

The Paradox of (De)politicisation in a Selected South African Municipality: An Afrocentric Ethical Reflection

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Abstract

South Africa's local government administration is complex in that both traditional leadership and elected municipal councils play a role in it. Traditional leadership occupies an essential position and status in local government administration, in particular in rural South Africa. However, the contemporary administrative jurisdiction of municipalities cuts across both rural and urban areas. In the rural areas, the conflict over the division of roles between traditional leaders and elected councillors is evident. Due to the influence and dominance of the neo-liberal global order, modernists often accuse traditional leadership of being undemocratic and authoritarian. However, the reality is that elected councils' administration also leaves much to be desired, and the consequences of their poor administration are not uniformly understood. Since South Africa is a democratic state, it is expected that there should be a clear separation in government institutions between party (i.e., the ruling African National Congress) politics and public administration; a phenomenon that some describe as depoliticisation. Nevertheless, the realities on the ground suggest otherwise. This article, which is based on the theory of Afrocentricity, examines a selected rural municipality (Maruleng) in South Africa's Limpopo province to critically reflect on the ethics and the value system of African culture in the context of local governance vis-à-vis Westernised governance principles. The aim of this research is achieved through interdisciplinary critical discourse and thematic analysis in its broadest form.

Keywords: Afrocentricity; (de)politicisation; Maruleng; Limpopo; South Africa

Introduction

From an Afrocentric perspective, this article examines the Maruleng local municipality in the Limpopo province of South Africa and it uses this municipality as a case study to ethically debate the (de)politicisation of public service in the country. For the purpose of this article, depoliticisation is understood as a clear separation of politics and local government administration with a view to fostering professional and efficient service delivery to the public by officials who have been entrusted with the primary responsibility to do so. The notion of depoliticisation has featured prominently in the public and academic discourse following the emergence of the subject of Public Administration in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom of Britain (UK) during the 18th and 19th centuries respectively (Chazan 1988). In South Africa, this notion has been researched and written about by scholars (e.g., Mafunisa 2003; Maphunye 2005; Maserumule 2007; Sebola 2014) since that time. Apart from the academic discourse, various political parties, including the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA), and organised labour have proffered their policy positions on the sensitive and emotionally charged issue of (de)politicisation (Sema 2010).

A closer scrutiny of the academic, official and popular literature on the subject of (de)politicisation indicates that there is a lack of uniform understanding of these notions among different agents and parties. The epistemology of most of the academic literature consulted for the writing of this article is located mainly in the Western paradigm (Mafunisa 2003; Maphunye 2005; Sebola 2014). This epistemic bias should be understood within the context that early published scholars writing on the subjects of Political Science and Public Administration came from the West. In much of the academic, official and popular literature consulted for the writing of this article, the analysis was done on a macro level. The position of this article is that it is crucial to delve into the subject of (de)politicisation through the application of theories, ideas or concepts that have been largely marginalised (e.g., Afrocentricity) as articulated by pioneers such as Asante (1990, 2003), Mazama (2003) and Shai, Molapo, and Sodi (2017). While shared lessons are to be drawn from local government administration in South Africa and beyond, it is also pivotal to pause and consider doing a micro-level analysis given the fact that South Africa's municipalities have their own unique dynamics in the context of the interface between politics and administration (Mokgosi, Shai, and Ogunnubi 2017). Flowing from the above, it is apparent that this article extends the existing body of literature by specifically using the Maruleng local municipality in Limpopo as a case study to revisit the discourse on the politics–administration dichotomy. It is instructive to point out that Maruleng, which is a rural municipality situated on the periphery of South Africa, does not normally get adequate attention from both scholars and the media (Shai 2017). A failure to take adequate account of rural municipalities could lead to government officials' misunderstanding of critical questions pertaining to development issues at different levels of governance (Shai 2018).

Theoretical and Methodological Contours

This article is underpinned by the theory of Afrocentricity as articulated by scholars such as Asante (1990) and Mazama (2003). As a product of inclusive epistemology, Afrocentricity, due to its cognitive and functional role, was chosen as a theoretical and contextual lens through which to approach the argument in this article (Mazama 2003). Among other factors, two key reasons prevail to make this article Afrocentric in orientation and grounding. Firstly, this article is dismissive of the binary standing that truthful knowledge is either empirical or non-empirical and either subjective or objective. In other words, the conventional empty perceptual space between the researcher (author of this article) and the researched (Maruleng as municipal institution and its actors) is not acknowledged in the research done for this article. I, the author of this article, perceive all knowledge, written and unwritten, as equally important. This view is shared by a number of scholars, for instance, Maserumule (2011). Secondly, I am an African who studies municipal institutions in South Africa that are governed by Africans for Africans. Emerging from this, the choice of the research design of this article was shaped by its theoretical grounding. As such, data for this article was generated through document study and was complemented by my previous experience and my knowledge about the Maruleng local municipality and my random but regular encounters with its residents and former and current officials. The thoughts emerging from my review of a potpourri of academic, official and popular literature were thematically, descriptively and qualitatively analysed and presented. The systematic and rigorous grounding and orientation of this article are based largely on African experience and history, and the article portrays an Afrocentric perspective. Thus, in respect of this article, I confirm that orientation, grounding and perspective are the three tenets of Afrocentricity, and I affirm that I used these tenets as analytical categories in doing my research for this article and that I did so well within the bounds of scholarship.

Ethical Considerations regarding (De)politicisation

Why do members of the public or sections of the public consider some things to be right and other things to be wrong? To be ethical is to conform to accepted professional practices and/or societal norms (Moran 2012). Ethics can be understood as standards of conduct and moral judgements; they refer to the moral premises on which people base serious decisions. Ethics describe conformities in people's behaviour and their sanctions against deviation (Von Sikorski 2018). A system of ethics describes a body of beliefs about right and wrong. As a branch of morality, ethics in public affairs are relative (Shai 2011). In the same breath, moral absolutism does not find true and honest expression in politics and governance (Andrews as cited in Shai 2011) and this explains that making ethical decisions is easy when the facts are clear and the choices are "black and white." Examples of simple choices are whether South Africa should join the African Union or not, or whether the UK should suspend its membership of the European Union or not. The answers to these two questions should be clear-cut and straightforward, but it is a

different story if the situation is clouded by, for instance, ambiguities, incomplete information and multiple conflicts or responsibilities. An example of a complicated question would be whether the ANC leaders who have been previously accused of acts of crime should be removed from the list of candidates to be considered in South Africa's general elections. The ethical decision-making process itself is largely dependent on the experience, intelligence and integrity of the decision-makers. The reason for introducing the foregoing exposition is to create an appreciation of the cultural diversity that informs the different perspectives of politicisation and depoliticisation. Therefore, inasmuch as it can be said that communities learn from each other for the purpose of self-enhancement, it can also be said that what may be deemed good for non-Africans may not necessarily be good for Africans in a particular geographic space and time (Shai 2016).

(De)politicisation in Maruleng: Local and International Perspectives

Globally, there is no consensus among academics and practitioners about whether (de)politicisation should be rooted in the governance trajectory of the modern nation-state system or not. The tide of opinion seems to be strongly in favour of depoliticisation (Mafunisa 2003). This is particularly the case in Western societies. This situation should be understood within the context that intellectuals in the West have real power in defining and influencing the content and direction of the public agenda. However, this is not the case in Africa in general and in South Africa in particular where the gap between academics and practitioners is wide (Shai 2016). Generally, the debate in South Africa about the need to politicise or depoliticise administration is polarised. The call for depoliticisation enjoys the support of the larger segment of the intellectual community and of professionals. But such a call is largely rejected by political activists among the ranks of revolutionary political formations; they feel that politicians have a moral and humanitarian obligation to use their positions in government to lead efforts in undoing the economic and social injustices of the past in a manner which suggests that current policy initiatives and interventions should be biased in favour of those who were previously disadvantaged during the colonialist and apartheid eras (Maphunye 2005; Ndu 2010). In contrast, conservative political parties, such as the DA, have a tendency of condemning the conflation of politics and administration in areas that are governed by the ANC, even though it practises the same in its turf such as in the Western Cape (Mafunisa 2003). This is even worse in the City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality. What can be deduced from the foregoing analysis is that some political parties, such as the DA, only views politicisation of administration as wrong when it is practised by its opponents. So it is a question of double standards. This tendency can be well captured by the following saying (which is often made in reference to USA's counsel): "Do as I say and not as I do" (Shai and Iroanya 2014). The double standards of the DA and other opposition parties as regards depoliticisation are reflective of the depth of hypocrisy among politicians.

In the case of Maruleng, when the situation is looked at through a prism of foreign standards, there appears to be an unwarranted overlap between politics and administration. I argue that it is best to benchmark. However, it is also important to contextualise the lessons drawn from foreign territories. For example, in China and Malaysia it is a “crime” not to understand the national political and economic system of one’s country (Mai 2017). Besides, the appeal of the (de)politicisation narrative in most parts of the world cannot be delinked from the new international economic order which manifests itself through neo-liberalism (McGowan and Nel 2006). In theory and in practice, neo-liberalism advocates that, in the case of economics and politics, economics has the upper hand (Lawson 1989). In this context, the advocates of neo-liberalism are of the view that economics is the basis of politics and, consequently, that economies are poised to do well if they are freed from the bondage of politics (Jackson and Sorensen 2003). Adding his voice to the foregoing analysis, Alatas (as cited by Shai, Molapo, and Sodi 2017, 156) concurs that “no society can develop by inventing everything on its own. When something is found effective and useful, it is desirable that it should be adapted and assimilated, whether it be an artefact or an attitude of mind.”

Ironically, the nature and state of governance in Maruleng has been weighed against the experiences of Western states. This has led to a lack of appreciation of the positivities of its governance trajectory. It is my well-considered view that since Maruleng is part of a developing country (i.e., South Africa), it stands a better chance to learn many positive lessons from countries in the Global South (including Malaysia and China) rather than from countries in the West (including the USA and UK) (Mai 2017). South Africa, China and Malaysia belong to the Global South (Shai and Ogunnubi 2018)—the political and socio-economic conditions in these countries are more or less similar. The foregoing assertion should be understood in terms of Khapoya’s (2010) correct scholarly observation that any political or economic system which dovetails with the material conditions of the country that practises it stands a better chance to succeed.

Given the influence of the neo-liberal global agenda on the governance trajectory of South Africa, the conflation of politics and administration in Maruleng has been a subject of concern to the majority of the members of its communities who are part and parcel of the dominant faction of the ruling ANC.

The interface between politics and administration has been abused in Maruleng. This is a common problem in the whole of South Africa; it did not begin when the ANC came into power, and it will not end when the ANC no longer rules. During the apartheid era, the practice of the ruling National Party (NP) of South Africa was to instil loyalty in its faithful supporters. The difference in the way that the NP and the ANC politicise their administration during their terms of public office is that the latter openly propagates politicisation as opposed to depoliticisation whereas the former did so indirectly or secretly. The ANC’s official policy on cadre deployment is a clear case of the open propagation of the fusion of politics and public administration (Suttner 2014). In the

research I conducted for this article, I found evidence that the political–administrative interface is not a uniquely South African problem—it is commonly practised all over postcolonial Africa. I typify it as a form of what one can call “postcolonial public administration.” Whereas “race” defined this conflation in the colonies, politics takes precedence in postcolonial public administration. This prevalent notion in Africa is succinctly captured by Jonathan Moyo (2011) by what he terms “the politics of administration.”

Uncritically embracing the British governance model is not feasible in the case of the Maruleng local municipality in South Africa because it is impossible to draw a watertight distinction between politicians (who are responsible for political and human management) and public service officials (who are responsible for administrative management). By implication, this article’s area of focus (i.e. the Maruleng municipality) and other areas with similar socio-economic and political dynamics do not necessarily need “political”-party-biased officials or pure technocrats. These public institutions need officials who are sensitive about and aware of national politics; that is, a civil service which is more patriotic and less partisan but meritorious. This requisite crop of officials should be committed to the translation of policy postulations into meaningful actions. Because of the legacy of apartheid and the rurality of Maruleng, the communities of Maruleng have a very limited number of highly qualified professionals who are well grounded in corporate skills such as financial management. Most of the professionals in the communities of this municipal area are either nurses or teachers (Shai 2018). As a consequence, these teachers and nurses are normally recruited to serve as, for example, events and protocol officers, communication officers or public participation officers in municipal directorates such as corporate affairs (Gumede 2008). Due to the incompetence of municipal officials who were hired not because they had the necessary expertise and experience but simply because of their political affiliation and activism in the governing ANC, poor service delivery has become the order of the day. In certain strategic divisions of the municipality, office bearers were recruited outside the municipal jurisdiction of Maruleng. Such recruitment was not based on the incumbents’ scarce skills or previous good track records; their appointments were facilitated by powerful or influential ANC leaders at the provincial level to serve their own selfish and narrow goals. Some of the strategic office bearers who had been recruited previously for Maruleng from other districts were later found to have hopelessly failed in their previous occupations elsewhere.

The above situation is problematised by Ndletyana (2017, 761) who questions whether the recurrence of cases of political–administrative interface in South Africa is a by-product of “[a] policy vacuum or inadequacies in the system of the administration of the state.” This article argues that the practical realities on the ground in Maruleng suggest that the perennial un-settlement of this political and governance conundrum has little to do with a policy vacuum but has a lot to do with inefficiencies in the municipality’s execution of its primary roles, including the provision of services (e.g., water supply

and refuse collection). South Africa as a whole has one of the best policy/legislative frameworks in the entire world (Shai and Ogunnubi 2018). Despite this, legislative provisions and requirements in respect of filling vacancies are at times lowered to make room for insufficiently qualified and inexperienced political activists from the governing ANC. In certain instances, the requirements in respect of vacant posts are downscaled with the intent of causing loss of interest on the part of those that are well qualified. The politicians see the well-qualified candidates as threats to their ill-gotten economic fortunes and those of their cronies and relatives. It is common knowledge among the residents of Maruleng that, until recently, the secretariat of the ANC in this sub-region was used as a launching pad for municipal capture by certain business moguls within the municipality's territorial jurisdiction and beyond. Indications are that the Maruleng municipality has been used as a cash cow for various business people who normally monopolise the acquisition of lucrative tenders disbursed by this institution. Such use occurred under different administrations, and the nature of the occurrences depended on who possessed real power or dictated terms at the municipality at the time. While political and administrative actors changed from time to time, the truth of the matter is that the mode of operation has been retained. That is, some incompetent ANC members have been deployed by their party leaders in positions carrying administrative or political responsibilities so that they can be manipulated in exchange for protection of their positions (at which they perform dismally). In the case of the Maruleng municipality, and of the government as a whole, the deployment of insufficiently qualified and inexperienced officials provides a fertile ground for mechanisations and control by external forces.

It is worth emphasising that the previous ANC sub-regional secretariat (the one preceding the current leadership collective) had an upper hand in the recruitment and appointment of senior municipal officials (i.e., the municipal manager, chief financial officer and directors). This opened the door for the ANC sub-regional secretariat to determine who the successful bidders for lucrative tenders would be. Such influence over the administrative function of the municipality by external politicians provided an enabling environment for rampant corruption and sheer incompetence in delivering service. Because of a lack of intellectual consciousness about conceptualising timely and relevant municipal programmes for the benefit of women, money that was budgeted for such programmes was used to bankroll the programmes of the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL). It is such wanton abuse of public resources to pursue a particular political cause that leads to the Maruleng municipality and other government entities to be known for "irregular expenditure" (a discussion of which is beyond the scope of the current article). It is worth noting that this deceitful pattern of operation that occurs at the political-administrative interface is not limited to local municipalities such as Maruleng; it can also be observed in provincial and national government circles where the political party and the state are seldom collapsed for the benefit of the ruling party. This implies that the external parties' influence does not only nourish the business interests of select individuals but also drives inter- and intra-party

politics especially as they relate to the ruling party. Ndletyana (2017, 763) expresses the conviction that in this context “personal relations trumped merit,” which provides a partial understanding of the phenomenon of political–administrative interface in South Africa and Africa as a whole. The foregoing analysis is echoed by Maserumule (2018) who laments that “[T]he danger the governing party poses to democracy is that it continues to blur the lines between the state and party This way of doing things is fixed in the ANC’s political parlance. The party may be too stubborn to erase it. But it threatens the future of South Africa’s constitutional democracy.”

Gumede (2008) posits that municipalities are poised to become centres of excellence in development, but only if they are left to non-political officials to pursue their mandate to run municipalities as pure administrative centres. This view is challenged by Suttner (2014) who avers that the question arises whether it is imperative in this context for a government official to be academically qualified. The political situation in South Africa in the early 1990s made it prudent to appoint people on the basis of unconventional forms of merit and not on the basis of academic qualifications. However, in the third decade of majority rule there is no excuse for disregarding or marginalising academically qualified people under the pretext of the need to consider “unconventional merit.” Suttner and like-minded scholars and activists share a view that they draw from the analogy that “there is no hunter who can use another man’s dogs to hunt.” The danger of not heeding this advice is that if the dogs fail to catch their prey, they might devour the unfamiliar hunter. The key message emanating from this analogy is the centrality of loyalty in the appointment of officials to occupy strategic positions. This implies that a sympathiser of the DA is unlikely to stay true to the ANC-led government. This premise should be understood within the context that it is difficult for people to change their mindset if it would contradict the values they ascribe to. Thus it would probably be very difficult for a person who previously defended white privilege and supremacy to truly experience a revolutionary shift in thinking to a point of working towards the realisation of an inclusive and egalitarian society.

The preceding observations bring to the fore pertinent questions in respect of modern politics in South Africa. The age of populism has produced many activists who are more loyal to individual leaders than to their political parties per se. It is for this reason that it is not uncommon to find members belonging to two different factions of one political party, such as the ANC, hating each other more than they hate the members of the opposition parties. In the case of Maruleng, such a high level of mistrust among ANC leaders could be seen during the mayorships of Mpudu Junior Mafogo, Pule Abel Mafologela and Dipuo Thobejane. When coming to power, each of these mayors restructured the mayoral office and the management composition of the municipality in a manner which marginalised those who had worked very closely with their predecessors. It was believed that the retention of the former immediate subordinates had the potential of giving one’s predecessor the opportunity to “rule from the grave.”

While this argument contains an element of truth, it cannot be generalised to all situations. For example, it is well recorded that Johann Mettler performed his duties as the municipal manager of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality excellently and professionally when it was under ANC rule and also later when it was under the rule of the DA-led coalition. When the municipality was plagued by political instability during 2018, Mettler, in the midst of political mayhem and protracted legal battles, continued to occupy a position of neutrality. A newspaper report (African News Agency 2018) cited him as saying that, “I have taken the view that this is a political matter. I have no business with involving myself in a political dispute.” Taking the case of Mettler as an example, it is clear that professionalism and the watertight separation of party politics and administration can ensure continuity in policy implementation and administrative stability in terms of service delivery.

Concluding Remarks

Based on the findings of the research conducted for this article, it can be said that depoliticisation in a municipal context is impracticable in the age of politics that we live in, especially in Africa. The process of depoliticisation is complex, and yet empty rhetoric is used to win the hearts and minds of the investor community by promising them political and policy certainty. If the practice of politics is to live up to its meaning as conceptualised by Morgenthau (1978) as “the struggle for power,” it becomes fundamental to politicise public service to fast-track efficient service delivery. The fusion of politics and administration is not an emerging phenomenon in African politics; it is as old as the institution of African traditional leadership. In African tradition, the royal council is chaired by the chief councillor (*mokgomamogolo* in Sesotho) who is normally a chief’s brother. The inner circle is constituted by the chief’s half-brothers (*bakgoma* in Sesotho), and the third layer of representation is made up of junior councillors (*bakgomana* in Sesotho), who can be headmen or other relatives of the chief who command a fair amount of respect in the community. In the case of Maruleng, the noble idea of politicisation is spoiled by factionalism, corruption, nepotism and related governance ills. In the end, politicisation is abused for the benefit of the dominant faction of the ANC at the expense of the party and community as a whole. Flowing from this, it is crystal clear that the mix of politics and administration (and to a certain extent of party and state) is easier said than done. In the final analysis, the qualitative picture painted in this article through an Afrocentric lens has proven to complement rather than to compete with an analysis that uses theoretical tools such as social constructivism (which has been used previously to study the same subject). The subject of the interface of politics and administration in South Africa can best be understood when located within a historical context and also framed by the broader prism of continental and global perspectives.

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