

Toxic Political Leadership and the Problems of Professionals in Free State Municipalities

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Abstract

The 2016–17 Audit Report by the Auditor General points to the deterioration in audit results of South African municipalities. This deterioration confirms the perennial dysfunctionality of municipalities, at least from the governance perspective. Corporate governance is a function of leadership. Municipal councils are, therefore, responsible for the overall performance of municipalities they lead. Sound regulatory framework, good plans, clear strategies, policies, and systems are inadequate if not supported by highly gifted and ethical leadership. The Auditor General's Audit Report suggests that local government struggles the most in the area of ethics. The Principal-Agent Theory argues that appointed officials are more likely to subvert the interests of an organisation. However, this article argues that the primary source of problems in municipalities is a combination of ineptitude and unethical political leadership taking root. This conclusion is based on the empirical comparative cases of eight municipalities in the Free State Province. The conduct of councillors makes it difficult to attract and retain professionals in municipalities, resulting in notable deficiencies in the delivery of services. Essentially, councillors are the root cause for governance failure in municipalities arising from a number of factors. Findings in this study contribute towards the understanding of the impact of leadership in the failure of municipalities to meet good governance and developmental objectives. Further, they deepen the theoretical understanding of the political-administrative interface.

Keywords: leadership; accountability; internal efficiency; organisational cohesiveness; political-administrative interface; municipal capacity; municipal performance; oversight

Introduction

This article is premised on the basis that everything rises and falls on leadership. As King IV Report argues, “good leadership, which is underpinned by the principles of good governance, is equally valuable in all types of organisations, not just those in the private sector” (Institute of Directors 2016, 6). It is in this context that the article focuses on the nature of thoughts and conduct of leadership, and how that affects the wellbeing and performance of municipalities they lead. The analysis will also focus on the morale and performance of the staff directly accountable to political leadership in municipalities. Relying on the developmental state literature, political leadership is viewed as a requisite developmental structure with inherent developmental role to facilitate an enabling environment for soaring outcomes. It looks at how principals (politicians) relate with their agents (senior municipal leaders) and uses the principal-agent framework to analyse the incentive structure that compels municipalities to meet their constitutional mandate.

Background

Several legislations were established to regulate the relationship between elected councillors and appointed officials in South Africa. Broadly speaking, councillors are responsible for policymaking while appointed officials are responsible for daily implementation of policy decisions and programmes. Although normatively ideal in order to advance capabilities required for a 21st century developmental state, local government in South Africa is bereft with many problems, which render both decentralisation and the prospect of a developmental state failed projects, particularly if assessed against the delivery of 38 functions assigned to municipalities by the Constitution (Koelble and Siddle 2013). Poor relationship between politicians and appointed staff is often among the root causes for the dysfunctionality in municipalities.

The question that continues to elude intellectually curious minds is why politicians find it easy to behave as they please despite a very clear Code of Conduct for councillors, which spells out their boundaries. Institutionalism may be the best framework to understand the normalisation of toxicity of political leaders, particularly with regard to the attitude of a political party that deploys them to State institutions about their (principals) unethical conduct. Institutionalism has got its strands, namely, rational choice institutionalism and historical or sociological institutionalism. Both interpret human behaviour within a particular context. Rational choice sees humans as “maximisers of their own self-interest” (Naidoo 2013, 527). Therefore, while historical institutionalism analyses human behaviour within either the empowering or constraining environment of organisations, the inherent human rationality makes institutions susceptible to manipulation. Essentially, it is important to acknowledge “a two-way causation between individual motivation and social institutions” in order to avoid the rise of “an unwarranted structural determinism” that may assume human beings to be robots (Chang 2002, 554).

The outcomes of audits in municipalities are a good example to understand maximisation of self-interest at the expense of the organisational wellbeing. The Auditor-General repeatedly laments that waste in municipalities has taken root and increases annually because there is no action taken by the powers-that-be to investigate dubious expenditure. The Municipal Public Accounts Committees (MPAC) were set up by the National Treasury regulation of 2008 as a reactive measure to minimise unaccountability in local government. To date, there is enough evidence that these committees are merely a placebo because the rot has not significantly minimised. Political principals are often involved in these acts. The Auditor General points out that in the 2015-2016 audit cycle, there was an increase from 1 648 to 2 015 instances of false declarations of interest by suppliers owing to a culture of not investigating wrongdoing by political leadership. Inevitably, as Naidoo (2013, 528) argues, this phenomenon creates “a substantive problem for the integrity of an accountability relationship, and an enforcement regime grafted onto this, which pits one set of actors against the other by distinguishing their behavioural motives”. Therefore, the problem of corruption in South Africa at all levels of governance can be attributed to the normalisation of “Amoralism”, which assumes “inevitability of corruption” (Dwivedi 2002, 40-41).

The aim of this article, therefore, is to assess the impact of the normalised toxicity of political leadership in municipalities from the lens of Political-Agent Theory (PAT). Various studies have been conducted that focused on the political-administrative interface as one of the major important elements that constitute organisational cohesiveness. The latter refers to the outcome of the ability of political leadership and management to create and sustain a functional and professional relationship based on nothing but the wellbeing of the organisation. Organisational cohesiveness further forms the basis for internal efficiency, which takes into account the alignment between the strategy, the structure, the capabilities of the people, practices, habits and rewards and, lastly, the processes within the organisation. All these key elements are dependent on the thought orientation and capacity of political leadership in a municipality. The PAT is premised on an assumption that agents (appointed officials) are more likely to sabotage organisational objectives compared to principals. The basis for the negative characterisation of agents is flawed in that any human, irrespective of societal or organisational position, is capable of ethical or unethical conduct. As Chang (2002, 555) argues, human behaviour is amenable to institutional rules of engagement. This implies that both principals and agents can influence and be influenced by institutions.

Conceptual Framework

The term developmental local government has been among the most preeminent in the discourse of public policy in South Africa since early 2000s. Despite its popularity, it does not necessarily enjoy definitional consensus. The White Paper on Local Government (1998, ix) defines a developmental local government as a system that is “committed to working with citizens, groups and communities to create sustainable

human settlements which provide for a decent quality of life and meet the social, economic and material needs of communities in a holistic way”. For Schoburgh (2014, 5), a developmental local government is a sub-national government, which is development-oriented and is “mandated to design and implement policies aimed at increasing local economic growth resulting in positive social transformation of the lives of residents in a sustainable way”. Developmental local government recognises the importance of partnering with the private sector in order to facilitate employment through investment. It realises the need to improve local environment through the provision of basic infrastructure as a requirement for investment attraction.

All the above definitions focus on the results of what local government needs to achieve. They do not consider the cause for the required results. The political school on the developmental state discourse tends to focus on the structure, or institutional arrangements, as the cause for outputs. This is the approach taken by this article. It focuses on the political leadership and its relationship with the appointed senior staff in municipalities. It makes two bold hypotheses: (i) the functional relationship within the political collective and between the political collective and appointed staff leads to a successful municipality; (ii) the fractious relationship within the political collective and between the political collective and appointed staff creates a dysfunctional municipality. The first hypothesis can reasonably lead to what Chibber (2014) terms “internal cohesiveness”, which is the prerequisite for a high performing organisation. In sharp contrast, the second hypothesis can lead to a faction-ridden organisation wherein it is possible that policies and programmes can follow “purposively groomed personality cults” (Berhanu 2003, 115) despite the same party remaining in government.

Theoretical Framework

This article is informed by the pathologies of political leadership in municipalities, which are analysed using the Principal-Agent Theory. The Theory posits that agents are very likely to subvert the objectives of an organisation. Many factors explain variance between the stated performance targets and actual performance. These factors could either be external or internal within an organisation; or they could be systematic or structural. For purposes of this article, I focus on the intentionally destructive informal behavioural relationship among politicians and between politicians as principals and officials as agents. According to Leruth and Paul (2006, 6), a number of government operations can be assimilated to principal-agent relationships. This means that the ability of any organisation to construct internal cohesiveness is dependent on the skill of stakeholders, particularly leaders, to negotiate and resolve conflict often immanent in human systems.

Several government reviews and reports in South Africa indicate that the relationship between politicians and administrators has been tumultuous. This is particularly true for local government as reflected in the State of Local Government Report that covered every municipality in the country (Department of Cooperative Governance and

Traditional Affairs 2009). According to the Report, the relationship between politicians and senior managers in municipalities is among the root causes for poor performance by municipalities, often resulting in high staff turnover as managers get to be fired without regard for procedures. It is an accepted fact that the employment relationship is “characterised by an inherent conflict of interests” between employers and employees (Miles 2014, 1047). Generally, a conflict between principals and agents could be resolved through planned or emergency meetings at which politicians can negotiate and officials interpret, translate, and deliver outcomes. This is not as easy as it sounds because “an atmosphere of deep politicisation” often drive many to “exploit the crisis to their advantage” (Milward et al. 2016, 323). The bifurcation of South African society across the spectrum further suggests that it would be analytically naïve to assume that appointed officials are apolitical, which inevitably pits agents against their principals either along intra-party internecine factions or ideological differences.

Institutions often develop grand plans to achieve their socio-economic goals. These grand plans would often detail the kind of structures, systems, processes, and functions needed to attain the set goals. With other things constant (and they rarely are), these are sufficient to ensure the success of an organisation. What is often missed, however, is the human element. Rules do not guarantee compliant behaviour. Human beings are prone to act outside the formal rules and create their own. Neoliberalism suggests that human beings are naturally self-seeking. It is, therefore, not surprising that principals, in this study, were comfortable with their own “rules-in-use” (Klijn and Koppenjan 2006, 155) as opposed to formal set of rules. In their attempt to promote the interest of self-preservation through the careful design of a culture of political entrepreneurship, principals (political leaders) within and outside the State deliberately create and nourish a culture of political factionalism in order to transform institutions into economically incoherent and rent-seeking predatory states (Mehri 2015). Consequently, decentralisation does not suggest that municipalities are immune from local capture by collusive elite (Bardhan 2016, 875). In fact, a culture of political entrepreneurship thrives in local government where a national system rewards leadership pathology in a manner seen under the Zuma presidency of both the ANC and the State.

Corruption, party factionalism and inefficiency may have deepened under Zuma, as confirmed by a number of respondents from the sampled municipalities and some high-ranking officials from other spheres of government, but these phenomena did not start under his leadership. His predecessors, perhaps for reasons of political expediency, failed to nip corruption in the bud in its early days. If anything, the opposite happened. Zuma was rewarded with ANC and State presidency for two terms. Therefore, it is not surprising that under his leadership, many senior ANC politicians got embroiled in one scandal after another. Under Zuma, the fundamental assumption of the Principal-Agent Theory was challenged. The Theory postulates that the agent (civil servant) is likely to manipulate the system for self-interest while the principal (politician) is seen as benevolent (Begovic 2005, 3). The context of human nature is important because the political-agent framework is largely based on an assumption that the agent is invariably

opportunistic, “even to the point of cheating, than the principal” (Perrow 1986, 14). However, the Rational Choice Theory does not exonerate principals from acting in a “pathological” manner (Sobol 2015). For instance, some respondents cited an example wherein the Executive Mayor of Lejweleputswa District Municipality was shielded from accountability when funds meant for a specific project went missing. Instead, the same mayor was rewarded with a position in the provincial legislature, and subsequently a position as Member of the Executive Council (MEC) when the affected official was used as the sacrificial lamb.

Institutional arrangements are an important element of organisational internal efficiency. The arrangements include a system of delegation of powers by principals to agents. Sobol (2016, 336) identifies a list of reasons that explain why principals delegate powers to agents. These include, but are not limited to the following: (a) reducing transaction costs and improving the efficiency of decision-making process; (b) enhancing credibility of policy commitment; (c) shifting blame for unpopular decisions or policy failures. Principals then have a responsibility to work out the detailed mechanisms that will ensure that agents are accountable for their actions in pursuit of organisational goals. These are either *ex ante* or *ex post* (ibid). The former refers to mechanisms that are established before the actual act of delegation while the latter refers to a set of actions performed by principals once delegation has been finalised and agreed to.

The relationship between politicians and bureaucracy may be the bedrock for the required internal organisational efficiency, but it is also a function of cohesiveness and cooperation between different political offices in a municipality. This is particularly important in a situation of multiple political offices, which often lead to coordination problems and turf contestations. In this article, Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality, Matjhabeng Local Municipality and the two district municipalities of Lejweleputswa and Fezile Dabi fall in the category of municipalities with multiple full-time office bearers. Problems of pathological delegation discussed below may easily permeate a municipality should the political collective be unable to forge the unity of purpose around organisational objectives. Therefore, it suffices to argue that the unity and cohesion of a political collective is the basis for organisational internal cohesiveness.

The capacity of councillors has been under the spotlight for quite a while now. Many a times, councillors are only leaders in name but not in terms of skill and competency. Moreover, inexperienced and incapable mayors are often appointed to lead municipalities (Coetzee 2010, 56). Lack of leadership and interpersonal skills in a climate of plurality of offices can be a big problem in itself. Combined with turf contestation between different offices, improper soft skills can lead to fragmentation within a political leadership collective. Full-time office bearers in municipalities include the Mayor, the Speaker, members of Mayoral Committee in bigger municipalities, the Council Whip, and the Chairperson of Municipal Public Accounts Committee (MPAC). The fragmentation within the political collective creates what Thompson (2007, 10)

terms “principal drift”. According to Thompson, principal drift arises “when members of a collective principal lack unity and send contradictory and confusing signals about what they want”. Principal drift tends to frustrate administrators as they end up not knowing who they should listen to. The following assertion explicitly describes the situation in municipalities:

The issue of the division of responsibilities and powers among political office-bearers in a municipality has proved to be a persistent source of tension and contestation. As stated above, the speaker’s office was a novelty when it was introduced in 2000. Generally, municipalities have not found it easy to adapt to this new political office-bearer. A persistent source of tension and conflict can be found in the role definition of the speaker vis-à-vis the municipal executive, or more specifically, the mayor. An earlier study found the relationship between speakers and executive mayors to be poor. (De Visser 2009, 16)

Incoherence of leadership could spring from a number of sources. The first one is indicated above, which has to do with the division of responsibilities and powers. The second cause of incoherence is partisanship; given that councillors mostly get elected on the basis of political party representation. Naturally, councillors spend most of their time in office defending the partisan policies and programmes of their respective political parties. According to this logic, councillors of opposition parties are likely to “pay selective attention to performance data, partly as a motivated response to ensure consistency with their prior beliefs about the bureaucracy” (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017, 541). The preponderance of partisanship makes it difficult for municipalities to create a climate of “cooperative advantage” (Westermann-Behaylo, Van Buren III and Berman 2016). Strand and Freeman (2015) define cooperative advantage as the implementation of a value-creating strategy based on cooperation with stakeholders that results in superior value creation for the organisation and its stakeholders.

The last cause of leadership incoherence can be attributed to intra-party factions, which spill over to government structures. In this scenario, the condition that Menz (2014, 13) describes as “principal slippage” is possible. This is a situation where a principal deliberately works outside the formal framework to frustrate the work of another principal within a collective. This has the potential to further affect bureaucracy as managers have multiple principals to which they report. Similar results of leadership incoherence caused by intra-party conflict is what Gutner (2005, 11-21) calls “antinomic delegation” and “mission creep”. The former refers to a delegation consisting of difficult and complex tasks to be implemented and institutionalised while the latter refers to the mushrooming of new tasks without reduction or elimination of the old tasks. Both antinomic delegation and mission creep may be precipitated by principal slippage as the focus shifts from organisational interest to personality contest. Sobol (2015) refers to all these phenomena as “pathological delegation”. Delegation is pathological when principals abuse their power to fire their agents and structure delegation in such a manner that hampers the work of agents.

Roles and Functions of Leadership in a Municipality

For conceptual purposes, political leadership is regarded as a developmental structure with inherent developmental role to bring about soaring outcomes. Leadership is, therefore, the most basic of all developmental structures, given that it creates an environment for performance. At collective level, leadership in a municipal context refers to a body of council, comprising individual councillors elected directly at ward level and through the proportional representation system determined by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). As a collective, councillors are specifically responsible for “governance and leadership roles” to promote service delivery (Gqamane and Taylor 2013, 831). At individual level, Strodi (1993, 2) suggests that leadership refers to the influence an individual has on the voluntary behaviour of others to work together and to encourage cooperative efforts. By implication, this would assume that a leader has to be someone with “superior knowledge” (Wade 1990, 230). One could also add that a set of competencies needed for influence of a leader has to be reasonably superior to the rest of team members if his/her leadership is to enjoy some measure of legitimacy.

Section 151 (2) of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996, 74) vests the executive and legislative authority in a council of a municipality. The Constitution further mandates a municipality to structure and manage its administration and budgeting and planning processes in a manner that will ensure responsiveness to the developmental objects set out for local government. Various other pieces of legislation give elaboration of administration, budgeting and planning processes requisite for a developmental municipality. These legislations further specify the roles of office bearers like the Mayor, the Speaker and the Accounting Officer, who is answerable to a council collective.

Collectively, a council of a municipality is responsible for the following functions:

- determination of the vision of a municipality in consultation with the community for a prescribed period;
- approval of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), Local Economic Development (LED) strategy and sector development plans;
- approval of the budget and related policies;
- recruitment and appointment of municipal staff, particularly at senior management;
- development and approval of delegation and performance management systems;
- holding municipal staff individually and collectively accountable for municipal performance; and

- report back to the community and intergovernmental forums on the performance of a municipality.

Influence of the ANC on Municipal Governance

The ruling party in South Africa seeks to build a developmental state as a cause to resolve problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality. The continuing underperformance of municipalities has obviously frustrated the hope to realise a developmental state that will steer development projects and programmes at all levels. The ruling ANC had hoped that this vision would be realised by 2030 in accordance with the adopted National Development Plan (NDP). In this section, the article suggests that the ANC has not succeeded in supporting the practicality of the idea of a developmental state. The successes and failures of the democratic state cannot be fully understood without the concomitant assessment of the ANC. State performance is inseparable from the dynamics of the ruling party. By implication, successes and failures of the State are very much the representation and reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of the ANC policy implementation in the post-apartheid era.

The ANC (2012, 6-8) identifies a couple of factors as causes for the under-performance of the State, namely:

- constraints during the initial years of post-1994 breakthrough as a result of the nature of the negotiated political settlement;
- unfavourable global climate at the time of transition, which would not permit 'radical' and 'progressive' policies, coupled with the stagnant economy, deep inequalities and systemic underdevelopment;
- problems around capacity and coherence of the State as well as the poor orientation of the public service resulting in poor implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies;
- poor conduct on the part of sections of ANC leadership, including corruption and greed, which both lead to wastage of public resources as well as the erosion of confidence in the democratic government and the party itself; and
- on-going internal strife that threatens the unity of the ANC and the Alliance, impacting negatively on the State's capacity to mobilise society behind the programme of transformation.

While this analysis is at national level, its manifestation in different provinces and municipalities takes different forms. For instance, the organisational reports of the party from its 50th National Conference in 1997 to the 53rd National Conference in 2012 paint a picture of a party infested with internal division in the Free State Province. Between 1994 and 2000, the National Executive Committee (NEC) had to dissolve both the leadership of the party and government in the Province because of divisions,

resulting in the failure of the party to provide strategic guidance to provincial government over its programme of transformation.

In their empirical study on how the PRI was forced to adapt or face extinction in Mexico, Greene and Ibarra-Rueda (2015) distinguish between accommodative factionalism and conflictual factionalism. This distinction is premised on an assumption that the rationality of political parties is dependent on the unity of intra-party actors. These authors argue that problems faced by parties often pit national leaders and local leaders. When this happens, parties that can negotiate “factional unity” (Greene and Ibarra-Rueda 2015, 48) to be able to focus on important messages that appeal to voters and portray the picture of professionalism, reliability, strength, and certainty. In contrast, a party that is infested with conflictual factionalism gets stuck in deleterious infighting.

Factionalism has been part of the ANC for many years throughout its existence but only worsened once the ANC tasted state power (Mashele and Qobo 2014, 10). The continuing electoral support for the ANC at all spheres of government, albeit with constant decline, has only reinforced conflictual factionalism. The party continues to thrive in the midst of State performance deficits (Booyesen 2011, 86) largely because its institutionalisation of conflictual factionalism has not resulted in the convincing unity of opposition parties.

The intra-ANC factional politics often manifest itself at local government level because the space is feverishly contested (Calland 2013, 418; Marais 2010, 353). Quoted in Calland (2013, 418), the former deputy minister of local government observes that “power struggles within the party are translated to municipalities and serve to undermine good governance and service delivery in municipalities”. This is largely caused by the substitution of cadre deployment with factional deployment (Habib 2013, 1). As Benit-Gbaffou and Lama-Rewal (2011, 188) point out, a combination of ANC dominance and its institutionalisation of conflictual factionalism has resulted in inefficiency within the party and the State; rising arrogance and lack of accountability; equation of politics to corruption and political violence within and outside the party. Lastly, a deduction can be made that the dominant lack of consequences for wrongdoing and selective targeting of some within public service has a relationship with party factionalism.

Research Methodology

The study used the qualitative research methodology. Interviews were conducted with at least 32 high ranking officials representing the eight municipalities that were sampled in the Free State Province and organisations such as the Office of the Premier, Provincial Treasury, Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Auditor General and Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority to supplement document analysis method. Included in this number were also high-ranking former and sitting leaders of the ANC in the province and the three affected regions. At least 22 of the 32 participants were mayors (9) and municipal managers (13). This category

included mayors and municipal managers who belonged to the first generation of developmental local government (2000-2006); the second generation of mayors and municipal managers (2006-2011); and the third and fourth generation respectively (2011-2016; 2016 until present). Overall, the respondents who were mayors and municipal managers constituted 69 per cent of the respondents. It is largely the responses of this category that were used to analyse the results, based on the political-administrative interface.

Data were analysed using discourse and content analysis. Triangulation method was used to compare and contrast answers to the same question. It was evident that political leaders who belonged to the first generation of the developmental local government held different attitudes from their successors. Secondly, political leaders held different beliefs from administrative appointees on themes such as municipal capacity and bureaucratic autonomy. It was easy to detect subjectivity based on one's position. Various themes emerged from data analysis and are used to interpret the findings contained in the section below.

Findings

The section below discusses various themes that were either predetermined based on the review of literature or as emerged during the process of interviews.

Design of Political Entrepreneurship

Local government was found not be a career of choice for professionals owing to several reasons. Firstly, entrenched factionalism within the ANC has led to the aggressive campaign to haemorrhage competent leaders, therefore replacing them with "marshals" first in the ANC and subsequently in government structures. Once they control political offices, office bearers move with speed to get rid of managers they found in a municipality and replace them with their own administrators without regard for key minimum competency requirements. They often deliberately frustrate managers in an attempt to force them to resign, failing which they resort to other heavy-handed, cunning tactics. The third leg is the appointment of preferred service providers, often outside legal processes, in order to channel funds back to the influential leaders in the ANC and leave some leftovers for senior municipal leaders and officials.

Conflicting Roles of Executives

The deployment of incompetent leaders into key positions in municipalities has numerous consequential effects. The first one is the turf contestation between office bearers, which further fuels conflict within municipalities. According to the respondents, there was relative stability from 2000 until 2006 as relations were largely professional between mayors and speakers. Things turned for worse from about 2005 because of the serious division between the ANC President and Deputy President, which

led to the party being divided in the middle at all levels. ANC divisions affected professional relations between various mayors and speakers in the units of analysis.

Relations between the mayor and the speaker in Lejweleputswa DM deteriorated shortly before and after the 2007 Polokwane National Conference of the ANC because they both belonged to different factions of the ANC. The Mayor relied on the support of the Municipal Manager, who was serving as the Deputy Secretary of the ANC in the Province, to undermine the office and the activities of the speaker as the Chairperson of Council. In Mangaung LM, the Mayor and her Mayoral Committee suspended and finally fired the municipal manager without the support of the speaker and council because of ANC factions.

The divisions between the mayor and the speaker also took place in Nala, Tswelopele and Masilonyana local municipalities. During the 2009 national general elections, some of her colleagues accused the Mayor of Tswelopele LM as working for the Congress of the People (COPE), which was formed largely by the group that lost the Polokwane Conference. This led to her removal from office after the 2011 local government elections. It is only in Fezile Dabi DM and Matjhabeng LM where divisions between the two leading offices have not been pronounced. Tokologo LM combines the two offices in one person owing to its small size. While the Mayor and the Speaker in Nala LM cooperated on wrong things from 2000 until 2006, the emergence and institutionalisation of personality cults between office bearers have condemned this municipality to perpetual dysfunctionality as the successors were always involved in perpetual infighting.

Political Interference

Based on the data collected from participants, it emerged that there is a limited capacity to support a functioning bureaucracy that can carry the duties of municipalities and service communities. There is a strong point that the basis for “an internally cohesive apparatus” that will be able to coordinate itself around developmental tasks starts with the deliberately cooperative leadership, particularly between mayors and speakers. The incapacitated officials can easily be persuaded by politicians to circumvent rules through interference. As one respondent said: *“You need to have a strong senior management in a municipality that will be able to advise leadership once they overstep the boundary of oversight. But once you have weak management, politicians will run the show”*. Once the office bearers are seen to be working together, it will be easier for both of them to cajole other full time and part time councillors into a functional unity of a municipality. On the contrary, their glaring conflict will have dire ramifications for municipalities they lead. Nala LM was a case in point over the years. The removal of the Municipal Manager in Mangaung by the faction led by the mayor represented the sour results of a divided political elite.

The legitimacy of decisions of the institution is questionable once decisions are based on divisions along intra-party factions. The Municipal Manager in Matjhabeng was removed in 2014 because of perceptions that he was too loyal to a particular faction within the ANC. On the other hand, the unity of the office bearers in Fezile Dabi DM over the years could be the reason behind the Municipality's history of good audit outcomes in successive years. Although audit outcomes do not necessarily represent their entire institutional performance and success, they do shed some light on institutional culture with regard to management and effectiveness of processes and systems.

Unbearable Working Environment for Professional, Appointive Staff

Conflict and contestation between leaders has further ramifications for professional relationship between leaders and senior managers. The study confirmed the opportunistic and pathological behaviour of principals in their relationships with administrators in all municipalities. Various respondents used strong words to describe the kind of pressure under which municipal officials were subjected. One respondent bluntly said that senior officials in municipalities were “*suffocated*”. Another respondent likened a municipality to a “*wild animal*” that can devour its unsuspecting prey at any point. One respondent who had previously worked as a junior official in the district municipality and joined the provincial government before re-joining the Municipality as the Municipal Manager conceded that her stress levels increased acutely since she re-joined the District Municipality as the Municipal Manager. She pointed out that her principal, the Mayor, did not have a sense that she and other senior managers in the municipality had feelings. She attributed her stress to the “*toxic work environment*” to which she was subjected. According to her, politicians did not regard officials as human beings when they talked to them.

Another respondent described his municipality as a “*tense and strenuous environment with possible consequences of serious criminality which no right-thinking adult could stand such [avoidable] stress*”. He said that his principals in the ANC put him and his colleagues under pressure to take decisions that were illegal. He articulated as follows:

As a registered professional, you know you cannot do that because the consequences for you personally are more serious. Yet, those who put you in office have a total disregard for your professional reputation and risk. Their interest is simply to use you as a pawn in their game of self-interest. Inevitably, you will always be stressed as the office you hold is no longer enjoyable.

The strenuous environment under which municipal officials operated required them to learn what one respondent described as a “*political management skill*” as formal qualifications increasingly proved inadequate for survival. This compelled professionals who respected themselves to jump out of municipalities quickly in order to lessen the risk of disrepute if they stayed longer. All municipal managers interviewed confessed that they would not have worked for municipalities if they had options. This flies in the

face of one of the goals of the National Development Plan (NDP), which is to make local government a career of choice. One of them almost cried when he described his relationship with his mayor in his municipality. It is clear from the responses given that municipalities are not employers of choice given the stressful conditions under which senior officials work. Inevitably, stress has an impact on performance and developmental outcomes. Weary officials cannot perform regardless of their level of experience and qualifications. As the respondent from the Auditor General put it, one had to be “*very brave*” to work for a municipality in South Africa.

Conclusion

Leadership is closely linked to legitimacy. It cannot be imposed. It has to be earned. In practice, it means that members must voluntarily choose to cooperate with the influential individual (Strodi 1993, 2). Leadership has to inspire. It is accepted that processes that produced councillors in the units of analysis did not have a chance to deliver credible and competent leaders. Therefore, there is a need for continuous in-house and professional training of councillors for them to be responsive to policy expectations. Local government legislation delegates serious developmental work to council, which is a body of councillors. Functions such as strategic planning, budgeting, translation of plans into programmes and engagement with stakeholders, including municipal staff, are bound to fail if councillors are not adequately capacitated, first and foremost, to treat their managers with the dignity that they deserve. In this regard, it is important for politicians to be empowered on the concept of “structures of living together” because these affect development trajectories of countries (Deneulin 2008, 112).

The finding that is a big indictment to the system of local government is the fact that municipalities are not regarded as a career of choice largely owing to “strenuous environment” under which professional staff are expected to work. This is largely caused by pathological behaviour of (some) politicians who behave like “*demi-gods*”. The unreasonable demands placed on senior managers by politicians, often with consequential risk of litigation and imprisonment, force ethical and professional managers out of the system. That the system is known for many problems that are often human-made soils the reputation of professionals who work in the sector. Where they have a choice, competent and qualified professionals stay away. Unless something is urgently done to stop the abuse of professional staff, municipalities will find it difficult to attract competent managers in the future. This requires all the three spheres of government to fast track the commitment to professionalise the sector.

One of the difficulties about being in local government as a manager is the lack of job security, over and above the unhealthy environment. There is a need for policymakers to secure the jobs of senior managers in municipalities by passing regulations that protect them from abuse of unethical politicians. There is a need to curtail the culture of micromanagement of senior managers by politicians and political parties. That would

create a climate for performance and accountability. Secondly, although they are administrative head of institutions, the reality is that municipal managers are paid relatively low compared to their counterparts in other spheres of government. This also cascades down to managers reporting to municipal managers. There is therefore a need to re-look at the incentive regime for senior managers in order to attract highly skilled professionals that can stay long enough to turn the fortunes of municipalities around.

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