Social movement defensive battles Need to engage with politics

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In the South African political landscape there are some feisty social movements that have waged some hard struggles such as Abahlali base Mjondolo. However, the Left needs to be careful not to over-romanticise their contribution to a more democratic South Africa.

On 4 November 2009, the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Johannesburg and Rhodes University hosted a provocative seminar called "Democracy under threat?: What attacks on grassroots activists mean for our politics" to reflect on and debate the recent attacks on Abahlali BaseMjondolo at Kennedy Road.

The seminar brought together grassroots activists from Abahlali, scholars and human rights advocates to discuss threats to free political activity and their implications. Given the state's violent assault on grassroots organisers who have challenged aspects of the ANC's development plans in poor communities, the main concern was understandably to build solidarity to support Abahlali.

During the seminar, it was suggested that a network be created between various progressive stakeholders across the country which would attempt to challenge the repressive arm of the state. A unanimous resolution was passed to pressure the State President to conduct an independent enquiry into the attacks on shack dwellers in Durban.

But an analysis of the discussion at this seminar, and of the politics surrounding the recent events at Kennedy Road and other protest activity around the country, must also take another form. Analysis is needed in order to understand the potential for movements to provide an alternative to the ANC and its neoliberal economic policies.

Are defensive battles enough?
It is certainly important for community organisations to be free to express themselves and to associate without fear of state repression. But there is also the danger that focusing solely on repression and police brutality arouses emotions, thereby blurring our vision and hiding the nature of the movements themselves. This induces romantic accounts of the kind of society or democracy these movements could build if they were not repressed.

Indeed, the Left's depiction of social movements in post-apartheid South Africa has tended to be superficial, labeling the poor's voice as a virtuous one that needs no outside political strategy - as is the case with Abahlali. Alternatively, the Left has tended to assume that movements like the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) automatically challenge neoliberalism, simply because the face of the forum's leadership is anti-neoliberal. Analysts have not gone so far as to analyse the internal dynamics of local affiliates of the APF which, in some instances, actually buy into ANC policies.

These approaches have meant that the Left has ignored the potential for movements to challenge the ideologically dominant ANC. From this perspective, academic leftists and other research-activists critique the policies and often even the ideology of the ANC in power, but the masses are left to their own devices.

With this in mind, we must attempt to soberly uncover the politics of Abahlali and other movements.

One of the most celebrated movements in post-apartheid South Africa, Abahlali is often described as an ideal example of a bottom-up community-based organisation

that genuinely represents the interests of the poor. It claims to be able to speak for itself and on behalf of poor people living in shacks. At the seminar, S'bu Zikode, chairperson of Abahlali, declared that, "grassroots intelligence independently can provide their own political direction, they know what they want." This is contrasted with the top-down and repressive ANC government that serves its own interests.

Similarly, for Mnikelo Ndabankulu, the spokesperson of Abahlali, the recent attacks reveal that, "For the ANC, Abahlali is a threat to their gravy train more than political parties. We are concerned about the people whereas they are concerned about seats in parliament. The ANC is upset because their job becomes to sit quietly… It (ANC) can no longer be paid to think for poor/shack dwellers because Abahlali can speak for itself."

Echoing a common phrase evoked by Abahlali, one of the members declared that, "no one should think for us, without us".

Referring to the apartheid-style of attacks in Kennedy Road, Ndabankulu compared Abahlali to the United Democratic Front (UDF), the liberation movement which was attacked during apartheid because it was a threat to the state. He even went so far as to suggest that, "The mere fact that we are being attacked, means that we are heading in the right direction."

But, we must take a close look at the politics of Abahlali itself if we are to understand where Abahlali could be taking the South African democracy. And then Abahlali actually appears quite conservative in its politics.

Obtaining low-cost RDP houses and struggling to demand in situ (where they live) upgrading, as Abahlali has done through the courts, cannot on its own challenge whether or not Kennedy Road will remain a slum. Instead, in situ upgrading essentially earns the right for the poor to remain in shacks and upgrade them.

While defensive battles are clearly welcome and necessary, the demand to think, speak and act on behalf of oneself does not necessarily challenge the neoliberal status quo.

ANC ability to co-opt

Drawing lessons from the history of recent militant communities provides critical insight into Abahlali and other militant community organisations which have challenged government decisions in post-apartheid South Africa. While at face value there have been important challenges to neoliberal orthodoxy, many movements die out at the faintest sign of a state concession - and this where the power of the ANC, and indeed token welfare neoliberalism, lies.

The case in Khutsong (township on West Rand) throws this into sharp relief.

Khutsong was one of the most militant communities in the post-apartheid period particularly between 2005 and 2006. It refused to vote in the 2006 elections and achieved its demand of being incorporated into the Gauteng province and is now, as one leader celebrates, "100% ANC".

Winning this kind of concession is in important in its own terms for the lives of poor people in Khutsong and, indeed, for our faith in the power of human beings to resist the implementation of top-down development plans. But it must not be viewed as a sign that the neoliberal onslaught is under threat or that real resistance to neoliberalism is mounting.

Like the recent service delivery protests in Balfour, Piet Retief, and Standerton, Abahlali does not challenge the ANC's national policy framework. The danger is that we describe these movements as revolutionary or liberatory when in fact they buy into the ANC and, to a certain extent, legitimise it.

We must honestly deal with the contradictions that movements are faced with and ask ourselves: what kind of liberation movement legitimises the same government

that represses them, by voting them into power?

Despite the position of the leadership of Abahlali, the majority of the people in Kennedy Road vote the ANC into power. Even Abahlali's slogan,"No House, No Vote", as militant as it may be, suggests, like the case of Khutsong (and maybe also Balfour), that if the ANC arrives with its state concessions, often a few poorly constructed RDP houses and toilets, residents will then vote for the ANC. This means little for the enemy, neoliberalism, that so much of the Left claims to be fighting against.

Romanticisation of social movements only takes us so far if we seriously seek to understand whether the strategies and tactics employed by movements have the potential to challenge state power.

Need to critically engage

We must also confront the desire among the Left to depict the weak and vulnerable, the poor shacks dwellers, as those who have all the answers, as pure subjects. If true democracy is to be not only for the middle class minority, but also for the poor majority, Abahlali and other movements will have to do more than just speak up and participate. Indeed, academics will have to do more than update websites which depict the struggles of the poor.

My own recent experiences of updating websites on behalf of the then repressed Landless People's Movement (LPM), have taught me this. I have learnt that while websites do much to publicise movements to a group of left-leaning South African and international activists and scholars, they do little to actually mobilise and strengthen movements.

Merely amplifying the voices of the poor and assuming that those participating from below embody the truth, does not enable us to understand the potential and limitations of movements to challenge neoliberalism. Nor is there any possibility in this line of thinking to chart a way forward for liberation or to contest capitalism (which yes, is my own ideology and not necessarily that of the poor's).

Also sometimes, outsiders and researcher-activists are in a position where they do not want to tell poor people what to do. Nor do movements want to be told what to do as the case of Abahlali brings into sharp relief. The role of academics in this movement has been to show struggles on websites, but never to critically engage with them or to share our own ideological direction in what the Brazilian activist-intellectual and revolutionary, Paulo Freire called "Education for Critical Consciousness."

These experiences indicate that Left academics who once critically evaluated the strategies and tactics of the anti-apartheid liberation movement while simultaneously maintaining a relationship with activists on the ground, have in the post-apartheid period abdicated their responsibilities.

It is time to rethink the role of intellectuals in social movements and to ask whether intellectuals are merely "outsiders" of movements or if the critical knowledge that we obtain from our research findings can be used to empower movements from the inside. This will involve shifting our emphasis away from giving presentations about the poor at small, unknown international conferences.

It also means acknowledging that while power lies in the hands of the poor and oppressed, the oppressed also need to develop political and strategic direction in order to bring about fundamental changes in society.

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