

## Abstract

# Deepening political pathologies, de-legitimisation of local government and the myth of a capable state

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The birth of a rationalised new system of local government in South Africa in 2000 promised to deepen constitutional democracy, promote spatial justice and expedite socio-economic transformation. In theory, the realisation of these goals would have legitimated characterisation of a democratic local government as developmental because it would have been responsive to the injunctions embellished in the White Paper on Local Government (1998), which is primarily about radically eradicating apartheid inequities and vices. Subsequently, the democratic state adopted a plethora of pieces of legislation aimed at empowering the newly autonomous local sphere of government to take its rightful place as the pivot of socio-economic development.

A critical review of empirical scholarship and numerous reports generated by the democratic state itself point out that local government is in perpetual distress. Back-to-back proactive and reactive interventions, which include the rising number of municipalities placed under Section 139 intervention of the Constitution, are failing to get the system functional. The end result of this parlous performance of local government is the increasing delegitimisation of the state and the deferment of the birth of a capable and/or developmental state which is envisaged by the National Development Plan (NDP). Simply put, the dysfunctionality of local government suggests the evaporation of a dream of a South African developmental state.

This paper presents the findings of a study that involved eight (8) municipalities of various categories and types in the Free State Province. This qualitative study used a combination of document analysis, and interviews with at least 32 high-ranking officials from the ruling party, national and provincial government key departments as well as a number of oversight and support institutions. Interviews helped particularly in an attempt to understand the underlying intricacies behind the salient features of performance. The study confirmed that what I call defective leadership, or deepening political pathologies and/or institutionalisation of toxicity in leadership is behind the sorry state of affairs in local government, which effectively denies motive forces to benefit from the democratic dividend.

The study used the theory of the developmental state to ascertain the extent to which its salient conditions are applicable at a local level. It was found that there is absence of shrewd political leadership and meritorious, insulated bureaucracy, largely due to the normalised toxicity in the ruling party within the regions and the province. As a result, success in the delivery of basic services is more dependent on nationally-driven mega projects like bucket eradication than on the planning dexterity of local leaders. All the municipalities are failing in the area of local economic development for that requires some level of deep thinking capacity, legitimacy to lead and coordinate local stakeholders which seems to be missing in the case studies that were examined.