

# TRENDS IN Community protests

## FROM 2007 TO 2010

Community protests are becoming more common, frequent and violent. These are the findings of the Community Law Centre's recent survey of data on community protests since 2007.

The research was undertaken by Hirsh Jain, a Harvard Law School visiting fellow at the Community Law Centre. This article summarises Jain's findings relating to the frequency of protests, the incidence of violent protests, the impact of the 2008/09 economic recession, the geographical spread of protests per province, and the types of concerns that fuel protests.

### What constitutes a (violent) community protest?

Jain defined 'community protest' to include instances of unrest where protestors did not explicitly cite the inadequacy of municipal service delivery, but referred to 'corruption' on the part of municipal officials or to inadequate housing (for which local government is not legally responsible) as grievances.

Figure 1: Average number of protests per month for the years 2007–2010

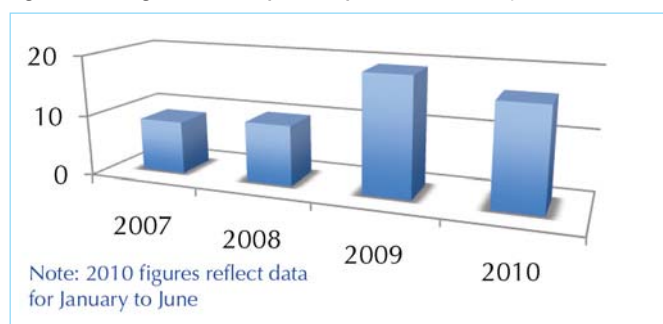
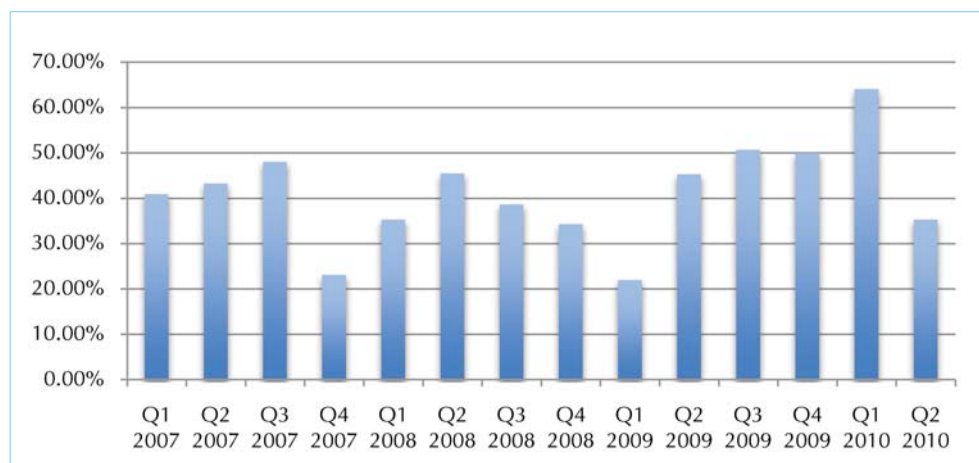


Figure 2: Percentage of protests that were violent, by quarter (2007–2010)



### Community protests have become more frequent since 2007

In 2007, the country saw an average of **8.73** protests occurring in a given month. In 2008, that figure rose modestly to **9.83**. In 2009, however, the average number of protests nearly doubled to **19.18** a month. Community protests remained a frequent occurrence throughout the first half of 2010 (January to June), with a monthly average of **16.33** protests across the country. The incidence of protests also showed an upward trend during this period. The number of protests in every month since January 2010, with the exception of June 2010 (possibly due to the World Cup), exceeded the average number of protests per month in 2007 and 2008, indicating an unmistakable escalation in protest activity in recent years. July 2009 and March 2010 featured unprecedented levels of protest (at 37 and 38 protests, respectively). Figure 1 illustrates the increased frequency of community protests over the period.

### Violent community protests have increased as a proportion of protests

Jain defined violent protests as those protests in which some participants engaged in physical acts that either caused immediate physical harm to a person or were substantially likely to result in

such harm. He did not include instances of protestors making threats of violence (eg, 'We will make the municipality ungovernable if our demands are not met within seven days!') if they did not actually engage in potentially violent acts.

Figure 2 shows that during 2007, approximately **41.66%** of protests were violent, including a high of 48% in the third quarter

and a low of 23.08% in the fourth quarter. In 2008, approximately 38.13% of protests were violent, with a high of 45.45% in the second quarter and a low of 34.28% in the fourth quarter. During 2009, approximately 43.60% of protests were violent, with a high of 50.65% in the third quarter and a low of 21.95% in the first quarter. In 2010, approximately 54.08% of protests have been violent: 64.06% in the first quarter and 35.29% in the second quarter.

Beginning in mid-2009 there was a noticeable, if not moderate, increase in the proportion of protests that were violent. In the third quarter of 2009, the fourth quarter of 2009 and the first quarter of 2010, 50.65%, 50% and 64.06% of protests, respectively, were violent, representing the three highest quarterly figures since 2007. Moreover, while only 36.86% of protests between February 2007 and March 2009 were violent, 50.75% of those taking place during or after April 2009 were violent. The data thus indicates that at roughly the same juncture that community protests became more prevalent, the proportion of violent protests increased as well.

### Recession was a factor in protests

The spike in the number of protests between December 2008 and November 2009 appears to suggest that the economic recession was a contributing factor. The months during the recession consistently

Figure 3: Protest levels – recession months vs previous averages

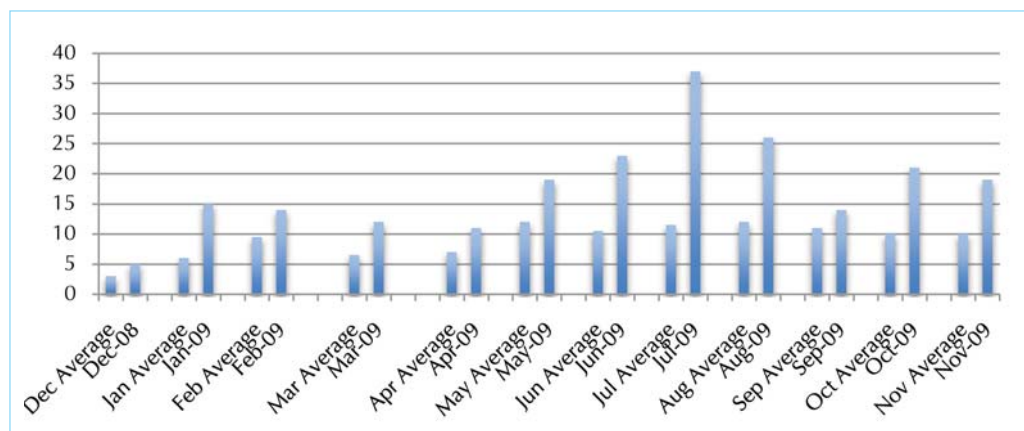
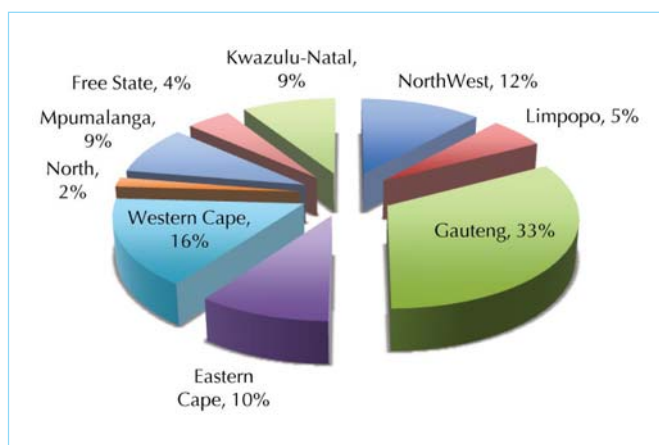


Figure 4: Protests by province, 2007–2010



featured higher levels of protest activity than did similar months in previous years. In fact, 41.30% of the community protests documented between February 2007 and June 2010 took place in the 12 months from December 2008 to November 2009.

### Uneven geographical distribution

Between 2007 and June 2010, Gauteng accounted for 32.70% of the protests in South Africa. The Western Cape accounted for 15.87%, and the North West for 11.85%. Protests in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga were relatively evenly spread, with 9.94%, 9.18% and 8.80%, respectively. Limpopo, the Free State and the Northern Cape were relatively minor contributors, accounting for 5.54%, 4.40% and 1.72% of protests, respectively.

### Protesters express a wide variety of concerns

Figure 5 illustrates the frequency with which participants in community protests expressed certain concerns when engaging in those protests, such that those grievances can be said to be among the 'reasons' for the protest.

What is most striking is the regularity with which protestors expressed concerns about their housing, which is a provincial function under the Constitution. In 190 instances, or 36.33% of the time, protestors complained that they did not have access to

affordable or adequate housing. These residents claimed that the houses they lived in were deficient, inadequate or unfinished. Protestors often complained that they had been waiting for the government to provide them with RDP housing for several years, but to no avail.

Following housing, the lack of access to clean water was a common grievance of protestors. In 96 instances, or in 18.36% of protests, protestors complained about being unable to access clean water, often claiming that little had changed since 1994. Electricity was just as frequent a concern of residents, arising in 95 instances, or 18.16% of protests. Protestors regularly complained that they had no electricity, had to pay exorbitant rates for power or had their (illegal) electricity connections dismantled by government officials. In addition, protestors often complained of inadequate sanitation systems, most commonly because of insufficient refuse collection and unsanitary toilet systems. These concerns arose

in 75 instances, or 15.43% of the time.

Many protestors expressing concern at the state of their housing claimed that they would have access to adequate housing were it not for the favouritism displayed by government officials towards their cronies. Distrust of local government manifested itself in a number of other ways as well. In 21 instances, protestors cited corruption on the part of government officials as their sole grievance. Similar allegations of corruption were accompanied by other grievances in 61 instances. Furthermore, protestors cited the incompetence of government officials, or the need to hold them to account, in 31 instances, and on 34 occasions claimed that state officials had broken their promises.

### Conclusion: Larger issues are at stake

The data and methodology used to assess the phenomenon of protests are still fairly crude, but the trends outlined by Jain’s reports do suggest at least three key questions for future research.

First, how did municipalities respond to protests, and how did their responses influence the actions of protesting communities, if at all? While such protests are widely reported, as are surprise visits by senior leaders to these communities, there is little research into what the municipalities themselves subsequently do to address the grievances.

Secondly, will the protests translate into different voting behaviour in the 2011 elections, with angry communities ejecting non-performing political parties? Earlier research undertaken by

Professor Susan Booysen of the University of the Witwatersrand suggests that protesting communities actually return the incumbent political party to office. If this occurs in the 2011 election, it will be a signal that protests, not elections, are the main mechanism for calling elected local officials to account, and hence that local democracy is not maturing.

Earlier this year, the Deputy Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Yunus Carrim, told the National Council of Provinces that the ‘rage, violence and destructiveness’ vented in some protests were symptoms of ‘a more fundamental alienation of people from our democracy’ and of an ‘acute sense of marginalisation and social exclusion’. The third and most important question flows from this statement. If local government is actually facilitating division and exclusion in our society, then how do we improve the basic structure of local democracy to make local government more responsive, inclusive and accountable?



The full research report by Hirsch Jain can be downloaded at <http://ldphs.org.za/publications/publications-by-theme/local-government-in-south-africa/community-protests>



Summarised by Derek Powell  
Editor

Figure 5: The concerns of protestors, 2007–June 2010

