

On the State of Democracy in South Africa

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OPINION | On the State of Democracy in South Africa

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By Steven Friedman



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South African democracy spans two very different worlds. In one, people complain loudly but enjoy full democratic rights – in the other, most remain unheard and battle for the right to speak. In both, life is difficult for those who do not conform.

Among political scientists - and many of the South Africans who can speak - it is fashionable to label this country's democracy a 'party dominant system'. Democracy, is, in this view, limited by the iron grip of the African National Congress, which is said to dominate the political order because it wins repeated national elections. But this fails to explain why the governing party has almost no impact on some of the most important places in the country – those where the holders of economic and social power live.

In the townships and shack settlements, the ANC may dominate although even there the reality is more complicated. But in the suburbs, it is hardly noticeable as a force in society or a factor in elections. The dominant party there is the Democratic Alliance although, as in the townships, the deeper reality is that particular interests dominate. In the townships, force may be used to get people to conform. In the suburbs, it is not needed – people fit involuntarily.

South African democracy is, therefore, built on at least two worlds – one dominated by the well-resourced and their favoured party, the other in which the ANC and local power holders who attach themselves to it hold sway. In one, residents speak and act as full democratic citizens – on the other, they may face violence if they do. The parallels with the pre-1994 period are clear: then to the suburbs were places where people could be heard, the townships places where force was used to impose silence. The pattern of the past continues, in a new form.

None of this means that democracy is meaningless. Political freedom has enabled most South Africans to reclaim their dignity. It has placed a lever in citizens' hands which can be used to send political power holders a message, as voters did in Marikana and Nkandla when they voted against the ANC, and to change lives: 3 million people living with HIV and AIDS are alive today because the politics which democracy allows enabled activists to win effective treatment at public expense. But it does mean that democracy is not yet able to change the social power inherited from the past which limits its reach in both suburbs and townships.

In the townships, the ANC – despite the challenge of rival parties – continues to dominate elections. More importantly, public life in the areas where most citizens live is restricted by ANC functionaries or local power holders who use the governing party when it is convenient. They often use force, at times in concert with local police, to silence those who challenge their monopoly. The shooting of Andries Tatane is well known – other examples largely ignored by the media include the violence unleashed against the shack dweller members of *Abahlali basemjondolo* or the murder of union officials. But these are only extreme examples of the cost of challenging local power.

Even if this constraint did not exist, many in these areas would find it difficult to make themselves heard, for the power balance is stacked against them: they often lack the resources and connections which the middle class use to make themselves heard. Local power holders impose an added barrier to realising democracy's promise.

Voters in these areas are not forced to vote for the ANC – when they want to ditch it, they do. But most find it difficult to make themselves heard in the crucial period between elections. Ironically, in the suburbs, where no-one forces anyone to obey, the dominance of one party and one view of the world is far tighter than in townships. On the surface, voting trends are similar: in Johannesburg's last local election, both the ANC and DA won 80%-90% of the vote in their strongholds. But the DA areas also house domestic workers, most of whom do not vote DA: so the official opposition is probably winning more than 95% of the vote among those who own or rent property in their areas.

Uniformity of thought in the suburbs is also more pronounced, as a glance at mainstream media shows: there is consensus that all ills are caused by the governing party; politicians and government are all-powerful while corporations and professionals are powerless, and that townships and shack settlements are of interest only when they disturb suburbanites by protesting. Those who challenge the first two are silenced by ridicule rather than force. Ironically, the suburban elites who impose this groupthink routinely berate township dwellers for 'unthinkingly' choosing the wrong party.

Suburban dominance is powerful because it succeeds in presenting its world as everyone's world. So powerful that those who claim to challenge it – social justice activists and organisations – repeat many of the assumptions of the suburbs even as they claim to oppose them. There are many examples but one will suffice. A sure path to

denunciation by activists is to suggest that it is fair to fund Gauteng motorways by tolling those who can afford to own vehicles while exempting those who don't: and so 'radical' activism embraces the interests of suburban car owners. A look at social media – often regarded as the forum in which all citizens speak although at the very most they are used by one in five people – shows how the suburban view dominates even among many who claim to be on the left.

What might change these patterns? One important start would be a social justice activism which recognises how deeply trapped in the suburbs it still is and commits itself to breaking out. That could begin a challenge to the social and economic patterns which restrict democracy here – one which would recognise that our problem is not that democracy has failed, but that it has not yet been fully tried. We need the freedoms won in 1994. But we need to ensure that they are available to all.

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