

# BOOK REVIEW

## **PATRONAGE POLITICS DIVIDES US: A STUDY OF POVERTY, PATRONAGE AND INEQUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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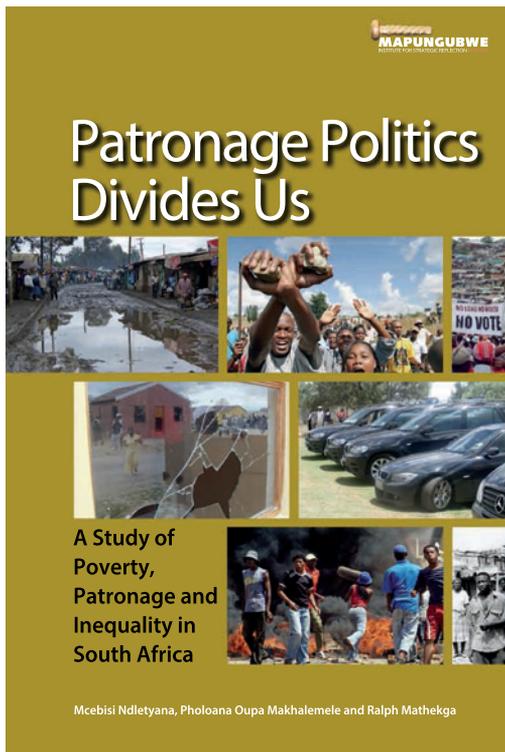
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If you want to understand the reason for the heightened contestations at the precipice of internecine strife in political parties' nomination and list processes for 3 August 2016 local government elections, pick up this book: *Patronage Politics Divides Us*. It gives insight into what is at the core of inter- and intra-party rivalry as the elections are looming – patronage. The book is one of the research outputs of the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) – a knowledge-based South African organisation that assumed a position in the Top Ten of the Best New Think Tanks in the world in 2013. At that time, MISTRA was less than five years old. Strategic thinking and generating cutting edge knowledge for societal advances underpin the edifice of its foundational disposition. Those with a sense of curiosity will naturally be spurred by this context, and will immediately lay their hands on the book and read it. Its purpose is to,

as simply explained, 'explore the relationship between poverty and patronage politics' (p. 45). Sequentially arranged in five (5) chapters, the book is easy to read, with the academic jargon normally associated with traditional scholarship kept to the barest minimum. I wish that every politician could have an opportunity to read the book.

The perspicacity of the foreword, penned by Joel Netshitenzhe, summarises the entirety of the research project that informs the book in less than two (2) pages: from where it started, the question it sought to answer, the research design and its methodological approach, the findings and the validation processes, and its conclusions. The team, whose hands have always been on deck for the book to see the light of day, comprised seasoned researchers, scholars and intellectuals of note, who evidently put much effort into putting together a book as enlightening as this. Chapter 1 of the book sets the context. It problematises the object of the study – patronage politics and explains the significance of the choice of the local sphere of government as the contextual setting for the consideration of this phenomenon, the purpose being to establish its relation to poverty. Chapter 2 provides theoretical insights into patronage politics. Typically, theoretical insights are abstractions sometimes beyond the cognitive reach of ordinary readers. The ingenuity in simplifying theory with the sophistication of delineation makes this chapter easy to read. It is written in a style that eschews the heavily loaded academic language of traditional scholarship without losing the seriousness of the subject matter. This chapter engages the reader theoretically without the pomposity of academic jargon.

Using the Jacksonian praxis of politics, largely from the American spoils system, with anecdotes from Medieval Europe, and insights into the dynamics of state and party political relations in post-colonial Africa and the post-apartheid state, the authors manage to successfully demystify patronage politics. From this chapter, it appears that, in some instances, patronage is necessary for state formation, but not as a permanent feature of this pursuit, for the latter destroys a state. Kenya and Mexico are contrasting illustrations of this point. Against this background, it is important to ask the question whether, twenty-two (22) years into democracy, the utilitarian value of patronage politics (as a function of state formation for democratic identity and consolidation) has not expired. An answer is implied in Chapter 4 of the book, where the findings of research show that, specifically in the local sphere of government, patronage politics has now assumed an increasingly self-serving posture – a deviation from the post-apartheid state's commitment to the common good. With the methodological rigour followed in the study of patronage politics, as adequately explained in Chapter 3 of the book, coupled with meticulous dissection of information, the validity of the findings cannot be challenged. Its conclusions are not a function of navel-gazing, but a consequence of rigorous analysis largely of primary data generated in the interviews, focused group discussions and the observations the researchers made in their eight months of fieldwork, including attending meetings in the communities where the researchers' study of patronage politics and its relation to poverty led them.

Qualitative in design, the study that spawned this book followed an ethnographic approach,

combining participant observation and case studies to enhance its methodological rigour. This is important as the phenomenon studied is complex, with multiple variables. In studying the relationship between poverty and patronage politics, I would not have premised my research pursuit on a hypothesis, for hypothesis-based research creates a tension between what the researchers want to authenticate as the case and what is actually the case. In their study, the researchers formulated a hypothesis, but cleverly in an open-ended way, to enhance the exploratory potential of their scientific endeavour. This was to give the study, as they explain, 'much space for discovery of the unknown' (p. 45). To me, beyond explaining the design and methodological approach of the study, Chapter 3 of the book is instructional for students of research methodology. It can be used as an example of how ethnographical study is designed to examine social phenomena, including the choice of methodological approach, to answer exploratory and descriptive questions. Enough of these pedantic meanderings, let's cut to the chase. What are the findings of the study in the book?

An answer is in Chapter 4, which, for reasons of context, starts with the socio-economic profiles of the sites of observation chosen as the focus of the study: Diepsloot (Gauteng, City of Johannesburg); Reitz/Petsana, Phuthaditjhaba and Monontsha (Free State, Nketoana and Maluti-a-Phofung); Qumbu and Tsolo (Eastern Cape, Mhlontlo Municipality); Kleinmond, Hangklip, Greater Hermanus, Gansbaai Stanford and Buffeljachts (Western Cape, Overstrand Municipality). From the analysis of these localities, it emerged that poverty-stricken

areas are prone to patronage politics. This confirms the hypothesis of the researchers, but not accurately in its entirety. The affluent areas are no exception to this phenomenon, which delegitimises the state and, by extension, the very concept of democracy that, for more than two decades, South Africa has claimed to be. As the authors caution:

Patronage politics has a corrosive effect on South Africa's body politic. It fosters factionalism and social tension. Marginalised sections of the community disengage from political institutions and processes. This implies loss of faith in political institutions. Consequently, residents are prone to resort to extra-judicial measures to register concerns and seek remedy. The State is as such, steadily and corrosively delegitimised, and its authority undermined. (Ndletyana, Makhalemele & Mathekga, 2013:129)

This is a very important observation for public leadership. Perhaps, had we listened to this, Vuwani would not have happened. Beyond answering the question about patronage politics and poverty, whose findings are generalisable, the book reveals many other things that relate to, among others, the socio-economic implications of foreign nationals in South Africa. Contrary to popular thinking, as the book argues, the attack on foreign national owned businesses, especially in Diepsloot, was not necessarily a manifestation of xenophobia, but what the researchers term 'intra-class rivalry' (p. 124). The book also raises the question of race, ethnicity, inequality, unemployment, institutional weaknesses, corruption and inadequate delivery of public services. All these, in their different ways, exacerbate

the socio-economic plight of those who are in the lower social strata of society. They are a feeding ground for patronage politics. In Chapter 5 of the book, the implications of the findings of the study are analysed, from which recommendations emerge. An important point the writers make is that patronage politics and the totality of the context that spawns it, including its effect on the evolution of the post-apartheid society, cannot simply be attended to through legislative interventions. What is required is a national commitment to good society, ingeniously defined in the literature as 'a process which is in perpetual evolution, constructed historically by individuals who are themselves constructed by the history of that society'.

The book does not communicate only with government for policy interventions to fill voids in the post-apartheid architecture of the state for societal advances. It talks to almost everybody with an interest in public affairs. Especially with the 2016 local government elections nearing, political parties can benefit a great deal from the book in

how to regain and sustain people's trust in politics. Those who are on the receiving end of patronage politics can benefit, too, by heeding the book's advice that they should establish themselves as organised formations to optimise their opportunities in the local economies, including the capacity to influence policy. The book communicates with all sectors of the economy, including departments that comprise the economic cluster in the different spheres of government, about the significance of synergy of effort in dealing with the challenge of unemployment. It underscores the significance of coordinating, harmonising, and synchronising economic development initiatives, of which all their philosophical basis should be social equity. Exploring innovative ways of optimising service delivery, especially in the local sphere of government, is another important point that the book makes. It warns against patronage politics because of its potential to fracture society, and offers insights into what unites society. As the book implores, we dare not let 'patronage politics divide us'.