



# COMMUNITY VIOLENCE TO MAKE THEIR *voices* HEARD

By Kotie Geldenhuys; Photos courtesy of Ashraf Hendricks/Ground Up

**South African communities are increasingly frustrated by inadequate service delivery, the proliferation of drugs endangering their neighbourhoods, high tertiary education fees, ongoing gender-based violence and various other concerns. While feeling hopeless, many believe that resorting to street protests and engaging in violence are the only viable solutions to make their voices heard.**

**P**eaceful protests and social mobilisation are essential to democracies as they allow citizens to express their dissatisfaction to political leaders between elections and when traditional institutional processes have become ineffective. Ironically, most protests do not result in lasting change. While most protesters and leaders engage in peaceful demonstrations, there are always those who resort to violence. This is because protests and social movements consist of diverse communities with various expressions, political factions and leaders. Some of these groups advocate for violent direct action and act accordingly during protests. However, criminals often exploit protests as

an opportunity to commit crimes, which can escalate the violence (Habib, 2020). For many community members, protests are the only way to get the government's attention: "If you don't protest, they never hear what you're saying" (Brooks, 2019).

## **What is a violent protest?**

In an article entitled "Violence and democracy in South Africa's community protests," Marcel Paret, an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Utah and a Senior Research Associate in the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg, critically examines the ambiguous nature of the term "violent protest". He highlights the conflation of meanings associated with the term "violence," noting that it can refer to actions by different actors, such as the police and protesters, and can include a range of behaviours, from social disruption and property damage to personal attacks.

Prof Paret explains the diverse usage of the term. Firstly, "violence" may be used without specifying a particular meaning or action, leaving readers to interpret it themselves. Secondly, it can refer to protesters' actions, such as vandalising property. The term is also used to describe social disruptions such as when roads are barricaded or tyres are set alight. Thirdly, "violent protests" occasionally depict incidents of police brutality without clearly assigning responsibility for the violence to the police, thereby implying that the protesters themselves are the ones engaging in violence. Lastly, "violence" can also refer to protesters hurling stones at motorists, assaulting community members or intimidating foreign shop owners, alongside incidents involving arrests for public violence and looting of shops owned by foreigners (Chiwarawara, 2021).

## Reasons why peaceful protests turn violent

While thousands of people gather to express their outrage peacefully, some demonstrations turn violent and are marred by vandalism and clashes with the police. Prof Donatella Della Porta, a political science professor in Italy, believes that violence in protests arises from two distinct factors, namely aggressive police action and when various political groups compete for control over the leadership of social movements. Inadequate management of protests by law enforcement agencies has the potential to escalate peaceful demonstrations into violent ones. However, the second factor is often overlooked, as it requires collective self-reflection and political confrontation among movement participants (Habib, 2020).

## The media and violent protests

Mainstream media often highlights the increasing tendency of service delivery protests to turn violent. Media coverage is skewed towards larger protests, dramatic elements such as novel tactics and protests in major urban areas over smaller local ones. The emphasis on violence in these reports affects which protests are covered and how they are perceived by the public. Consequently, the public often views protesters negatively, perceiving them as violent and destabilising, despite potential justification for their actions. While media focus on violence is driven by the desire for newsworthy stories, it often overlooks peaceful protests, distorting public perception. Similarly, both government and law enforcement frequently label protesters as hooligans or criminals, further shaping public opinion negatively (Chiwarawara, 2021).

For protestors to gain media attention, it is frequently essential to exert pressure on decision-makers. This is because media coverage allows protesters to capture the notice of influential political figures. However, attracting media attention is challenging as everyday forms of community expression often go unnoticed by the media. Consequently, protesters often resort to more extreme and dramatic actions that possess news value to attract attention. Unfortunately, this can sometimes lead to incidents of violence as a strategy to gain media visibility (Pointer, 2015). The crowd uses the media for various purposes, such as:

- Seeking publicity for their grievances.
- Gaining internal and external visibility.
- Establishing a political platform.
- Provoking responses from the SAPS (Geldenhuys, 2017).

## Children caught up in violent protests

When adults attempt to address community issues through violent protests, children often find themselves inadvertently involved. In May 2017, Mr Fikile Mbalula, the then Minister of Police, appealed to parents to shield their children from such unrest, cautioning that they were being unwittingly used as pawns. He emphasised the dangers, noting that even very young and innocent children were being exposed

to harm, pushed to the forefront of confrontations. Shockingly, children as young as nine were observed throwing stones and bottles during these tumultuous events, disregarding their own safety (Voice of Cape FM, 2017).

In a study conducted by Brooks, a member of the Public Order Policing (POP) Unit recounted an incident where minors were involved in looting shops during a protest. The police member felt conflicted about having to use rubber bullets where these young people were present, stating: "And now having to shoot (rubber bullets) on those kids, it's minor kids! But eventually it's your work, you have to do it. Because they were looting the shops, they were robbing people. It was now not a strike whereby they are striking for houses. They were damaging properties, schools, taking things from other churches ... In the middle of those children there's always adults" (Brooks, 2019).

Although some children are active participants in violent protests as mentioned above, there are unfortunately children who sometimes become innocent victims in situations involving violent protests or when police intervene to restore order. One such a tragic event unfolded in Slovo Park, south of Johannesburg in August 2023. During a service delivery protest that escalated into violence, 16-year-old Karabo Chaka went outside to observe the situation from his family's yard. Trying to disperse the protest with teargas and rubber bullets, police members entered the yard. Karabo was struck in the head by a rubber bullet and regrettably, the teenager succumbed to his injuries and passed away (Gilili, 2023).

A more positive story of a child caught up in violent protests was exemplified by what happened to baby Melokuhle. During the July 2021 riots in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, triggered by the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma, looting and arson were rampant. In Durban, looters set a building on fire, leaving several people, including children, trapped inside. One of these children was baby Melokuhle, whose mother was visiting a friend on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor when they noticed smoke rising. Because of the fire, the elevator was out of service and the mother hurriedly tried to descend the stairs with her baby. However, she was unable to reach the ground floor due to blockages in the area. Being desperate, she managed to reach a balcony on the second floor, where she appealed to passers-by for help. "All I could think of was ensuring my baby survived," she recounted. Fortunately, the baby was saved and the mother was later reunited with her child (BBC, 2021).

Another indication of how children and their future are disregarded during violent protests is evident in the destruction of schools which deprives children of their right to education. Children often suffer the consequences of violent protests which is what happened in Mahikeng in the North West, where the community of Ga-Khunwana witnessed the closure of six schools for two weeks due to violent protests. The reasons were because the community demanded basic services such as water, a satellite police station, improved road infrastructure and Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses (Mhlathi, 2019). Similarly, in the Western Cape, 21 schools in Khayelitsha and Lwandle were forced to close due to protests demanding RDP houses and water services (Lesley-Anne, 2019). In another instance in 2016, protests in Vuwani, Limpopo, over municipal demarcation led to the burning and vandalism of 27 schools (HSRC, 2018). These protests were sparked by a decision to incorporate Vuwani into a new municipality by the Municipal Demarcation Board (MDB) (Kgatlé, 2018). The disruption and vandalism of schools severely impact educators' ability to teach and learners' ability to learn (Mbokazi, 2012). When schools are destroyed during civil unrest, records are lost and facilities are damaged or looted, contributing to a negative attitude towards education among learners and decreased morale among educators (Mushoma, 2020).

## The police and protestors

Communities and law enforcement sometimes clash during violent protests, particularly when community frustration mounts due to the perceived political manipulation of the police. There are several triggers for such conflicts, with one of the most significant the rapid and sometimes excessive use of tactics such as rubber bullets and teargas by SAPS and metro police in response to crowd unrest. These actions can escalate tensions and provoke repeated confrontations between police and community groups, eroding trust in both the police and the government (Lancaster, 2016).

The use of force in dispersal of crowds must comply with the provisions of section 9(1) and (2) of the Gatherings Act 205 of 1993. During operations, ongoing negotiations between police members and organisers or other leaders must occur. If these negotiations and other crowd control measures prove ineffective and there is a threat to persons or property, or if the gathering is illegal under specific circumstances, the police may use the minimum necessary force to disperse the crowd. This action must follow the procedures detailed in section 9(2) of the Gatherings Act 205 of 1993. Section 9(2) specifies that the force should be

proportionate to what is required to disperse the people who have gathered and the circumstances and objectives of the situation. Force, according to Act 205 of 1993, should only be used when unavoidable (De Vos, 2016).

According to Brooks (2019), a member of the POP Unit mentioned that protestors often perceive the police, particularly the Public Order Police, as a constant threat, believing they are only present to use force and disperse them, which contradicts their actual constitutional duties. The POP member remarked that their primary role is to uphold law and order during gatherings, not to antagonise protestors. They acknowledged that during violent or non-peaceful protests, tensions may rise when protestors view the police as adversaries. However, the member noted that they are fulfilling a vital job and are not inherently opposed to the protestors. Brooks (2019) found that strained relations between police and communities exacerbate protest tensions, often aggravated by police responses involving force. Many police members interviewed in the study expressed feeling unappreciated by the public, noting instances of receiving derogatory or racist remarks from the communities they serve (Brooks, 2019).

The police generally avoid using force during protests, but violent protestors occasionally leave them with no alternative. When law enforcement intervenes in such situations, it can be traumatic for the community. Yet, attacks on police members by armed community members are equally distressing, including those wielding stones, pangas and other weapons readily used by protestors.

Brooks (2019) observed that the police had become scapegoats for service delivery failures. Police members regard their primary duties as safeguarding rights, preventing crime, ensuring safety and restoring order as responsibilities from which they do not shy away. However, there is a widespread sentiment, often overlooked by those outside the SAPS, that the police are left to handle issues originating elsewhere. Members of POP and Visible Policing Units describe the SAPS as being caught in the middle. When municipalities and local councillors fail in their duties, it falls upon the SAPS to manage the consequences. In the study by Brooks (2019), one police member reflected on protests in their area, attributing community unrest to issues such as housing shortages. This member stressed that political leaders often make promises they cannot keep, merely to secure votes. Another POP member expressed frustration, noting that the police are frequently caught in a dilemma, having to navigate between unfulfilled political promises and community expectations. Consequently, police members often have to act as mediators between government authorities and local communities (Brooks, 2019).





## Impact of violent protests

Violent protests not only affect local communities but also have far-reaching negative consequences for the entire country by hampering the national economy and deterring investors and tourists. These protests threaten the safety of community members, employees and visitors in affected areas. In regions near popular tourist destinations such as the Kruger National Park and Cape Town, violent protests disrupt and endanger the lives of tourists, significantly impacting the local economy. When tourists are unable to access these areas, they cannot support local businesses by purchasing goods such as artwork and fresh produce (Geldenhuys, 2017).

The most vulnerable groups, including the poor, children and the elderly, bear the brunt of such unrest. During violent service delivery protests, essential community facilities such as health clinics and schools are often destroyed, compounding the government's responsibilities. Rebuilding damaged infrastructure drains resources that could otherwise be allocated to housing or education initiatives, further straining South Africa's already fragile economy.

## The cost of violent protests

The economic cost combined with the loss of jobs and lives due to violent protests is enormous. In 2016, factories along the KwaZulu-Natal North Coast became targets of rioters who vandalised and set fire to several establishments, resulting in the loss of 2000 jobs, leaving many unable to pay rent and facing eviction. One of the affected factories, Southpoint Industries, which employed 1000 workers and produces industrial bags for various sectors, had to shut down for two weeks, incurring a production loss of R10 million. Another factory, Ronglida, known for manufacturing a wide range of plastic goods, suffered a production loss of R3 million. Ronglida also faced penalties from a major customer due to non-delivery of advertised consignments (Khambule, Nomdo and Siswana, 2019).

In the same year, Vuwani, a semi-rural community in Limpopo, experienced protests that led to the destruction of 24 public primary and high schools. The protests were sparked by dissatisfaction with the Municipal Demarcation Board's decision to place Vuwani under the jurisdiction of Vhembe District. This act disrupted the education of many children, leading to significant costs for the government to rebuild and restore educational facilities. As of mid-2019, most of the attacked schools had not been fully restored, with estimated damages totalling R175 million (Khambule, Nomdo and Siswana, 2019).

Through SA Special Risk Insurance Agency (Sasria) data, the SA Local Government Association (SALGA) was able to assess the nature of damage to municipal property due to riots for the period 2013 to 2018. According to the data, the total damage for the six-year period due to political and non-political incidents amounted to R392 million countrywide. Service delivery-related protests were the most expensive, contributing to more than R221 million (Ndaliso, 2020). Regrettably, there are no recent figures available, except for data from the July 2021 riots in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Those week-long riots resulted in more than 300 deaths (Visagie, Turok and Swartz, 2021), caused significant economic damage estimated at more than R50 billion and put approximately 150 000 jobs at risk (Cele and Wilson, 2021).



The issues of inadequate service delivery, corruption and political challenges have contributed to the rapid rise of violent and destructive protests in South Africa. However, protesters must understand that public infrastructure is crucial for fostering inclusive growth and driving spatial transformation, which, in turn, contributes to economic progress. Vandalising infrastructure during violent protests is counterproductive, as it limits the community's access to various social and economic opportunities. Protesting has almost become a science, with protesters adept at attracting attention which is increasingly concerning for the government and many citizens. We can all reflect on the words of the Zulu King, Misuzulu kaZwelithini, during the July 2021 riots when he condemned the looting, stating that it painted a negative picture of the community and only harmed the poor. "I never imagined that my father's people would be involved in the burning of their own country ... my father's people are committing suicide," he said (BBC, 2021).

## Editor's note

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## Community violence to make their voices heard

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