not draw such a distinction, arguing it is of little or no relevance in the debate on the nature of civic protests.³ One argument against making the distinction is that there tends to be a

³ See, for example, Runciman C *et al* (2016) *Counting Police-recorded Protests: Based on South African Police Service Data* (Social Change Research Unit, University of Johannesburg), 24-25.

fine line between what can be classified as either violent or non-violent, with the result that protests are more likely than not to be classified as violent.

While acknowledging this, we maintain that the distinction is important. The fact that discerning non-violent from violent protests can be hard to do and open to bias is not a good enough reason for doing away with the distinction itself. Moreover, the rise in the number of protests characterised by violence or the potential for it reveals a change in the nature of protest activity in South Africa, which is a subject deserving of study in its own right.

All methodological questions relating to the 2016 CPB, including the distinction between violent and non-violent protest, are detailed in the [technical note](#).

3. Trends in protest: 2007 to July 2016

This section of the Barometer measures annual and monthly trends in protests between 2007 and July 2016 (see Figure 1 below).

- The number of civic protests (using the new definition) peaked in 2009 with 204 protests.
- This was followed by a more stable period that lasted till 2014, when the next highest number (176) was recorded.
- In 2015 the number declined to 126, a drop of 30 per cent. The first half of 2016 (not plotted) witnessed an even sharper decline.
- Extrapolating from the figures for the first half of 2016, there will be 20 per cent fewer protests in 2016 than in 2015.

Figure 1: Annual number of protests

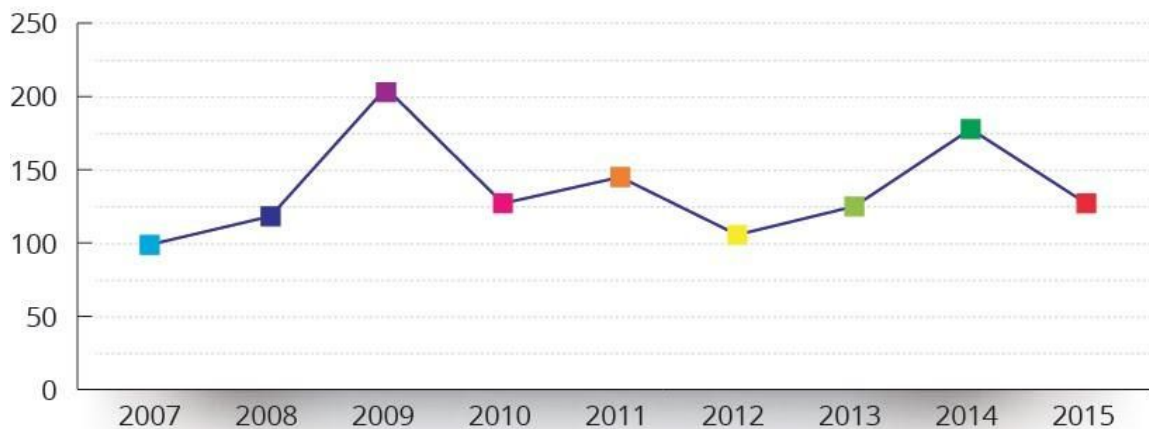
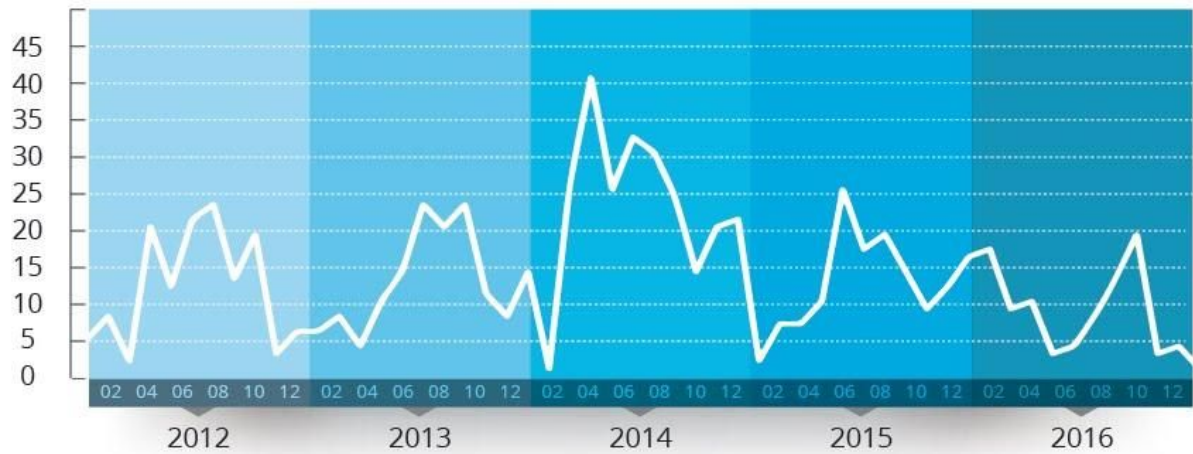


Figure 2 below shows the count of protests in selected months between 2012 and 2016, with the highest figure occurring in February 2014.

Figure 2: Protests by year and month

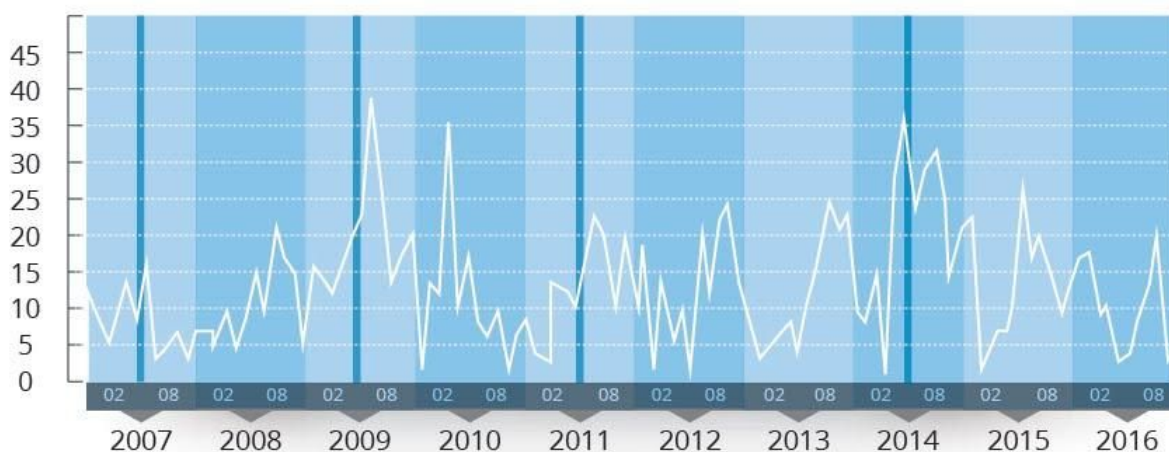


4. The relationship between protests and elections

Figures 1 and 2 above show huge fluctuations in the number of protests. This raises the question of whether there is a correlation between civic protests and election periods. Figure 3 plots the number of protests each month against when elections took place.

- It shows there was a decline in the number of protests in the three months prior to the elections in 2007, 2009 and 2011. There is no clear pattern evident in 2014 and 2016.
- The available data dating back to 2007 show that – contrary to popular belief – no simple correlation can be drawn between an impending election and the number of civic protests. The rise in protest activity in the pre-election period may reflect civil disobedience campaigns and organised labour action⁴ rather than civic protests.
- In general, a spike in the number of protests is as likely to follow an election as it is to precede it.

Figure 3: Protests and election months



⁴ See the technical note on the distinction between civic protests and civil disobedience campaigns, including labour-related protest activities.

5. Geographic spread of civic protests

Figure 4 measures the spread of protests among South Africa's local municipalities and provinces for the period 2012 to 2016.

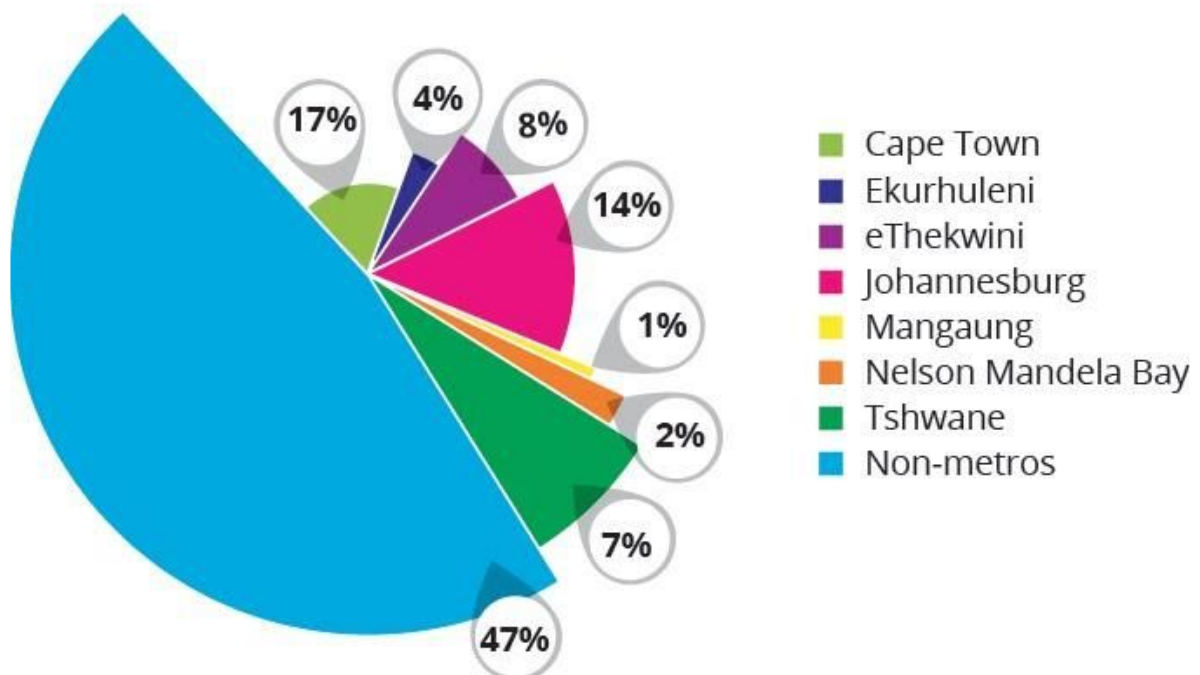
- Gauteng is the most protest-prone province (33 per cent of all protests), followed by the Western Cape (23 per cent).
- The lowest share (one per cent) of protests took place in the Northern Cape; however, this province has only two per cent of the country's population.
- The data suggest that areas with high metropolitan populations may be more prone to protest than non-metropolitan areas.
- While there has been a fair degree of fluctuation in the number of protests in each province, the decline in protest activity in the Free State is particularly noticeable.



Figure 5 below shows the spread of protest shares across the eight metropolitan municipalities in relation to non-metropolitan municipalities.

- Between 2012 and 2016 the most protest-prone municipalities were, in descending order, Cape Town, Johannesburg, eThekweni, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni. They accounted for 53 per cent of all protests recorded in the country since 2012.
- Among the non-metropolitan municipalities, Breede Valley in the Western Cape experienced the most protests (32 since 2011), followed by Madibeng in the Brits area of North West (28 protests).

Figure 5: Protests in metros and all other areas

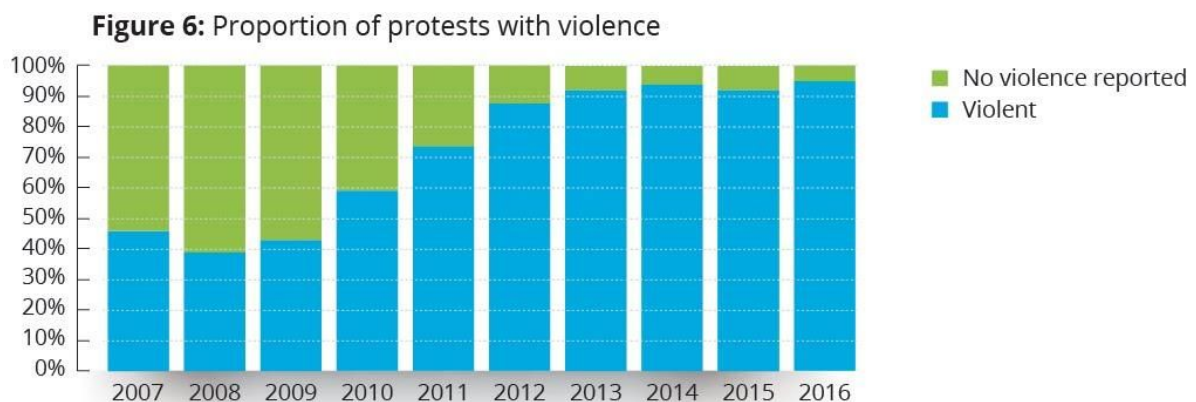


6. Trends in violent civic protest: 2007 to July 2016

This section measures the proportion of protests involving some element of violence, presents the total number of violent protests, and compares the prevalence of different forms of violence.

In this study, violent protests are defined “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 Violent protests thus include unauthorised protests and marches where roads are barricaded and the passage of non-participants is impeded.

- The data show an increase in the number of protests involving violence.
- In 2007 around 46 per cent of protests were violent.
- From 2013 onward, 90 per cent of protests involve some element of violence or intimidation on the part of the protesters or authorities.



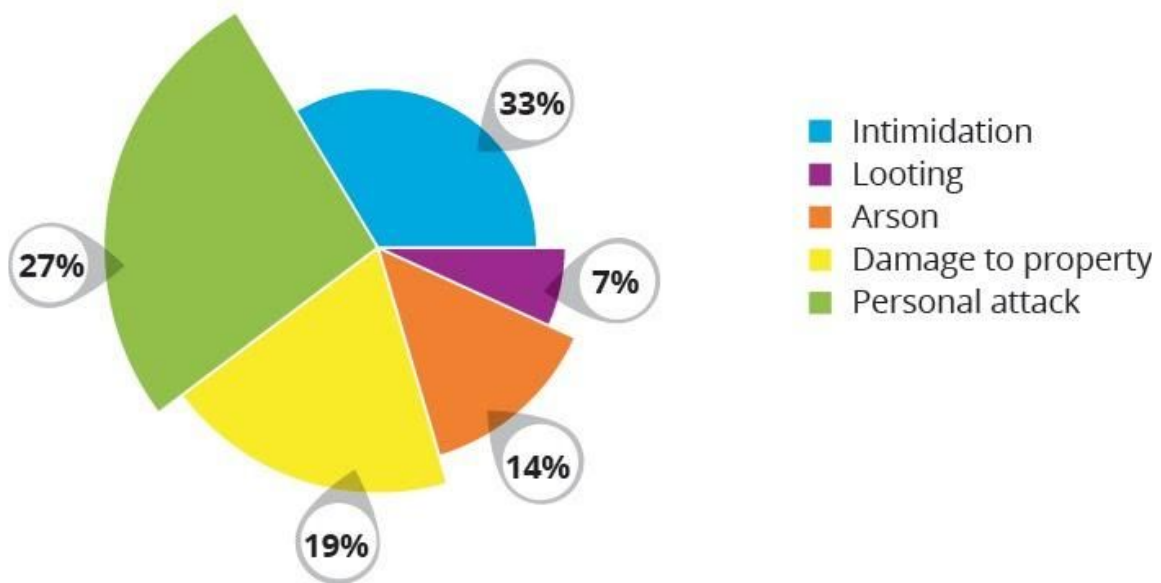
⁵ See Powell and De Visser (2011) Service Delivery Protests Barometer, MLGI: Community Law Centre, University of the Western Cape, Bellville. Page | 13

Figure 7 below indicates the prevalence of five main forms of violence in the period 2012 to July 2016: intimidation, personal attacks, arson, damage to property, and looting.

- Intimidation was most frequently cited, accounting for one-third of all references to violence. Given that intimidation includes the barricading of roads, its pervasiveness is to be expected.
- Physical attacks on individuals were only slightly less prominent (27 per cent of acts cited), while arson and destruction of property accounted for 33 per cent of citations.

Two-thirds of the types of violence recorded at protests thus went beyond “mere” intimidation and involved assault, looting, destruction of property and even death.

Figure 7: Categories of violence reported in protests



7. Grievances reported to be behind protests

This section of the Barometer measures the grievances reported as underlying factors in protests in the period 2012 to July 2016. The grievances are arranged in six categories:

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

As shown in Figure 8 overleaf, the single most prominent category of grievance cited by protesters relates to municipal services (58 per cent).

- Almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of cited grievances relate directly to municipal services or aspects of municipal governance.
- A relatively high percentage (15 per cent) of grievances relate to party political issues.

Figure 8: Grievances cited in media

