PART 6

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

19 Transforming the political: Towards a transformative concept of political leadership in Africa

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Overview

Acknowledging but rejecting the ways in which we make political leaders in Africa either 'saints' or 'crisis managers', this chapter develops an account of transformative political leadership that shifts thinking by privileging opportunities and possibilities as opposed to crisis. By calling for a break with good governance as the dominant parameter of effective leadership, and privileging the thinking of politics from below through the distinction between civil and political society, this chapter develops this concept within democratic praxis. In this regard, transformative political leadership is popular democratic practice that transforms the political. The grassroots movement Abahlali baseMjondolo is used as an example to describe transformation of the political as the insistence on a mode of politics that foregrounds active inclusivity, solidarity, and collaboration; a living politics; and emancipation – as opposed to concessions – as an overarching aim.

Introduction

The scholarship on political leadership in Africa typically foregrounds a crisis narrative, which is used to explain democratic, development, and governance deficits. To this end, much research, scholarship, and development resourcing has been invested in resolving the 'leadership challenge' in Africa, though without a critical conceptualisation of what really characterises this challenge.

Leadership challenges in Africa are, in one sense, no different from the challenges faced by leaders in other parts of the world. However, in another sense, these challenges are unique because of the contexts in which they are experienced and the particular dynamics that underpin their proliferation and intensification (Lenneiye, 2000; Maathai, 2009; Mkandawire, 2015). Centring crisis in the African political and social experience produces a limited understanding of the situational dimensions of leadership, civic engagement, and governance at work every day across the continent. Besides 'leadership' and 'crisis leadership' being two separate practices and fields of enquiry, not every problem that leaders seek to resolve can or should be defined as a crisis – an acute, unexpected, disruptive, and potentially catastrophic event (Gigliotti, 2017). A focus on the continent as a

site of perpetual crises undermines the structural, social, economic, political, and symbolic forces that are constantly at work and that secure peace and contain war, produce livelihoods, and ground our relationships to time, space, and place.

This chapter will also discuss the particular assumptions that inform writing about African leaders and leadership, while unpacking the value of transformative leadership theory for a new concept of African political leadership that is situated, negotiated, and substantially co-created. It seeks to decentre the notion of 'good governance' and other instrumental indicators from our understanding of what transformative political leadership should look like. The broad aim is to shift from this notion of leadership through crisis towards centring leadership on opportunities and possibilities.

Constructing the 'leadership challenge' in Africa

Leadership describes a relationship between two entities: leaders and followers. The relationship is one of an influencing process (with attendant outcomes) between these two entities. To study political leadership as the primary essence of leadership is to study this influencing process in the exercise of power, and the ways in which power is legitimated (if at all) into authority. The point being stressed here is the *political* dimension of political leadership as a concept (that is, recognising that politics is about power). This is noteworthy because others might insist on a more *ethical* conceptualisation of political leadership.

Political leadership is often seen in relation to diverse political phenomena such as democracy, governance, development, or conflict. As such, one can study political leadership as an influencing process in and of itself, in addition to examining its impact on and relationship to some of the aforementioned political processes. More broadly, studies on political leadership in Africa are part of a broader enterprise to describe the nature of the African state, an institution that is seen to be characterised by informality more than formality. This informality can be understood by the broader range of social, economic, and cultural formations that engage with political institutions more usually associated with the 'Weberian legal-rational state' (Beresford, 2014, p. 1).

One common mode of characterising the nature of African states is in terms of their 'neopatrimonial' character (Mkandawire, 2015). It is analytically useful to think of neopatrimonialism as having three constituent components. First, such regimes are characterised by presidentialism, in which both formal and informal rules place one person – usually the president, and almost always a man – largely above the law and not subject to the checks and balances that executives face in mature democracies. Second, such regimes rely on systematic clientelism by the president and his immediate followers to maintain the status quo and ensure political stability. In this way, as Beresford (2015) argues, the president

is positioned as a patron who disburses largesse and opportunity to his political family of clients occupying different claims to the overall 'pie' – whether as siblings/peers, or 'children' (political minors). Third, and unlike more traditional patrimonial regimes, neopatrimonial systems rely on the fiscal resources of a modern state to provide the resources that are distributed following a clientelist logic (Van de Walle, 2001). It is important to note Van der Walle's observation that neopatrimonialism is a ubiquitous form of modern politics, thus moving away from accounts that exceptionalise or pathologise Africa.

There are at least two explanations offered for why this particular mode of governance is problematic for the continent's social and economic development. First, neopatrimonialism is considered to be inherently anti-democratic. Second, it is often invoked to explain economic underperformance on the continent (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Van de Walle, 2001).

Mkandawire's (2015) famous critique of neopatrimonialism is a caution against taking this characterisation as emblematic of an indigenous political condition in Africa, rather than a result of particular political, economic, and historical factors at work wherein public power is exercised towards private and strategic political benefit. For one, he demonstrates that 'neopatrimonial' states are not inherently anti-democratic, sometimes adhering to key indicators of good democratic governance, such as freedom of speech (Mkandawire, 2015). Moreover, some states, such as Botswana, have seen marked economic growth alongside complex ties of reciprocity and benefit between state and groups of citizens (Mkandawire, 2015). And recently, Anciano (2018) suggested that clientelism can sometimes fulfil important democratic tasks like enhancing accountability and participation at the level of local governance. The point here is that whatever the 'leadership challenge' in Africa, it cannot be simply explained by analytical categories that collapse complex issues of governance and government.

Implicit in these characterisations of leadership and the challenges facing African leaders is a general theme of African political leadership as deficient and crisis ridden. This idea of leadership in crisis permeates analyses of democracy, development, and governance in Africa. Much of this scholarship observes the role of leaders (in addition to broader internal and external institutional arrangements) in creating governance deficits and negatively impacting democracy and development (Ayittey, 1992; Bond, 2006; Mbah, 2013; Mills, 2011; Rotberg, 2004; Tettey, 2012). A litany of descriptors, like kleptocratic (see, for example, Acemoglu, Verdier, & Robinson, 2004); predatory (Fatton, 1992; Lewis, 1996); and prebendal (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2013; Joseph, 1987), have functioned as conceptual tools to unpack this crisis of leadership and its entanglement with intersecting issues of governance, citizenship, democracy, and development. For example, Rotberg (2004, p. 14) describes the crisis of leadership in Africa as 'poor, even malevolent leadership: predatory kleptocrats,

military-installed autocrats, economic illiterates, and puffed-up posturers… indifferent to the progress of their citizens…unswayed by reason…hypocrites, always shifting blame for their countries' distress'.

This perceived crisis naturally encourages an investigation into how leadership can be strengthened. That is, what leadership styles and traits ought to be cultivated? In differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' African leaders, there is a tendency to venerate good leaders in ways that flatten and often silence their complexities, failures, and, indeed, ethical or moral ambiguities. This is what defines hagiography, or the narrativising of sainthood. In the context of political leaders, the elevation of complicated human to moral force renders these individuals unique, and their heroism uncommon, stripping away the social and relational nature of their struggles. We argue that hagiography has limited usefulness in understanding African political leadership in its full complexity, because it exceptionalises leadership traits rather than situating them.

To return to Rotberg (2004), it is also flawed to assume that good governance and effective leadership are co-implicated. This bears consideration given the pervasiveness of this association in research and international development communities, where good governance is seen as the solution to neopatrimonialism, among other political deficits (Mkandawire, 2007; Nanda, 2006). Proving 'good governance' has become an essential requirement of international development agencies and financial institutions (Nanda, 2006). Contemporary states – especially in the Global South – are required to demonstrate good governance to support their eligibility for donor finance, loans, and international investments. This is defined as 'combating corruption, nepotism, bureaucracy and mismanagement – and [promoting] transparency, accountability and proper procedures' (Nanda, 2006, p. 272). Meeting these political conditionalities also increases the number of non-state actors involved in the management, administration, and execution of the work of government, including civil society, NGOs, the business community, and donor agencies (Nanda, 2006).

This increase results in the dispersal of roles, relationships, processes, and institutions among a wider network of stakeholders (Demmers, Fernández Jilberto, & Hogenboom, 2004; Robertson, Mundy, & Verger, 2012). On one level, strong governance matters precisely because states are no longer solely or even centrally responsible for the administration or execution of authority (in other words, 'government'), and often work in tandem with legitimate and illegitimate stakeholders. On another level, this also matters because, increasingly, states exist at the interface of complex battles for meaning, resourcing, and legitimacy, whether globally, regionally, or locally, where they are subject to measures of improvement and success that are defined, weighted, and rewarded or sanctioned by external actors.

Mkandawire (2007) argues that the contemporary definition of good governance in fact emerged and then broke away from the inputs of critical African scholars in the World Bank's *Long-Term Perspective Study* in 1989. This definition had three prongs: (1) a developmental, competitive, and inclusive economy; (2) human rights and democratic participation; and (3) social inclusion (Mkandawire, 2007). The focus on inclusion, equity, and 'larger issues of state-society relations' (Mkandawire, 2007, p. 681) is distinct from what Mkandawire considers to be the technocratic focus on transparency and accountability that came to dominate in international financial and developmental institutions see also Demmers et al., 2004; Nanda, 2006). This is important because it demonstrates the contextual nature of 'good governance', and the development of the ideologically bound nature of the term that we know today, rooted as it is in free-market ideology and international development discourse. It also suggests that there is potential for good governance to focus on more than demonstrating administrative competence, drilling down to the substantive improvement of lives and livelihoods in an inclusive and democratic society. Leadership, in this sense, cannot be reduced to 'good governance' in the absence of a substantive notion of what this means in practice.

Setting out the argument

This chapter seeks to produce an understanding of transformative political leadership that re-centres social justice, inclusion, and substantive participation. This is a necessary excursion into the question of political leadership due to the primacy of globally powerful discourses that prioritise technical and administrative performance as hallmarks of effective leadership and governance (Demmers et al., 2004). Not only are these insufficient indicators of effective leadership, they also do not accommodate the messy, complicated, and multiple ways in which people engage in politics on an everyday basis. By not accommodating this diversity of political engagement and interaction, we run the risk of rendering it invisible, superfluous, or even criminal in official discourse.

Two questions underpin this excursion: (1) 'What does transformative leadership look like in an African context, beyond indicators of governance?' and (2) 'How do we think critically about political leadership on the continent as a situated, negotiated, and historical practice?'

The first question draws from the work of De Kock and Swartz (Chapter 2, this volume), considering the definition of transformative leadership provided and applying this in an African context. We consider how transformative leadership could be used to make sense of political leadership in Africa, not only in terms of heads of government and industry, but in the broad array of activities, interactions, and struggles that characterise a 'politics from below', or 'the historical and current micropolitics from which new popular political

subjectivities and practices emerge' (Motta, 2013, p. 6). These are important sites through which contemporary political struggles are expressed and articulated, yet they are rarely recognised or legitimated within the formal political sphere. Noting this, we contend that such spheres are generative regarding a substantive account of transformative political leadership. Scholars such as Chatterjee (2004), Neocosmos (2011), and Motta (2013) point out that a focus on governance belies a relationship between the governed and those who govern, with little space in between for genuine democratic deliberation to unfold except within the space of representation (for example, through voting). Transformative leadership, as argued in Chapter 2 of this volume by De Kock and Swartz, is therefore not only about focusing on socially just outcomes. It is equally about transforming relationships between 'the leaders' and 'the led' beyond existing configurations of representation deemed axiomatic to modern political life.

The second question takes the point above further by asking how we begin to think about political leadership as a situated, negotiated, and historical practice – that is, shifting from a focus on values, behaviours, and 'types' towards leadership for context, time, and space. In this way, the emphasis also shifts from whether political leaders conform to static categories and barometers of their present 'success', to how their actions plant seeds for as-yet unknown futures. This is the critical turn from crisis to possibility that we argue for – and a notion of political leadership that recognises that the road to future crises is paved with missed contemporary opportunities.

This chapter emerged from an iterative process based on an initial review of political leadership conducted by Nyamnjoh. The review included 50 scholarly resources on the topic, with a deep focus on major theoretical and philosophical debates. This was synthesised with the extensive review conducted for this book (De Kock & Swartz, Chapter 2, this volume).

From this grounding in the literature on leadership, the authors identified an important contextual gap in how African leadership has been described – largely from the perspective of formal or legitimate politics. Review of an additional 40 resources (including scholarship, journalistic work, and grey literature) was used to investigate this gap. This chapter should be viewed as a provocation towards a new theory and praxis for political leadership in Africa.

Thinking politics from below

An important point of departure when thinking about the concept of transformative leadership is its origins in highly unequal educational contexts in the United States. Shields (2010), in producing her canonical work on the topic, not only makes a case for the importance of leadership that challenges the status quo and furthers the aims of social justice, but also emphasises the need to

change the rules of the game that rendered inequality as a structural and not only an individual feature of a given system.

This is relevant to the political sphere, where democratic participation has progressively been eroded in favour of a politics of representation (Robins, 2010). Voting is one site through which representation is actualised and legitimised. Another is 'civil society', which tends to be a domain of participation erroneously conflated with the public sphere in states around the world (Ekeh, 1975; Robins, 2010). Obadare (2004) argues that in its initial development, the notion of something akin to civil society emerged during the post–Cold War period through moves by anti-authoritarian, pro-democracy groups in former colonial and Soviet Bloc states to carve out a space for public engagement by a vast array of interest groups, including youth and sports organisations, social associations, neighbourhood and cultural groups, and so on. He suggests the importance of differentiating between civil society as an *idea*, as captured in the above and represented through a variety of historic struggles for meaningful democratic engagement, and as an *empirical reality* – that is, what it has come to be associated with over time (Obadare, 2004).

This can be explained in terms of the way that civil society is formed and continues to be shaped by its interactions with the state. Rather than representing the organic or everyday space of public deliberation, 'civil society' is in fact synonymous with a highly organised space of engagement with organs of the state, often through NGOs and advocacy bodies 'concerned with supporting political liberalisation… promoting economic liberalisation, and…furthering the rights and political participation of particular socially excluded groups, such as rural women or the urban poor' (Hearn, 2010, p. 4). These organisations take on a particular form that facilitates their recognition by the state, through formal political participation conducted through recognised interest groups or political parties.

This chapter draws on this understanding of civil society for two reasons. First, it allows one to employ productively the concepts of 'political' (Chatterjee, 2004) or 'uncivil' (Neocosmos, 2011) society, distinguishing the formalised spaces of civil society from those grassroots, everyday spaces through which politics emerges from below. While 'uncivil' is not intended in a normative or moral sense, but as an alternative to the space described as 'civil society', we prefer 'political society' as a more effective descriptor of this space. Second, understanding civil society as formal political participation conducted through recognised interest groups or political parties allows us to critique the predominance of this form of civil society for its exclusion or neutralisation of attempts to substantively transform the political space to incorporate the 'uncivil' (Wamba dia Wamba, 2007). We do not suggest that civil society and grassroots political spaces are mutually exclusive, but that they are positioned differently in relation to the work of the state.

Writing on the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, Harders (2015, p. 148) argues for the value of studying social movements and looser political formations to understand the 'widening gap between dynamic societies and ossified regimes that gave rise to a crisis of legitimacy and ultimately revolutionary mobilisation'. While civil society and the NGO/development sector is intended to bridge that gap, it also has the potential to flatten or collapse the systemic nature of people's concerns, grievances, or causes into specific, discrete procedural challenges, such as access to education, access to health, housing, microlending, voter education, or sexual and reproductive rights (Bénit-Gbaffou & Oldfield, 2014; Hearn, 2010; Kowalczyk, 2013). This is not to suggest that the civil society space does not provide essential resourcing and support, nor that spaces of everyday politics are inherently benevolent, inclusive, or progressive. Important compacts and bonds of solidarity have been built between grassroots movements and progressive NGOs. Rather, we argue that something is missing in the way state–society relations have been structured in postcolonial contexts, with implications for democratic engagement and political leadership.

A meaningful reflection on this issue is offered by Neocosmos (2011). Beginning with a series of observations about the 'Arab Spring' in 2011, Neocosmos suggests that people assert themselves as political subjects and agents when standing against forms of oppression. This agency is generative, in the sense that it affords people the space to actively conceive, imagine, and mobilise towards their own emancipation from oppressive political, economic, and social regimes. It is also, he argues, in excess of state politics, meaning that it exists outside of the political terrain governed, administered, and limited to the confines of the geopolitical domain of the state (Neocosmos, 2011). To exist 'outside' is to be marginalised, silenced, excluded, or simply left uncounted in the spaces of formal politics, resulting in forms of subalternity that encourage the turn towards reviving or creating new sites and grammars of political action. This matters because it is the enactment of democracy as a *popular practice*, not as a state or space of formal politicking. It rejects the tendency for these expressions of popular politics to be framed as illegitimate and outside the space of organised politics.

We can further understand this by unpacking Neocosmos's (2011) case study of the South African transition to democracy, which is illustrative. As he argues, grassroots political organising was responsible for much of the groundswell against Apartheid, as subjects of the regime organised themselves in mass education, resistance, and political violence campaigns to topple the Apartheid state. Mamdani (1997) further suggests that this political campaign was 'captured' or neutralised by the parachuting in of exiled political elites, specifically the African National Congress (ANC), which played a heavily influential role at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) negotiations that began in December 1991. In this process, the ANC had been positioned as a proto-state, 'waiting in the wings' to govern (Mamdani, 1997, p. 232). Padayachee and

Van Niekerk (2019) also attest to this in their analysis of the ongoing policy development that characterised the work of ANC comrades while in prison on Robben Island and in exile, focused on courting international support, finance, and legitimacy for a future ascendancy to power.

This is an important context for what happened next. Neocosmos (2011) suggests that the process of transition demands that people vacate the space of politics and leave it to the trustees of the excluded – for example, official political parties (in the space of political representation) or NGOs (in the space of civil society). Government becomes the technical process of governance, the management of diverse stakeholders and interest groups, and the conversion of democracy from a popular practice to an ideal end-state for the state itself (Neocosmos, 2011). This process, or what Neocosmos considers to be 'depoliticisation', transfers the popular organising capacity of the people to the formal structures of state governance, with the result that politics begins and ends with the state, and the law becomes the site of recourse, closing down the popular and 'informal' power structures once central to the political sphere (Chatterjee, 2004; Guha & Chatterjee, 2009; Neocosmos, 2011).

When popular politics is 'captured' or neutralised in this way, we can expect at least three outcomes. First, the transition to democracy spells the end of political violence, in the sense that all politics is now assumed to be represented within the legitimate domains of the state, civil society, and the rule of law. In this way, popular movements are framed as agents of criminal violence, and their tactics, once hallmarks of the anti-Apartheid struggle (for example burning, barricades, marches), are recast as the work of destructive forces intent on resisting the now-legitimate rule of law (Dugard, Madlingozi, Tissington, Klare, & Williams, 2014; Losier, 2015). Their political agendas are rendered invisible in this process. Second, the 'rules of the game' are consolidated: the legitimate democratic state is the only game in town. To go against the democratically constituted state, and its democratically elected government, is seen as going against democracy itself, and this discursive shift supports the reframing of popular movements in terms of their criminality and illegitimacy – particularly where 'alternative' and more institutionally legitimate trustees of their grievances exist in the space of civil society and NGOs. Lastly, and because of this uneasy binary created between the formal and popular spaces of politics, to act in a space of leadership recognised by the new political regime is often to act at a distance from the ground, and vice versa (Zikode, 2009). That is, grassroots political movements increasingly find themselves in an antagonistic relationship to the space of formal governance and have to find creative ways of negotiating the space in order to secure concessions and reforms (Dugard et al., 2014).

These antagonisms are not a given in the relationship between the state and 'uncivil' or 'political' society, but result from processes that invest the state with the sense of trusteeship. Rather than opening up spaces to include the excluded,

the state and civil society act ostensibly in the interests of the marginalised, while constraining the availability of meaningful opportunities for popular participation in governance. As this enclosure occurs, a distinction emerges between clients (of the political regime), consumers (of public goods and services), and wards (beneficiaries of state largesse). Clients and consumers have regimes of accountability available to them; wards have their claim to victimhood underwritten by the law, which offers the only other legitimate space through which to challenge those who govern.

The philosopher Jacques Rancière (2003, p. 202) claims: 'Politics begins exactly when those who "cannot" do something to show that in fact they can'. We extend this claim to suggest that transformative political leadership begins when its proponents shift from transforming through politics to *transforming the political*. In the context sketched above, this requires thinking critically about how the space of organic, popular, and subaltern politics has been eroded in the transition to democracy and encounters with neoliberalism, not only in South Africa but in other African states, and how these spaces can be reinvigorated with the kind of public deliberation that supports substantive democracy.

Democracy as popular practice

The discussion is guided by the distinction between democracy-as-state and democracy-as-popular-practice. In our view, transformative political leadership supports democracy as a popular practice, which offers us one way of thinking about what it means to 'transform the political'. In our originating discussion, we argued for a need to shift from crisis to possibility, breaking with the enduring trope of Africa as a site of ongoing devastation, corruption, and state failure. This powerful 'cognitive lock' (Verger, 2012) continues to produce the diagnoses and solutions to 'African problems' that minimise individual and collective agency, obscure the deliberate underdevelopment and plunder of the continent's resources, and constrain meaningful political, economic, and social transformation.

This shift also requires a break with the notion of good governance as a core feature of effective leadership – not because this is unimportant, but because it reduces the work of leaders to their ability to deliver on measurable, quantitative indicators of success. It is imperative that we begin to ask questions, such as 'Governance of and for whom?', 'Governance of what?', 'Success for whom?', and 'Accountability to whom?' Is good governance emblematic of effective leadership if it delivers on its indicators but fails to address the needs of people on the ground? For example, can we consider a housing programme successful if it delivers sub-par housing at a distance from where future inhabitants currently live, work, go to school, and socialise, if the indicator was that 'sufficient housing opportunities' are provided (Dugard et al., 2014; Gibson, 2009)?

The assumption that recipients are beneficiaries of largesse informs the concomitant assumption that it is the prerogative of the giver – in this case the state – to determine what it deems appropriate and sufficient. When we pivot to a political imperative that positions people as active agents in the ongoing process of democracy, it demands that they not only be involved in processes that affect them, but that they also have a hand in shaping those processes and their outcomes (Dugard et al., 2014). This is aptly captured by S'bu Zikode (2009, para. 5), co-founder of the South African shack-dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo:

> It is one thing if we are beneficiaries who need delivery. It is another thing if we are citizens who want to shape the future of our cities, even our country. It is another thing if we are human beings who have decided that it is our duty to humanize the world.

Abahlali is one example of a grassroots organisation that has located itself within a framework of democracy as popular practice. It emerged in resistance to 'slum clearance' efforts in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, which ostensibly aimed to eradicate informal settlements, but did this through evicting residents and destroying their homes, often leaving them homeless or resettled far from work, school, and social networks (Dugard et al., 2014; Gibson, 2009; Zikode, 2009). Over time, the movement grew to include residents of other settlements in and around KwaZulu-Natal, as well as parallel organisations in other cities and provinces, such as the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC). Abahlali, the AEC, Gauteng's Landless People's Movement (LPM), and other organisations form part of a network called the Poor People's Alliance. These movements, part of the new post–Apartheid landscape of social movements, are based within the communities they serve, and focus broadly on issues of land, housing, and access to services for displaced peoples, backyard-dwellers, and residents of informal settlements and 'transit camps' for evictees (Robins, 2010).

In what follows, we discuss some of the work of Abahlali as a way of giving meaning to the notion of democracy as popular practice, which we offer as one approach to defining what it means to transform the political. Issues of governance, leadership, and social justice emerge strongly in the work of contemporary social movements that challenge taken-for-granted understandings of how democracy should function in practice.

Pursuing active inclusivity

A fundamental characteristic of Abahlali baseMjondolo and its partner organisations is a commitment to active inclusivity and resistance against the forms of discrimination that sow divisions within the movement and its members. This has been evident most powerfully in its rejection of xenophobic, and particularly Afrophobic, rhetoric and violence (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2020).

Xenophobia has been regularly mobilised in the South African political imaginary, not only in popular spaces but in government policy and the operations of specific departments and divisions (Neocosmos, 2011; Tella, 2016). In part this can be attributed to the prevalence of redistributive policies that emphasise indigeneity as grounds for making claims against the state, accompanied by tropes of foreigners as 'stealing' jobs and housing opportunities, and contributing to crime (Tella, 2016). There is a tendency, especially by government officials, to either subtly endorse xenophobia or deny its existence entirely, conflating expressions of xenophobic violence with wanton criminality (Tella, 2016). To reduce xenophobia to criminality fails to address the political dimension of its origins in South Africa – underpinned by a legacy of structural exclusion, exclusivity, and exceptionalism.

It is important to recognise that the 'divide and rule' tactics that have enabled Apartheid-era divisions to persist into the present are also responsible for the continued violence, disregard, and prejudice meted out against foreign nationals and local 'economic migrants'. For example, displaced residents of a Cape Town 'transit camp', Blikkiesdorp ('Tin-can Town', so named for the corrugated iron structures erected by the city government), claimed that the city's government was using eviction as a strategy to displace Black residents in the area to reduce their voting power, replacing them with so-called Coloured residents who were more likely to vote for the party in power (Symphony Way Pavement Dwellers, 2011). In Johannesburg, regular forced removals of people from 'hijacked' land and buildings in the city centre take on an Afrophobic bent as city officials claim to be cleansing the space of illegality, crime, and illegitimate land claimants (Bénit-Gbaffou & Oldfield, 2014). In this way, long-running historical tensions have been mobilised to sow division and preclude the prospects of collective organising in contemporary South Africa.

Grassroots movements have to grapple with racism, tribalism, and xenophobia, given that their members are not from any one single group and often represent a range of ethno-linguistic groups and nationalities (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2020). Abahlali has strongly condemned xenophobia and acted to resist xenophobic attacks in the communities it serves, arguing for the humanity of all persons and the rejection of state and popular discourses that construct foreigners as outsiders (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2020). During the July 2021 unrest in parts of South Africa, the organisation released a statement condemning attempts by members of the ruling ANC to pin criminal acts on foreigners, position Indian South Africans as scapegoats for acts of violence against Black people, and sanction the harassment of township residents through unlawful searches and destruction of their property. Embedded in Abahlali's statement is a refusal to engage in the narrow chauvinism that has become endemic in South African party politics (Neocosmos, 2011; Robins, 2010; Tella, 2016). Active inclusivity,

then, is concerned with 'walking the talk' through an ongoing process of resistance against exclusion and divisive politics that undermine meaningful social transformation.

Solidarity and collaboration, not co-option by elites

Gibson (2009, p. 7) writes that a 'decentralisation of politics' is essential to the expansion of an emancipatory politic that includes the formerly excluded in shaping their world. This not only signifies political leaders 'coming down' to listen to the people, but the capacity of ordinary people to have voice and agency in the spaces of formal politics and policy-making.

This decentralisation is not synonymous with the decentralisation of governance that characterises the South African state, where power is devolved from national to provincial and municipal levels based on the rationale that this allows for more relevant and effective administration. Rather, it is about constructing an active and heterogenous democratic polity able to participate, shape, and challenge the work of government, and contribute to building a more just society (Gibson, 2009). In this space, people are able to bring the diverse aspects of their personhood into dialogue with each other, creating opportunities for solidarity to form across their concerns and contestations, and strengthening the quality and relevance of government's solutions to them. In the absence of such opportunities, mobilising outside or against the state becomes more attractive and necessary as the 'widening gap' (Harders, 2015) between the people and their government grows. Public statements by movements such as Abahlali and the LPM speak to this distrust of government as a result of harsh police responses to protests, attacks on movement members, and interference, sometimes of a violent nature, by local elected officials (Sacks, 2010).

One obstacle encountered by grassroots movements in the course of their struggles is the co-option or capture of their concerns by organisations in civil society, or government itself. Civil society organisations vary, and there are many that work in collaboration with grassroots movements. Co-option is not necessarily always a forceful or top-down strategy, as it may be a tactical or improvisational approach to more successfully navigate the spaces between civil society and realities on the ground (Robins, 2010). Of larger concern is the reduction of first-order questions of humanity, belonging, and justice raised by these movements to measurable indicators of welfare disbursement, transformation, or service delivery as their concerns are mobilised by actors working for reform *within* the formal political terrain – not by seeking to expand it (Losier, 2015; Neocosmos, 2011; Robins, 2010; Symphony Way Pavement Dwellers, 2011). In this way, as Gibson (2009) and Dugard et al. (2014) argue, while different social movements may tactically work through the legal system

and rights-based organisations when necessary, the struggles being waged on the ground are fundamentally about reimagining the space of the political, who is included within it, and who sets its terms of engagement.

Abahlali, the AEC, the LPM, and other movements have resisted co-option while welcoming solidarity and collaboration, arguing for the need for people to represent and have the authority to speak for themselves: 'Only those that feel it can lead it' (Cassiem, n.d., cited in Elliot-Cooper & Agyepong, 2011). The following discussion of 'living politics' will further elaborate on what this means in terms of concrete political action.

A living politics

In our foregoing discussion of democracy as popular practice, we have identified some of the principles that support the transformation of the political, in order to deepen our understanding of the possibilities of transformative political leadership. These principles in fact hinge on the notion of a living politics, or the politics of 'the ordinary men, women and children fighting for dignity as human beings, every day, until they count' (Figlan et al., 2009).

Living politics offers us one means of understanding how to think about transforming the political. It relies on people owning their experiences, struggles, and stories; being active and capable of learning, sharing, and creating knowledge; and reconstituting the spaces of political engagement and education to reflect the needs of their participants (Figlan et al., 2009). The term was coined by Abahlali to describe its approach to knowledge creation, movement-building, and collaboration, and is associated with its political education programme, known as the University of Abahlali, or 'Universal University' (Gibson, 2009). Living politics argues that poor people can think, and that their thought should be taken seriously, including by some corners of the political left that consider the oppressed incapable of thinking through their own struggles (Farred, 2003; Figlan et al., 2009; Gibson, 2009). Moreover, it draws people into conversation with each other, requiring community members to engage in critique both of society and of their own location within it. This emphasis on reflexivity is what enables organisations like Abahlali to challenge racism, xenophobia, and tribalism in its own ranks. At the same time, it challenges would-be collaborators and supporters, such as academics and middle-class activists, to enter the space as peers (rather than superiors, saviours, or vanguardists), to listen, and to contribute as requested by the movement, which ultimately drives the process (Figlan et al., 2009). Living politics calls for the synthesis of theoretical knowledge with practical experience and understanding, supporting people in thinking from and about their experiences, and breaking with the neat conceptual categories

(such as 'Marxism' and 'class struggle') that may not effectively represent and encapsulate realities on the ground.

From concessions to emancipation

Thus far we have developed an understanding of democracy as a popular practice that is rooted in active inclusivity, commitment to a living politics, and a focus on solidarity and collaboration with rather than co-option of grassroots political struggles. We argue that these factors are essential to thinking through transformative political leadership in ways that present, rather than represent, the fullness of experiences, realities, and contexts that comprise the political terrain.

It is also important to recognise that, taken together, these factors argue for a shift from concessions towards emancipation. By this we mean that a focus on the procedural realisation of rights (for example, through allocation of houses, water points, or electricity) may not sufficiently address the underlying structural and social forces that act against substantive democracy and democratic participation. The notion of 'concessions' is woven through critical work on human rights and social movements (Dugard et al., 2014; Figlan et al., 2009; Gibson, 2009; Losier, 2015; Neocosmos, 2011). Robins (2010, p. 82), who considers a variety of positions on the nature of NGOs and civil society in his work, offers an important analysis on this point:

> While to outside observers [patron–client] relationships may appear to reproduce dependency and disempowerment – the antithesis of liberal individualist conceptions of citizenship – they can also create the conditions for access to resources…Furthermore, should patrons fail to deliver, clients can exercise agency by shifting allegiance to another patron or acting to harm or undermine the legitimacy of the patron.

Robins (2010) also calls attention to the broad array of potential patrons that exist within the postcolonial political establishment, including NGOs, political leaders, traditional and religious authorities, charities, and community leaders. This offers a complex space through which people are able to move as 'clients' of different patrons and intricately and simultaneously leverage a host of relationships, positions, and strategies towards extracting concessions from the state (Losier, 2015; Robins, 2010). The question of whether these relationships are inherently instrumental and/or anti-democratic misses the point because it assumes: (1) that democracy is only located within the state, and (2) that complex relations of belonging and obligation cannot coexist alongside transactional exchanges. Instead, we should recognise that the competing relations of patronage that emerge within such a political space can only be resolved through the dissolution of relations of brokerage – in other words, a turn towards a more robust, accountable, and participatory practice of democracy. Arguably, as Losier

(2015) suggests, when citizens boycott elections, leverage client relationships, and engage in strikes and stayaways, they are enacting a conception of democracy that is consistent with the popular nature of their struggles, and that seeks its solutions through a broader assemblage of possibilities than those located only within the state and the space of representative politics. This is captured by Tormey (2015, p. 2), who observes that '[i]ncreasingly, politically engaged citizens don't speak, they act'. This is not a contingent or exotic phenomenon, either – the last two decades have seen a global paradigm shift from the primacy of representative politics towards the enactment of popular politics of all shades, ideologies, and concerns (Tormey, 2015).

It is important that the South African state gives substance to the socioeconomic and civil rights enshrined in the Constitution, but it is equally important to challenge the retreat of politics from the street committees, student, and women's organisations that in no small part brought about the end of Apartheid. Abahlali and other social movements have resisted attempts to reduce their struggles to the extraction of concessions. Rather, they have drawn attention to the fundamental link between representation and accountability that underpins the legitimacy of the democratic order (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2020; Losier, 2015; Tormey, 2015). If people cannot hold elected officials accountable, then they have legitimate reason to challenge the ability of elected officials to act on their behalf.

A consistent refrain of Abahlali, the AEC, and the Poor People's Alliance has been that even when the people participate in elections, the elected officials do not act in the public interest, whether by tying largesse to political loyalty, mismanaging funds, or excluding communities from decision-making that affects them directly (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2020; Figlan et al., 2009; Robins, 2010). Taking up these concerns through election boycotts, land and building occupations, and reconnecting electricity and water cut off due to non-payment are all acts of resistance against the legitimacy of a state that can claim legal force while lacking its moral foundation (Losier, 2015). Thus, saying that democracy as popular politics is concerned with emancipation, not concession, is to suggest that people struggle not only to improve their social conditions or location, but to challenge the foundation of that which excludes them.

All of this matters because when we think about transformative leadership, it is attractive to think about transformative leaders as representatives, even if we acknowledge that in their leadership they facilitate the agency of others (Shields, 2010). Facilitating agency is not synonymous with supporting, enabling, and foregrounding it, especially when this requires leaders to give way to their followers (Tormey, 2015). When we argue for political leadership as a situated, negotiated, and historical practice, it is because we acknowledge that democracy, governance, and participation are not static buzzwords – they are categories of meaning and action that can be thought, rethought, questioned, and challenged.

Conclusion: A world where many worlds fit

In this chapter we have taken an excursion into the question of political leadership in Africa, which has inevitably led to a discussion of grassroots political movements. While the discussion has been limited to the South African experience, and the contours of grassroots politics are so contextually diverse, it has distilled several pillars of what could constitute a new understanding of political leadership – specifically, transformative political leadership.

The chapter does not argue that representative politics is inherently anti-democratic or antithetical to the incorporation of popular politics. Rather, it suggests that representative politics as currently understood in terms of good governance, voting, and an active civil society can close off the space of popular politics or reduce it to the terms by which it is expressed (for example, through acts of political violence that subsequently become criminalised). We also do not view all popular politics or grassroots movements as naturally inclusive, progressive, or benevolent, but feel that to focus on their adverse manifestations is unhelpful, given that some of the resolution of such intolerance or chauvinism can be found in a more rigorous and heterogenous space of public deliberation.

Transformative political leadership should therefore be concerned with *enlarging the space of the political*: allowing people to speak for themselves, challenge political authorities, and engage in robust deliberation about the issues affecting them, both concrete and abstract. It also requires understanding that people are agents capable of imagining new worlds with vastly different approaches to the division of labour, the expression of gender, the space of political engagement, and even the relationship of society to the economy (Gahman, 2017). If political parties are no longer the sole or primary conduit through which people engage in their struggles for meaning, belonging, and survival, then transformative leaders need to be cognisant of that, and defend the creation of new spaces through which struggle can be expressed and overcome.

This also means thinking about transformative leadership as leadership that facilitates its own redundancy. By this we mean that transformative leaders should ideally work to displace themselves from the communities, movements, and causes that they serve, leaving the ground fallow for others to take things forward, and preventing the crisis of legitimacy that often results from the departure of charismatic and powerful figures (Tormey, 2015). Social movements around the world have experimented with a diversity of leadership structures, from leaderless to horizontal and caucus-led approaches, which indicates the space that exists for transformative leadership to unfold in new ways in the future.

At the outset of this chapter, we argued for a need to shift from crisis to opportunity and possibility in the way we frame the work of leaders on the African continent. This can be exemplified in quite simple terms. If political

leaders conceive of grassroots struggles as a question of crisis, there may be a tendency for them to seek solutions that return to the very status quo that these movements are challenging. When we recognise that ordinary people are able to articulate themselves within the political space, we are able to see the symbolic and structural roots of their material claims – meaning that solutions need to go beyond delivering services towards changing societies. If political leaders see these moments of rupture and disruption as opportunities to think about the world differently, in conversation with those they serve, we may yet see a form of transformative leadership that can radically break with the rules of the game.

#TransformingThePolitical

Transformative political leadership enlarges the space of the political, allowing people to speak for themselves, challenge political authorities, and deliberate robustly about both the concrete and abstract issues affecting them.

Questions for discussion

1. What do you understand by the phrase 'transforming the political'? Following from the discussion on Abahlali baseMjondolo, are there other principles you would add or develop further as part of transforming the political?

2. Is the distinction between democracy-as-state and democracy-as-popular-practice helpful? Are you able to apply it to other political events in your society?

3. To what extent do you believe transformative leaders should work to make themselves redundant?

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