

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

Rights, democracy and social movements in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper will outline a number of factors behind the emergence of Abahlali baseMjondolo (ABM), the South African shack dwellers' movement, and consider a number of elements of their thought. Initially, economic and political factors, the conditions for people living in shacks and a widely shared feeling of betrayal by politicians will be sketched as factors providing the material and psychological conditions for social movement formation. I will then describe the thinking of the movement, which can, for convenience, be considered under equality and democracy.

I spent three months in South Africa with Abahlali in 2008, spending much of my time living in Abahlali communities. The movement asked me to research and speak to people about the problem and politics of shack fires and I wrote a report on the issue for them which can be found at www.abahlali.org/node/4013.

Introduction

Abahlali baseMjondolo, the name is isiZulu for 'people that stay in shacks', is a South African social movement of poor, mainly African people centred around the city of Durban. The movement has around 10,000 paid-up members and more than 30,000 active supporters in over 40 affiliated settlements. They have recently formed a national alliance (The Poor People's Alliance) with Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town, Landless People's Movement in Johannesburg and the Rural and Farm Dwellers Network. The movement is remarkable for its thoughtful and ethical approach to an egalitarian, democratic evolving politics.

Economic context

South Africa serves as a textbook example of how globalisation plays itself out in the semi-industrialised world. (Ballard 2006:12)

South Africa has historically been one of the most unequal countries in the world. Inequality has increased since the ANC took power; the Gini coefficient rose from 0.69 in 1996 to 0.77 in 2001 (Schwabe 2004:2, Ballard 2006:13) and the HDI has fallen by about 10% to 1975 levels (UNDP 2007). These changes have taken place in a context of continued economic growth of 3 to 4% (van der Berg et al 2007:11, UNDP 2003:10). The top 20% of the population (majority white) rank around 30 on the Human Development Index (0.82), 100 places above the poorest 20% (Grim et al 2006:11). The poorest, majority African, 40% of the population have a HDI rank of around 0.60, similar to Lao, India and Botswana (Grim et al 2006:10). In this group over a third of children suffer chronic malnutrition and only a quarter of households have running water (World Bank 1999:9). Indeed, 20% of all urban households have no electricity, 25% have no running water and 33% have no flush toilet (War on Want nd).

Negotiations over the transition to democracy meant that ANC rule came at the cost of pro-business, pro-market policies (Ballard 2006:13). Despite the initial Keynesian RDP period, in 1996 with the introduction of GEAR South Africa became the first African country to self-impose economic reforms forced onto other countries through structural adjustment programmes. GEAR, was aimed at attracting investment (promoted as the route to development), however, to do this it was necessary to introduce government spending cuts (to reduce national deficit), tax concessions for big business (to attract foreign investment), reductions in tariff barriers (on clothing, textiles, leather, and cars), privatisation of government assets (including public services), reductions in welfare provision, and labour 'flexibility'.

It was argued that these policies were necessary to achieve economic growth through FDI, which would also lead to an increase in employment and improved socio-economic equality. While growth has continued, other results have been negative: de-industrialisation, job losses and rising unemployment (due to the reduction of tariffs on imports), capital flight (due to relaxation of investment controls), downsizing in the size of the public sector, and cuts in education, health and welfare spending.

Unemployment in South Africa is high, between 26-37% depending on the definition (World Bank 2006). Habib (2004:235) describes the net achievement of GEAR as realising the state's deficit targets 'at the cost of employment, poverty and inequality'. While 1.4 to 2 million jobs were created, overall unemployment increased. As remuneration for skilled jobs rose, unskilled employment declined (du Toit 2006:5).

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

Government statistics for 1995-2000 show an increase in poverty and inequality following transition. Average black household income fell 19 per cent from 1995-2000 (to \$3,714 per year) at the same time as white household income rose 15 per cent (to \$22,600 per year). Across the racial divide, the poorest half of South Africa's share of national income fell from 11.4 per cent in 1995 to 9.7 per cent in 2000 (Bond 2004).

Thus, consistent with the results of global patterns of economic change, there were benefits for the middle class and to some extent for the skilled working class from the new economic framework. However, despite economic growth, the poorest members of society in South Africa became poorer (Benjamin 2005:2, Desai 2002) and social inequality increased (Schwabe 2004:1, du Toit 2006:5). South Africa, as a willing participant in free-market globalisation¹ provides an instructive glimpse of some of the effects of pro-market policy.

During the struggle prior to 1994 there were only two levels, two classes – the rich and the poor. Now after the election there are three classes – the poor, the middle class and the rich. The poor have been isolated from the middle class. We are becoming more poor and the rest are becoming more rich. We are on our own. (Zikode 2005:2)

Political context

During the anti-apartheid struggle, the ANC formed an alliance with other strong anti-apartheid organisations, COSATU (Coalition of South Africa Trade Unions) and the SACP (South African Communist Party). However, during the transition the more left-leaning voices of COSATU and SACP were marginalised leaving the ANC to pursue a more pro-market agenda. The institutionalised left (SACP, COSATU, and the UDF) now work as junior partners within the ANC framework as a legacy of the struggle. The possibility of contesting the frameworks in which policy choices are offered has been exchanged for a limited (and frequently sidelined) input into policy discussions (see, e.g. van der Walt 2006:2, Naidoo et al 2005:34-39, Desai 2002). The pro-poor policy changes that have been made are restricted to the formal economy (COSATU's constituency), and increasing numbers of South Africans fall outside of this (Ballard 2006:12, Gibson 2006:21). For example, COSATU membership fell by 200,000 between 2000 and 2003 due to de-industrialisation, de-unionisation, and increasingly labour 'flexibility' (Barchiesi 2006:226). 40% of South Africans have formal full-time jobs, for the African population, this figure falls to 33% (Barchiesi 2006:226).

Since 1994, popular participation in the elections has shown a trend to constant decline. In the 2004 elections, the ANC was voted into power by a minority of eligible voters. A coincidence is also observable between areas of electoral apathy and low-income, marginalised communities (Barchiesi 2006:213). In this context, the rise of militant community-based movements, sceptical of the narrative of 'national liberation' and active around community rather than the workplace issues poses a significant threat to ANC legitimacy.

In contemporary South Africa, "civil society" is usually constituted by a combination of financial and (state) political sanction (Neocosmos 2005:163-4). This invariably leads to donor and government influence over civil society.

In most instances neither NGOs nor academic research institutes should, strictly speaking, be considered as part of civil society. This is because they tend to be professionalised projects of states or corporate donors and civil society is most often defined as popular association independent of the market and the state. (Pithouse 2006a:25)

It is arguable therefore that social movements democratise civil society as well as the state by providing channels for otherwise marginalised citizens to hold powerful actors to account (see Gibson 2006:5 and Ballard et al 2006:413-415). Given the domestication of civil society and the left in South Africa, social movements arguably play a vital role in defending the rights of the marginalised. We might consider in this respect the government shift around 2001 to a more welfare orientated economic policy which was concurrent with increased social movement activity (Ballard et al 2006:415).

The 'new' community-based movements in contemporary South Africa are often rooted in the township civics of the anti-apartheid era and collective resistance to the group-areas act, pass laws, and military harassment (Gibson 2006:4). Civics were often influenced by the 'new social movements' of the 1970s and organised through decentralisation, networks, mass meetings, a community base, and an explicitly political framing of issues. In the early 90s civics were using collective rent strikes to push for transition to democracy. However, the transitional period saw civic demobilisation, professionalisation and co-option (partly through bodies such as SANCO, the ANC's community wing).

¹ The World Trade Organisation required South Africa to phase out export tariffs over 12 years. The government volunteered to do it in eight, resulting in tens of thousands of job losses. (Desai 2002:65)

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

Although there was a rise in social movement activity from late 90s (such as the Treatment Action Campaign, Anti Privatisation Forum, Concerned Citizens Forum) this was often due to the influence (and funding) of middle class activists and NGOs. These movements often demobilised and fractured after engagement with the state or lack of success (Gibson 2006:15). It is claimed that only in the early 00s, after the prolonged effects of GEAR have made themselves felt, that resurgence of a range of former civics as social movements has taken place. These more recent movements are often based in informal settlements, and are self-organised and independent of NGO and activist patronage (Gibson 2006:15). In 2004/5 there were 5085 legal and 881 illegal protests in South Africa (Cape Argus 2005). This wave of unrest came after the 2004 national elections and during the run up to the 2006 municipal elections, although described in the media as 'spontaneous', protests over 'service delivery', they can arguably be seen as the reflection of a population tired of empty promises and a decade of ANC betrayal (Patel 2007:24).

They only remember us when they need us to vote for elections. And they promise whatever. I think our democracy is just to vote for them. And then we go back and sit in the mud. (Figlan quoted in Ngiam 2006:33)

Shack conditions

I am afraid. Every day is an emergency in the *jondolos*. (Zikode 2008c:114)

Despite the rights to water, electricity, and housing defined in the '94 South African constitution, the ANC has been slow to deliver these basic services to the South African citizens who were often at the front line of the anti-apartheid struggle. In the new South Africa, the informal settlements formed by people fleeing the grinding poverty of the rural homelands in the last years of apartheid, have become the solution to the 'warehousing problem' of modern capitalism's excess humanity (Boal 2006:13). 16.4 per cent or about one in six of all South African households live in shacks (Albertyn 2006:vii). In eThekweni, a third of the municipal population, and around half of the African population live in shacks. This is around 920,000 people (Marx & Charlton 2002:6).

Under Apartheid geography was racialised with urban areas restricted for the "white", while Indians and "coloureds" were relocated to semi-urban townships, and Africans to rural "homelands". From the mid-50s townships were built to house employed African men and their families on the edges of cities. This programme began to break down in late apartheid as the national party government weakened under internal and external pressure. At this time, excluded people seized the opportunity to move closer to urban centres, covertly at first but over time, the initial 'informal settlements' became more permanent. Now, post-apartheid, the logic of the market is leading to waves of new relocations, as the poor are removed to make way for 'development'.

Shack settlements are a poor people's solution to a lack of affordable housing, especially in cities. 60.7% of people in eThekweni live on less than R427 a month (eThekweni Municipal Council 2005:15). Rent in 'formal' accommodation might cost R500 a month plus bills, while rent in a shack costs around R100 a month (Flo 2008).

Shack communities are often referred to as 'informal', as 'temporary' and as 'camps', but a 2001 survey found that "over half of the household heads with informal dwellings have lived in their homes for between five and ten years and a quarter have lived in them for over eleven years" (Marx & Charlton 2003:16).

The number of households living in shacks increased from 1.45 million in 1996 to 1.84 million in 2001. This is an increase of 26%, more than double the 11% population increase over the same period (Breaking New Ground 2004:3-4). The national strategy for informal settlements, *Breaking New Ground*, recommends that they be upgraded where they are whenever possible. However, the policy has not yet been implemented anywhere in South Africa. Shack 'eradication' is still frequently undertaken alongside the provision of new housing on the urban periphery.

Take for example, Kennedy Road where ABM have an office. The settlement, in Clare Estate, Durban, is home to around 6,000 people. Most residents are originally from rural KwaZulu-Natal and the Transkei. Kennedy Road, like many squatter communities in South Africa was started in the mid-70s as the apartheid state weakened and people from rural areas moved to the cities in search of a better livelihood, access to good schools, a desire for city life, escape from traditional authority, and to reunite families. The settlement has a 'vibrant collective life' (Pithouse 2006b:21) including a creche, churches, a vegetable garden, shops, pubs and cultural, sporting and religious projects.

Amenities at Kennedy Road are minimal. There are five standpipes and 9 portable toilets for 6,000 residents, and even these are the recent result of popular mobilisation. This is obviously a threat to health and a risk for the safety of women and children, as well as imposing an additional level of unpleasantness for people living with HIV/AIDS. There is limited electricity in the settlement and shack fires are a regular occurrence. On average in eThekweni

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

there is a shack fire every day (SA National Fire Statistics 2003-2008). At Kennedy Road, state services, such as the fire brigade and ambulances, have only recently started to attend emergencies when called. In many other places they still don't.

Many Kennedy Road residents have no viable livelihood. The main sources of employment are in the informal economy, such as informal trading, casual labour, and recycling materials for money (Beresford 2006:26). Other more formal sources of employment are day work in Durban's industrial area, as security or cleaners, at the neighbouring Bissar Road dump, or as domestic help in middle-class areas.

Shacks belonging to people scheduled for relocation to Durban's periphery, and shacks not authorised by the municipality will be subject to demolition. Little warning is given. Shacks will be torn down even with people still inside (Giles and Khan 2006). However, if new housing projects do not have community participation throughout the planning process, then recipients will be unwilling to move, or may 'just rent out our houses and run back to the jondolos' (Zikode 2008). When housing is understood as a numerical question of units to be delivered and does not take into account the effect of social and economic infrastructure on people's livelihoods new schemes will fail. Without community involvement and control over planning, shack settlements will not go away.

Breyani politics and 'bare life'

Yakoob Baig (Ward 25 councillor) used to come with some pots of breyani, to the side of the road. We said no, we are not dogs, we are not animals, that you have to dish food to and then forget about them, until you remember, oh, we have to go and give food to the shack dwellers again ... No, we are not pets, we are human beings. We have to be treated like human beings. (M'du Hlongwa, quoted in Ngiam 2006:3)

Abahlali's struggle for recognition and citizenship illustrates Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'bare life'. Agamben's close reading of Schmitt and Benjamin's ideas about the unstable relationship between law and (state) power, traces the paradox at the heart of modern sovereignty. The inscription of natural rights in law simultaneously limits the power of the sovereign state and extends its reach by drawing the subject into an ever closer relationship with it (Agamben 1995:127-8). Agamben asserts that the modern sovereign, draws legitimacy and power from its citizens ("the people are sovereign") by including them through rights (Agamben 1995:139-140).

However, the new 'sovereign subject' can only be constituted by the extension of the state of exception (suspension of rights) and bare life to 'every individual body' (Agamben 1995:124). Formal rights become constitutive of citizenship, leading to the contradiction identified by Arendt, that the stateless person, the refugee, despite being the person to whom 'human' rights should most apply, in practice is the least able to draw on them (Agamben 1995:126), and is frequent reduced to the merely biological - 'bare-life' (e.g. in IDP camps, detention centres).

Agamben takes Arendt's argument further by understanding refugees and the *camps* of the Second World War (among others) as a model for modern political power. Camps are defined as the 'the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* [bare-life] is virtually confounded with the citizen' (Agamben 1995:171). This allows for the increasing spread of camps, including refugee detention centres and 'certain outskirts of our cities' (Agamben 1995:175).

When they say Africa belongs to all who live in it, it therefore also means that Clare Estate belongs to all who live in it. Because they think if you live in Kennedy Road you are not South African, we are not a part of citizens of Clare Estate. (S'bu Zikode, in O'Sullivan 2005)

This line of thought can be used to illuminate the situation of South Africa shack-dwellers, whose 'squatter camps' are simultaneously within the boundaries of state power (defined by geography, birth, and control) and largely outside of its juridical/constitutional order. That the state response to the shack dwellers' situation is denial of their rights and occasional provision of food and blankets demonstrates their reduction to bare-life. People in the shacks are under no illusions about this.

Human beings cannot live in fires

An illustration of the reduction of shack dwellers to 'bare life', a reduction which ABM obviously challenges, can be seen through the politics of fire. Shack fires are a frequent and preventable tragedy in South African cities that stem from a denial of rights and citizenship to the country's poorest citizens. Economic policy forces people into cities, where there is no land and therefore no affordable housing. Shack settlements are denied electricity, water, space. Shack dwellers are also denied the right to build their houses of safer materials like bricks. We can say

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

that people are forced into camps and forced to remain in 'camp' conditions by municipal government policy and lack of implementation of national policy.

South African Fire Department statistics show that in South Africa on average over the last five years there are ten shack fires a day and someone dies in a shack fire every other day. In 2006, 141 people died in shack fires, nearly 60% of all deaths in fires and more than deaths in all other types of fires combined. Data from the Medical Research Council suggests that the number of deaths is higher still. Between 2001 and 2005, a total of 1003 people died in shack fires in South Africa's five largest cities; an average of 200 deaths a year in these cities alone.

Ask anyone from a shack settlement the causes of fires and they will tell you: candles and paraffin stoves. Open flames were the biggest single determined cause of fires in informal dwellings in 2006, and nearly half of the known causes. The eThekweni Municipality will not allow electricity in shacks. This is despite the fact that paraffin is more expensive than electricity, and hard to afford for many people. Paraffin is also a danger to health. Many shack dwellers note that paraffin fumes cause chest problems. Children in the shacks are poisoned after drinking it by accident.

Since 2001, when eThekweni's Slums Clearance Programme was announced, the municipality has refused to extend electricity to shacks as they are now considered 'temporary'. The policy states that 'lack of funding' as the reason that electrification of informal settlements has been discontinued. However, the Municipality has continued to spend public money on non-essential projects like the theme-park and casino. The refusal to allow electrify shacks sends a clear message to shack dwellers, whose children must grow up without electricity while seeing electricity in the houses around them. How long will shack dwellers have to remain at the risk of fires while waiting for their settlements to be upgraded or developed?

Instead of electricity, the Municipality pays for Disaster Management to provide blankets and food after fires. Sometimes they pay to put shack dwellers in tents or transit camps. Sometimes they pay for funerals.

Since 2001, electrification has not only been discontinued – the municipality has pursued a dangerous campaign of armed de-electrification against shack settlements. This is often accompanied by police violence and theft. In some cases this tactic seems to be a response to mobilisation by Abahlali. The day after Abahlali announced that they would be challenging the legality of the KwaZulu Natal Slums Act in court the Municipality arrived with 'heavily armed' police and a dog unit at Kennedy Road. They made over 300 disconnections and destroyed the cables. In November 2007 when Abahlali marched on Mayor Mlaba demanding electrification to stop fires, peaceful protesters were attacked and beaten by police and 14 people arrested. At the eMagwaveni settlement in Tongaat, electricity connections have led to police violence, including 'a police shooting at a meeting held by residents to address the issue of electricity'. Pemary Ridge also faces tension with police over electricity. Philani Zungu, an Abahlali activist who lives at Pemary Ridge has been arrested and charged for unlawful connections. He has not denied the charges, but points out that Pemary Ridge has not burnt and demands to be judged on that fact. When access to electricity is criminalised, the very poor have to break the law to keep their communities safe. People that take these risks on behalf of their communities are considered heroes. It is the eThekweni Municipality's policy to deny electricity to people living in shacks that is considered criminal.

Betrayal

The politician is an animal that hibernates (Hlongwa 2007:2)

Despite the appalling conditions in the shacks, Abahlali's struggle can be seen to have transformed and taken a distinctive path in 2005. The movement formed after shack dwellers at Kennedy Road blocked a major road for four hours and held it against the police in protest at the sale of a piece of land that had long been promised to the community for housing. The movement now has tens of thousands of members in over 40 settlements.

The legacy of the anti-apartheid struggle is that many people still have a strong attachment to the ideas that the ANC is associated with. Dissatisfaction is often placed on corrupt and inefficient politicians but not the party as a whole. Part of the struggle for Abahlali has been to 'reclaim the soul of the ANC' or to remind them of their constituents (Patel 2007).

Even now I'm still an ANC member. But I'm also Abahlali baseMjondolo. Now we are fighting, let me put it like this, we are not fighting, we are reminding our government what our government promised us. If I put it as if I'm fighting it would mean I am against, whereas I am not against. I am just reminding our government to fulfill their promises. What we have been fighting for before, let the government not forget. (Ndabankulu quoted in Bryant 2007:16)

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

However, after over four years of struggle against the ANC city government in Durban, and at a national level, the ANC is now rejected by almost all of the movement leadership.

The reason that the road blockade was transformative is that it marked a point at which people from Kennedy Road gave up on following 'the official channels'. The Kennedy Road Development Committee, was previously affiliated to SANCO and the KRDC was trying to win development for their community by following the ANC line. Kennedy Road Development Committee was a loyal ANC structure, which worked within the system for over ten years, and got nothing. This led to a collective understanding that the system was not working. When, in 2005, the community discovered that 'we were on our own', the formation of Abahlali as a movement was aided by the contacts that Zikode and others in the KRDC had made previously.

The movement formation was also due to Kennedy Road having a 'strong democratic culture'. Because of the democratic culture, everyone knew what was happening, and the community was solid. When the community discovered the sale of the land at Elf Road that they had been discussing with the council for new housing, people blocked the streets and the settlement broke with the party (Pithouse 2007).

We have learnt from our experience that when you want to achieve what you want, when you want to achieve what is legitimate by peaceful negotiations, by humbleness, by respecting those in authority your plea becomes criminal. You will be deceived for more than ten years, you will be fooled and undermined. This is why we have resorted to the streets. When we stand there in our thousands we are taken seriously. (Zikode 2005:3)

The grassroots community structures of the anti-apartheid struggle have provided many South Africans with a living memory of participatory militant politics (see Nimmagudda 2008:11). This combined with the betrayal of their belief in the ANC has engendered widespread popular dissent among the poor. Abahlali, perhaps because of the Kennedy Road Development Committee's good democratic structures and patient work inside the state system has become the first formation of this dissent into a mass movement.

Democracy: Nothing for us without us

While there is always some form of governance structure in settlements, these take a variety of forms. Settlement may be controlled by elites – people there with money, political connections, or simply those who got there first. Informal settlements in Durban are often controlled by authoritarian ANC members who are maintained in control in exchange for petty favours to deliver the settlement as a vote bank (Pithouse 2007). Settlement committees are often not elected and do not allow political organising.

Forman Road, which was the second settlement to join Abahlali, was previously run by a woman who was last elected ten years before, and used armed men to enforce control. The settlement called a mass meeting, at personal risk, and in a show of democratic power the majority (thousands of people) decided to march with Abahlali. The old committee in response called the local ANC councillor to meet with the settlement and twelve people came. After that the old committee's power was broken and the settlement affiliated to Abahlali (Pithouse 2007).

The movement has democratized the internal governance of many settlements. The first substantive item on Abahlali's Constitution is to improve the lives of shack dwellers by 'working to fully democratise the internal governance of all settlements' (Abahlali 2006).

Each settlement has its own committee, often originally formed under SANCO. All Abahlali settlements have now broken with SANCO, which had an authoritarian style of management, for a more grassroots led approach. The movement and individual settlements meet weekly and are federated to form AbM. Once a settlement is democratised, democracy is taken very seriously in Abahlali's work. Meetings are the 'life-blood' of the movement (Patel 2007).

Our discipline has been about discussing things carefully at our meetings, thinking together at our meetings and then taking decisions that we are all committed too. Our discipline is a shared responsibility. (Zikode 2008b)

Abahlali meetings are usually attended by around 30-40 elected representatives from settlement development committees as well as local settlement residents. Decisions are made by consensus if possible, and by vote if not. Large decisions are referred back to local settlement committees for further discussion, and representative also report back on the meeting to their local community (Beresford 2006:40).

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

AbM selects office holders at branch, settlement and movement level through open elections at annual assemblies. Office holders are recallable, rotated, and mandated to act on specific issues at open weekly meetings. Office holders are not elected to make decisions but to ensure democratic process on matters relating to the issues.

The only really clever thinking from a leader given trust by the poor, maybe like myself, maybe like yourself, is that instead of talking more, the leader should provide a platform for the people to talk. So let us therefore allow other people to share their experience and ideas. Let us hear from everyone, especially those are not normally confident to speak in a place like this. (Zikode 2006b)

There is a saying in the movement; "there is no bad idea" – everyone present at a meeting will express their thought on an issue and decide together on the best course of action so that decisions are made by 'discussing everything, everybody gets the chance to talk' (Lembede 2007). Members are expected to be tolerant and to phrase disagreements of opinion in a respectful manner, 'we are brothers and sisters, we are family', System Cele says (2006).

Women, like System, are strong in the movement, and are brave, articulate and committed activists in many branches. Shamita Naidoo and Louisa Motha at Motala Heights, Mama Kiki at Joe Slovo, and Sindy Mkhize at Kennedy Road are prominent figures in the movement, and the movement launched a Women's League in August 2008 in order to better address and represent the concerns of women.

While a commitment to democracy may slow down the process of the movement, it is also likely to allow for genuine growth and for participants to continue their association over time. Pithouse (2006b:46) describes this emphasis on democracy as due to necessity as well as ethical commitments:

There is no other way to build popular consent for a risky political project amongst a hugely diverse group of vulnerable people with profound experiences of marginalisation and exploitation in multiple spheres of life, including political projects waged in their name.

Ethically, it is part of the prefigurative politics that allow a hermeneutic circle between means and ends. This is the reason for ideological fluidity. As the situation changes over time, ideas, goals and tactics will need to be re-evaluated in order to remain relevant and effective.

Equality: We are poor, not stupid

We are all Professors of our suffering. (Hlongwa 2009)

Abahlali is an intellectually, and ethically, serious project. Meetings are thoughtful, democratic and consensus based. All night 'camps' are held every quarter for members to plan, think and strengthen their solidarity. Mass meetings are characterised by a presentation of the situation and issues from key figures in the community development committee and the movement and then debate from the floor on the best course of action. The movement attempts to rotate key posts, although this has not always been possible. The following quote from ABM President S'bu Zikode's 2008 post-annual general meeting speech (in which he accepted the post for the third year running despite attempting twice to stand down) illustrates the links between the ideas of equality, humanity and direct democracy in Abahlali's thinking:

Our movement is founded on the politic of equality. We start from the recognition that we are all equal. We do not struggle to achieve equality. We struggle for the recognition of the equality that already exists. Our Movement therefore demands that we face and confront any element that seeks to undermine our humanity as ordinary citizens. Today I wish to remind comrades that we are also all equal and deserve equal treatment within our Movement regardless of our positions and tasks. This is the Movement of the poor. It is not an NGO. The movement is not here to save you. You are the movement. (Zikode 2008b)

Abahlali are resolute in their refusal to allow themselves to be co-opted by the government or anyone else. The movement rejects party politics, politicians and NGOs that 'want to use the poor as ladders' (Hlongwa 2009, ABM 2007). Abahlali President, S'bu Zikode has spoken about the movement's politics as an 'elementary politics', that 'was always based on us thinking carefully about our lives and our struggles' (Zikode in Bryant 2007:1), and 'a homemade politics that everyone can understand and find a home in'. He also describes it as 'a living politics'.

we must – as we always do – start with a living politics, a politics of what's close and real to the people. This has been the basis of the movement's success.

...

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

we will always bring it back to the people and back to the living politics. In this way, it is OK to venture into this 'enemy territory' with our tactics, but we always return to the people and will not let the enemy's approaches and language dominate. (Zikode, quoted in Ntseng 2007)

This is a politics based on the lived experience of people living in the shacks. It is a project of what the philosopher Ranciere has called 'communism of the intelligence' (Ranciere 2009). It relies on people thinking through their situation together rather than following an external theory. To be owned by the people, this politics will need to be independent of party or NGO patronage. This intellectual autonomy is asserted in the movement slogan: 'talk to us, not about us'.

Abahlali can be seen to be continuing the thought of Steve Biko replacing black consciousness with class consciousness. This class consciousness is coupled with an awareness of shared humanity. It is this shared humanity that leads to the conclusion that; 'We are human beings. Our lives matter as much as anyone else's life. Our communities matter as much as anyone else's community' (ABM 2008b).

Abahlali starts from its member's shared capacity for intelligence. This underpins the twin commitments to equality and democracy. Abahlali is multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-national. The movement operates on the principle that everyone living in a settlement is from that settlement and has full rights to participate in the political life of that settlement irrespective of their origins. It also has members in two areas in Pinetown in which people live in poor quality houses rather than shacks and who joined because they became familiar with the movement as their communities are adjacent to Abahlali shack settlements. The movement has also worked with street traders in the city of Pinetown in times of crisis.

Abahlali's belief in equality were put to the test in the xenophobic attacks of May 2008. Abahlali mobilised people in each of its settlements to prevent attacks and there were no attacks in any Abahlali settlements. ABM was able to stop an attack in progress in the unaffiliated Kenville settlement and offer shelter to people displaced after the attacks.

This idea of a 'living politics' means that although now land and housing (and fires, and the police, etc.) are key issues these are not limits of the movement's horizon. Although protest from the shacks is often described by politicians and in the media as 'service delivery protests' ABM is not just about services, or even houses. S'bu Zikode, ABM President says simply 'The movement only has one program – to be guided by its members' (Zikode 2008b). Lindela Figlan, Vice President, describes it like this:

Even if they give us houses and all those things, I think to banish a movement like Abahlali I would consider it to be stupidity. But if we keep Abahlali going, I think Abahlali can make so many things in the country straight. If ever they build houses we must continue with another thing, we can fight whatever, whatever thing we notice that is not good, here in South Africa. ... In my own opinion, I think if they can continue even beyond this development, ja, it would be no problem. (Figlan quoted in Gunby 2007:30)

Abahlali is also about dignity and empowerment for shack dwellers. When ABM was first formed, if there was a fire in the shacks it would be unlikely to attract media attention, or if it did the coverage would be negative. Subsequent to ABM's mobilisations, not only do shack fires receive media coverage which questions the policy choices that have led to their frequent occurrence, but people from the shacks will be involved in discussions over the problem. The state, media and NGOs now accept the agency and autonomy of shack dwellers. The movement has led to a shift in thinking that shack dwellers are able to think for themselves and have the right to participate in discussion (Pithouse 2007). Before the mobilisations in 2004 and the birth of the movement shack dwellers didn't appear (or weren't represented) in public space as thinking people. Now when issues are debated in the media Abahlali representatives are invited to discuss their situation on equal terms with government officials. This has shifted the situation of shack dwellers from being objects to subjects (Pithouse 2007).

Everybody thinks. We are poor, not stupid. Planning must not just be a technical talk that excludes the people. Democracy is not just about voting. Democratic planning is the way forward. (ABM 2008)

Conclusions

The marches have achieved some results for ABM. Protests might get small gains for water and sanitation (a tap or toilets for specific settlements (Pithouse 2007). Settlement residents (who are frequently overcrowded) are now able to build new shacks, which before would have been demolished because they were not regularised. Now the council will register them and give them a number. This qualifies them for 'service-delivery' but also allows the municipality to monitor settlements for social control.

Abahlali baseMjondolo: 'a homemade politics'

The main issue of opposing forced relocation has reached a stalemate. Since Abahlali has formed the number of evictions in affiliated settlements has been reduced. The municipality no longer tries to evict big Abahlali settlements (because they know they can't), but they refuse to acknowledge the shack dwellers' right to live in the city (Pithouse 2007). In 2008 ABM fought, legally and politically, relocation of shack residents in Arnet Drive and Motala Heights, Arnet Drive winning a victory in the Durban High Court. 2008 was the second consecutive year that ABM won all battles against eviction (Zikode 2008b). However, the movement is currently fighting against the relocation of people in Siyanda who are being displaced by a freeway. They won a court ruling that residents would have to spend a year in a transit camp before being allocated houses.

Since 2005, as the movement has grown, more has become possible. Abahlali are now making more use of the law and the courts than they could initially, as their increased media profile has enabled them to develop a network of lawyers who will work pro bono (Pithouse 2007). The movement has had to adopt a pragmatic approach to offers of funding, accepting only those which will enable them to continue to act with integrity. In Kennedy Road, 2008 was a year of negotiations as a municipal plan for upgrading of 14 informal settlements in Durban appeared to become a reality. Throughout this process ABM has insisted on the principle of one house for one family instead of one house for one shack. They have also insisted that no-one be left homeless by development. When any ABM settlements were under threat, Abahlali withdrew from negotiations, winning the right to bargain collectively. Electricity, and therefore fires, remains a contentious issue – the compromise being offered was high-mast lighting, communal kitchens and homework areas.

The year ended on a dark note with both Zikode, ABM President and Mzonke Poni, President of Abahlali Western Cape being attacked (and robbed) at night by gangs of youths (Zikode 2008b). Although Abahlali has tried to confront shacklords and shebeen owners before, it seems that the movement will have to continue to work in the shadow of crime and violence that affects the poorest South African citizens the worst.

Abahlali is now preparing to relaunch the No Land, No House, No Vote campaign for the 2009 national elections. The campaign during the 2006 elections successfully called a boycott which hurt the legitimacy of politicians claiming to represent the interests of the poor. No Land, No House, No Vote can be read as a simple contractual statement. However, given ABMs stated commitment to democratic planning and the right to the city it could also be read as an equivalence between economic and political power and therefore a rejection of a political liberty that is accompanied by economic immiseration. Ironically, it is the movement's refusal to engage with formal democratic structures (accompanied by protest and legal work) that provides them with political leverage. Strong voices in the movement are still advocating for a 'no vote' campaign aimed at removing legitimacy of non-performing councillors and building alternate centres of power:

Our boycott brought the percentage of voters in the areas where we are strong right down. In these areas the councillors can't claim to represent the poor and we have made our own organisations, which do represent the poor because they are made for the poor by the poor, much stronger than the councillors.... I am sure that the number of non-voters who choose to work very hard every day struggling in their communities instead of giving trust to politicians will be multiplied in 2009. (Hlongwa 2009)

However, the recent split in the ANC and the launch of the COPE party has threatened to disturb Abahlali's refusal of party politics. While COPE does not appear currently to present a threat to the ANC at a national level, the new development has led to increased interest in party politics for ABM members, especially those wary of a Zulu nationalism. Abahlali are likely to continue their studied neutrality with respect to their member's party politics while formulating issues of concern as a movement for the election campaign. This may call for a move from a refusal to vote to tactical voting based on movement demands. This shift in their relation to voting mirrors the demanding changes in the movement's work as a whole, which has evolved from marches and militancy towards careful engagement while still attempting to maintain political autonomy.

If 2009 is the year of elections, then 2010 and the Soccer World Cup is likely to bring in a new wave of confrontation as South Africa intensifies its creation of 'world class cities'. With these new challenges, a politics of the strong poor is as necessary as ever.

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