

The Politics of “Non-Political” Activism in Democratic South Africa

Twenty years after the first democratic elections in South Africa, organizations representing key voting constituencies—youth and the economically marginalized—are becoming major forces of opposition to the ANC-led government while explicitly framing their activities as non-political. They prefer instead to talk in terms of “rights,” and “activism.” Drawing from fieldwork and online publications of three opposition organizations—#RhodesMustFall, Abahlali baseMjondolo and Afriforum— this paper argues that the abandonment of “politics” is more than rhetorical positioning. By framing their actions as non-political these groups engage in a deep-seated critique of the possibilities presented by democratic politics, and a lack of perceived efficacy or legitimacy of institutionalized contestation. Perhaps more importantly, it means that opposition politics are occurring in an environment without institutional incentives for cooperation.

“Politics” can often be perceived as a dangerous and unwelcoming sphere of activity, fraught with conflict and inhabited by a select group of powerful people. Because of this, groups that aim to effect change in governmental behaviors have often framed their activities as “non-political” or “apolitical” to avoid provoking the ire of central governments, to allow marginalized demographics to have a voice, or to sidestep cooptation by factions or parties. Such strategies have been used by social movements across Latin America in the 1990’s,¹ human rights and women’s movements in Malawi² and Uganda,³ and conservation and development groups in Southern Africa.⁴

Although they call their activities “non-political,” such organizations engage in behavior that is explicitly political, like petitioning the government, organizing protests, and articulating demands for representation and services. By doing so, these groups seek to affect the “authoritative allocation of values,”⁵ and participate in politics both material and symbolic. This self-described non-political activism directly engages with the distribution and extraction of resources, as well as the value-driven politics of expression and identity, for the benefit of group members. In each of the above mentioned cases, desire to influence governmental behavior and represent the interests of the constituency in authoritative decision-making is the impetus behind the formation and sustaining of these groups. Such behavior is separate from the realm of what Walzer has called “civility,”⁶ in which groups form affective ties promoting tolerance and unity. It is also distinct from Putnam’s bowling leagues, in which political content is discussed, but in which groups do not constitute themselves as such for political action.⁷

The benefits of such a framing is quite clear under authoritarian and semiauthoritarian regimes. Because the space for dissent is limited, and institutionalized methods for input, such as elections, are erratic, unreliable, or constrained, the framing of groups’ actions as non-political

potentially shields such organizations from governmental reprisals.⁸ By framing themselves as non-political, groups attempt to position themselves as non-threatening to the regime in power.⁹ This stance, then, is often a matter of survival. By implication, such behavior then would be unnecessary in democratic countries. However, as this paper shows, such strategies are also pursued by groups operating within the context of democratic regimes; contexts in which an avoidance of “politics” seems to be at odds with a governmental system which guarantees rights to speech and assembly and where opportunities for dissent are regular and institutionalized.

What is gained and what is lost when opposition groups in democracies cede the terrain of “politics” to the government and opposition parties? What are the implications for democracy when the energy of opposition exits institutionalized political channels, preferring instead the avenues afforded by protest? Does the framing of opposition as non-political limit the ways key constituencies see the possibilities for institutionalized democratic contestation to address their demands? This paper examines these questions regarding three groups in post-apartheid South Africa who have, since the mid-2000’s, framed their activities as “non-political,” while seeking to influence governmental and political party behavior at all levels.

The three groups are Afriforum, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*/The Shack Dwellers’ Movement [hereafter “*Abahlali*”] and the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements [hereafter #RMF and #FMF, as well as “Fallist”]. The three groups represent distinct constituencies in terms of race, class, and age, and engage in campaigns aimed at influencing governmental behavior, both material and symbolic.

Given the ascendancy of the “miracle” narrative to understand the advent of South African democracy,¹⁰ the inherent critique of democracy that such an “apolitical” stance implies is striking. The South African case presents an interesting example of the strategy of “non-

political” activism, in part because of the living memory of such effusive political optimism in the political transition from apartheid to democracy. Despite the dire predictions of many observers in the 1980’s, South Africa has met Levitsky and Collier’s “procedural minimum” definition of democracy,¹¹ as well as Schmitter and Karl’s “principles” definition of democracy,¹² since the elections of 1994. The very existence of these opposition groups, which are tolerated by the government, is proof of the democratic credentials of the regime.¹³ Although falling short of Huntington’s two-turnover test of consolidated democracy,¹⁴ the major empirical indexes of democracy in practice, including V-Dem,¹⁵ Polity IV,¹⁶ and Freedom House¹⁷ have rated South Africa as democratic since 1994.

However, these opposition groups have abandoned the “political” as a sphere of participation. More importantly, they are simultaneously engaging in strident critiques of the possibilities of the democratically elected government to ameliorate or respond to their grievances. Twenty years after advent of democracy, opposition groups attracting mass participation have very firmly articulated their mission as “non-political,” preferring instead to use language of “rights” and “activism,” while condemning both the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and opposition parties as ineffectual, corrupt, or “sell-outs.” This stance, while not changing the content of their actions, implies a disconnect with the functioning of elections, as well as a broader disenchantment of the political possibilities represented by the South African democratic system.¹⁸ The three groups under investigation for this paper represent critical constituencies in South Africa, youth and the economically marginalized. The constituencies of these organizations have grown and they have been major sources of opposition to the ANC-led government, all while their target constituencies are less engaged in elections and partisan politics.

This paper will examine the ways in which these three activist groups frame themselves as “non-political” actors, as well as the benefits and potential drawbacks of such a strategy for the practice and potential of democracy. By looking at the ways that activists from these organizations talk about politics, what emerges is a characterization of politics as corrupt, frivolous, ineffective and occasionally violent. Such images stand in stark contrast to the dominant narrative of democratic possibility in the past twenty years, and represent a strident critique of democratic functioning from key constituencies, especially the poorest and youngest cohorts of voters, who have fallen out of the likely voter population in the most recent election cycles.¹⁹

The paper proceeds by examining the potential ramifications of de-institutionalizing democratic opposition and promoting social movement organizations as the primary drivers of opposition. From there, the paper will examine the organizations’ activities, and argue that because all three groups seek to directly influence governmental behavior, as well as draw on rights-based claims, *Abahlali*, #RMF/#FMF and Afriforum are engaging in activities that are easily classifiable as political. The next section explores the ways that activists in South Africa in general, as well as those directly affiliated with these three organizations, frame their activities as non-political, and in what contexts they do so. The following sections directly confront the benefits and drawbacks of framing actions as non- or apolitical, both in terms of the moral/rhetorical stances of these organizations, as well as in the context of South African democracy.

Research Methods

The groups under investigation here represent a wide range of target constituencies, as well as different ideologies and causes. Two of the groups, #RMF and Abahlali, began as local organizations, in Cape Town and Durban respectively. However, they have disseminated their ideas and built coalitions throughout the country, on various college campuses under the banner of #FeesMustFall in the first case, and through alliances with sympathetic organizations in informal settlements around the country in the latter case. Afriforum has had a self-consciously national approach throughout its existence. Both Abahlali and Afriforum were founded in the mid-2000's in response to the ANC-led government's perceived unresponsiveness to demands. #RMF and #FMF, by contrast, are student movements begun in 2015 which critique the lack of "transformation" of universities in South Africa in the post-apartheid period, in terms of faculty diversity, course offerings, monumental landscapes, and campus culture, as well as protesting against rising tuition costs.

The three groups, claiming to speak for white, Afrikaans-speakers (Afriforum), engaging students at universities throughout South Africa (#RMF/#FMF) and representing isiZulu- and isiXhosa-speaking residents in informal settlements (*Abahlali*) have presented meaningful challenges to the ANC-led central government as well as to municipal governments, both those headed by the ANC and those run by opposition parties. As such, the leadership and membership of these groups spans many demographic categories, including age, class, race, and ethno-linguistic groups. These three organizations have little in common. Indeed, they have come into conflict with one another. For example, Afriforum's hate speech court case against ANC-leadership for singing anti-apartheid songs they claim incited violence against the white community, was officially condemned by Abahlali.²⁰ Additionally, Afriforum activists clashed with Fallist movements over Afrikaans as a medium of university instruction in 2016.²¹ By

examining such different organizations, representing diverse constituencies and ideologies, the comparison presented here can be said to indicate larger trends within South Africa.

It is also true, however, that there is significant concern that the constituencies represented by these organizations—youth²² and the economically marginalized²³—are increasingly unlikely to vote. As such, participation in these organizations, with their attendant rejection of “politics,” could prove to be a serious challenge for South African democracy. This holds true whether this rejection of politics is understood as a reflection or a creation of constituents’ attitudes, because the result is the same: the exit from electoral politics of key demographics of voters.

Lastly, the comparison of these three organizations has the benefit of constituting a within-case analysis. All three organizations are responding to the same political context, in terms of institutions, electoral competitiveness, and media environment. As such, these factors can be held constant. The diversity of the organizations operating within a single context can lend weight to the contention that this strategy of framing action aimed at influencing government behavior as non-political is a larger dynamic at play in the South African public sphere.

To investigate these organizations, this paper examines the official communications put out by these groups on social media, their websites, and by their spokespeople in mainstream South African media. Although quantitative content analysis was attempted on the Twitter feeds and blog posts of all three organizations, the attempt came up somewhat lacking, because of the attempt to prove a negative.²⁴ However, this analysis did show that in none of the top 100 most commonly used words in social media and blog posts in all languages by these three groups

involved “politics,” the name of any particular political party or leader, or any words associated with national political institutions, like the presidency or the parliament.

The sample of documents used in this paper comes from keyword searches of official websites of the organizations under study, as well as their social media presence, specifically on Twitter. For #RMF/#FMF, I searched the twitter timelines of the protestors at the major universities in South Africa.²⁵ The information on Abahlali was drawn directly from the group’s website. Afriforum was examined looking both at the group’s website and their Twitter presence. Outside media, where referenced, was accessed through hyperlinks from each groups’ social media or website. The keywords used to locate sources were “politics,” “political,” “party/parties,” and “ANC,” to capture the widest possible sample. Key quotes were then pulled from each of the bodies of text to illustrate the tone of the discourse.

In the case of Afriforum, I conducted interviews with activists involved in the organization during the course of a larger project in Bloemfontein and Pretoria in 2012-2013, funded by the Institute for International Education. The quotes used in the text came from larger interviews about the organization’s activities. Documents on all the organizations were also collected in visits to South Africa and case selection was discussed with academics in 2014 and 2016 at the University of Pretoria and the University of the Free State.

Why Being Non-Political Matters

Social movement and civil society organizations are often thought of as agents of democratization, especially in new democracies. Empirical studies of their effects, however, are somewhat inconclusive regarding the extent to which such organizations mobilize key constituencies or give voice and agency to previously disenfranchised voters.²⁶ Comparative

studies have argued that social movements have very context-specific effects; both mobilizing and de-mobilizing citizens.²⁷ Regarding their effects on new democracies in Africa, studies have posited both that they assist in the deepening of democracy²⁸ and that they limit avenues for political participation.²⁹ But what are the effects on democracy of organizations that explicitly posit themselves as non-political, while engaging in serious opposition to democratically-elected governments? How are their actions different from opposition politics channeled through institutionalized, partisan competition?

Decoupling Opposition and Party Politics

Within democracies, political parties serve as interest aggregators that seek to build wide coalitions, accommodating extreme wings and presenting a united front in order to win elections.³⁰ Although there are alternative models of interest aggregation followed by different political parties, disaggregation or neglecting key constituencies is usually punished by voters.³¹ Because of the dual imperatives of working with opposition to craft policy, and the need to appeal to a broad coalition to win elections, political parties often serve as vehicles through which both intra- and inter-party compromise can take place. Political parties broker deals with different communities, like traditional authorities or non-coethnics, to help build such coalitions.³² Although African party systems have often demonstrated high levels of volatility, as well as a preponderance of dominant parties, such parties still seek to represent broad constituencies.³³

Social movements, by contrast, are often prone to schism partially because of their lower levels of bureaucratization, the often episodic nature of their action, and the dynamics of internal conflict and external responses to their action.³⁴ While incentives do exist for social movements

to build coalitions outside of their initial constituencies, they are often in response to external environments, especially threats, and not as frequent or institutionalized as elections.³⁵ When groups, like those discussed in this paper, remove their activity from the ambit of party politics, and disavow political activity, the tendency toward factionalism goes up and their incentives for cooperation, even on ideologically consistent issues, go down.³⁶

New approaches to social movement theory, however, point out that the separation between movements and parties is often fuzzy, and that Tilly's³⁷ "challengers" and "members" have the potential to be shape and transform one another.³⁸ Yet, this relationship is the result of explicit engagement by both the parties and the social movements. In the cases outlined here, such an engagement seems unlikely in the context of such an explicit rejection of party politics by these organizations. So, while parties in South Africa may try to accommodate the demands and priorities of social movements like the Fallist movements or Afriforum because of a desire to appeal to the organizations' target constituencies, these organizations have expressed little interest in engaging with parties or in directing their membership to do so.

Conflict and Compromise

In proportional representation systems, like South Africa, although parties tend to be less centrist, they are more numerous, and therefore more likely to need to compromise with other political parties in government to achieve their goals.³⁹ This need for compromise is the result of both the threat of ousting in subsequent election cycles, as well as the number of parties that make up a legislature.⁴⁰ Additionally, regardless of electoral system, parties work to constrain the actions of legislators and minimize conflict,⁴¹ though citizen-level conflict is most effectively managed by proportional representation systems.⁴² Although South Africa has had a single

majority party in Parliament since the end of apartheid in the ANC, recent electoral gains by opposition parties as well as the internal dynamics of party discipline have incentivized cooperation within and between parties.⁴³

An ongoing example of this incentive to cooperate can be observed in the fractious coalitions between the centrist Democratic Alliance and the left-wing populist Economic Freedom Fighters in municipal governance in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth. Despite the often unaligned policy priorities of their leadership, the two parties have joined coalition governments in three major metro areas. While the coalitions have proved fractious, the desire to hold on to power has kept the leadership of both parties coming back to the negotiating table.⁴⁴

Similar incentives for cooperation do not exist for social movement organizations, because although they do seek to organize a large base of supporters, leaders do not have electoral or legislative imperatives to engage opposition groups to achieve given ends. Although coalitions between distinct social movements do occur, they tend to happen when organizations are close to reaching a goal or when costs are low, while long-term cooperation between social movements is relatively rare.⁴⁵ Although both parties and social movements are constrained in their ability to achieve policy outcomes and to work with opponents, there is empirical evidence that social movements are significantly less likely to affect policy change reflective of their missions, as compared to political parties, in part because of the lack of incentives to work with multiple stakeholders.⁴⁶ These different incentive structures mean that social movements participate in politics in ways that are distinct from political parties.

Afriforum, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and #RhodesMustFall as Political Actors

The three groups under investigation for the purposes of this paper are civil society organizations focusing on articulation of demands arising from their constituencies. All three have been significant vectors for the articulation of dissenting opinions in post-apartheid South Africa. All three also engage in actions that directly seek to change government behavior and policy related to constitutionally-defined rights, funding of programs and use of the coercive apparatus of the state through protests, court cases and official petitions. As such, all three engage in directly political activities.

Afriforum is a group which labels itself as an NGO focused on protecting the rights of minorities, and specifically the rights of Afrikaners, in order to ensure that Afrikaners “who have no other home...are able to lead a meaningful and sustainable existence, in peace with other communities, here on the southernmost tip of Africa.”⁴⁷ The group has engaged in a number of different campaigns such as: protesting a campaign calling for white acceptance of past injustice,⁴⁸ opposing government commemoration of foreign communist fighters in the anti-apartheid struggle,⁴⁹ and bringing a court case seeking to disallow the singing of anti-apartheid songs in the post-apartheid era which include lyrics that, they claim, incite violence against white farmers.⁵⁰ Afriforum, while not using the language of race in defining their constituent population, has engaged in campaigns that have largely been in support of causes aimed at white South Africans. With an almost exclusively white constituency, Afriforum’s population of potential supporters is largely drawn from among the wealthy and privileged in South Africa.⁵¹

By contrast, *Abahlali baseMjondolo* or the Shack Dwellers Movement draws supporters from the poorest sectors of the population in South Africa. The movement began in a series of protests in Durban organized by and for residents of informal settlements who were protesting the government-led evictions and sale of the land they occupied.⁵² This organization, which has

affiliated itself with the Poor People's movement in Cape Town and the national Landless People's Movement, has become a primary organizer of protests for the rights of the poor, including the blocking of highways and demonstrations outside of provincial legislatures, protesting evictions and land issues (Gibson 2008; Chance 2012), and occupations of public space to oppose what activists deemed to be wasteful spending on the World Cup stadiums, rather than on poor citizens.⁵³ The basis of the claims to land and housing that are articulated in such protests are the constitutionally-recognized rights to Freedom of Movement and Residence, Property, Housing, and Human Dignity.⁵⁴

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements also draw on constitutional rights, specifically Section 29 of Chapter Two which guarantees access to basic and further education, including the mandate that the government will make such access available.⁵⁵ Additionally, student protests since 2015 have centered around issues of governmental funding of higher education, and specifically protested the actions of both minister of higher education, Blade Nzimande⁵⁶ and then-finance minister Pravin Gordhan.⁵⁷ In addition to protesting on university campuses, the student activists have protested outside of the Union Buildings in Pretoria⁵⁸ and the Parliament in Cape Town.⁵⁹ In framing their arguments in terms of constitutional rights, the student movements are utilizing a political frame to achieve a political end—using rights-based claims to try to change the allocation of resources. Yet, they persistently understand their efforts as outside of the realm of politics.

All three of these organizations engage in behavior that can be defined as political, targeting local, provincial and national government in an effort to affect the behavior of individuals and the larger state apparatus. These actions are undertaken largely without reference to party politics, and often through extra-institutional means like protests. However, in adopting

rights-based claims and seeking to influence government behavior through constitutionally-protected protest and legal means, these activities are, undoubtedly political. They seek to change the allocation of material and symbolic functions of government. Yet, like many organizations in the South African context, all three organizations explicitly reject the term “political” to describe their campaigns and actions.

Activists Defining “Politics”

The operational definition of politics, for organizations like Afriforum, *Abahlali*, and #RMF seems to be one involved in the direct contestation of elections. Even though regular, free and fair elections are a heralded part of the South African democracy, these groups tend to view them in a largely negative light; as petty, corrupt or ineffectual.

These organizations work within a context in which the broader public is largely uncomfortable talking about “politics.”⁶⁰ As such the organizations’ rejection of politics could be an attempt to mirror back the distaste with which so many of their potential constituents view politics, or it could help to constitute it. Given that 20 years ago, there was what many scholars have called election “euphoria,”⁶¹ the pessimism about politics and the ability of political leaders to create positive change, and the rejection of politics as a potentially positive force is noteworthy.

Such a stance is not unique to the three groups under investigation. Indeed, a wide variety of organizations that participate in trying to influence governmental and public behavior seek to distance themselves from “politics.” One representative of the Transvaal Agricultural Union, a conservative group which directly lobbies the government with the aim to shape policy and advocate for the interests of their dues-paying membership, when asked about whether he would

consider his work political, said “Politics, no, no. We are afraid of being labeled as political. We are not into politics or parties” (Interview with Author). On the other end of the political spectrum, another, newer group, founded in 2016 by former Member of Parliament Andile Mngxitama, called Black First Land First (BLF), echoed this distaste for politics when addressing the reasons behind founding his group. In an interview with the *Sowetan* newspaper, Mngxitama characterized his organization as a “revolutionary movement that seeks to end politics,” saying that, “BLF seeks to use politics to end the same because as the people know politics is a dirty game.”⁶² Interestingly, however, Mngxitama did not rule out the possibility of his organization standing for local or national election. These examples, while not connected to the core cases under examination here, point to the ubiquity of the negative understanding of politics in South Africa.

Despite their variety of causes, and their intense involvement not only in traditionally political activities—like lobbying the government, organizing protests, or even standing for elections—such activists are at pains to frame their activities as non-political, apolitical or disconnected from democratic politics as they currently operate. These same dynamics hold true for the three organizations under consideration here.

Afriforum, Abahlali and #RFM/#FMF as Non- or Apolitical

As with the various organizations discussed above, the three groups specifically under investigation in this paper have routinely characterized themselves as non- or apolitical. Although the ways in which they define their distinction from “politics” is not the same across all three, the rejection of the label of “political” has consistently characterized the groups’ self-description and official statements.

A field organizer for AfriForum, during an interview regarding the group's activities, characterized his organization by saying, "We are apolitical. We do not care who governs. We just want them to govern properly. We want to stay out of politics. In democracy, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. So, we need someone who will speak on behalf of the few" (Interview with Author). Echoing these sentiments in 2013-2014, Afriforum put up recruitment posters on a number of campuses around South Africa with Facebook-style text which says "AfriForum: Jislaaik (Thumbs up/Wow/Great), Politiek: Dislaaik (Dislike/Thumbs Down)." A recent statement from an Afriforum general meeting, posted on the group's social media accounts, called on members to "join hands, work together, forget the politics and build a better [South Africa]." ⁶³ The consistency with which the group has rejected the label of "politics" spans the various campaigns, including in their contention that "politics" fuels murders of Afrikaner farmers ⁶⁴ and their opposition to "political interference in sports," specifically racial quotas on national sports teams. ⁶⁵

Abahlali baseMjondolo has also tried to reframe the idea of "politics" in the interests of their organizations. The organization has sought to mobilize people for a "homemade activism" or "people's politics," which are fundamentally divorced from the workings of the democratic state, and which seek to transform democracy not through elections or lobbying but through protest.

The notable exception is the short-term alliance between *Abahlali* and the Democratic Alliance in KwaZulu-Natal in 2014, wherein then-leader of the organization S'bu Zikode endorsed the party, largely as a critique of the African National Congress-led city government's alleged violence against members of the organization. Zikode was clear that he was not urging his membership to join the DA, nor issuing a blanket statement in support of them. Instead, he

characterized it as a provincial-level agreement based on his evaluation of the “political landscape” and where the support of Abahlali’s membership would be most effective at removing the ANC from power. Zikode also stressed that, “Electoral politics are constricted; narrow interests often influence them...Abahlali has built a people’s democracy outside of electoral politics...We have built a politics of dignity, not a politics of power.”⁶⁶ So, even with the tactical alliance with a political party, the organization still distances itself from “politics” as practiced through parties as a principled position.

Since the 2014 election, Abahlali has not directly engaged with either the DA or any other political party, and there was no discussion of cooperation in either the 2016 municipal elections or in the future on the group’s official websites. The last mention of the Democratic Alliance on Abahlali’s blog, from 20 June 2014, regards a particularly extensive eviction campaign in Cape Town and asserts “Party politics is an inherently filthy business” and charging that both the DA and the ANC have “sought to capture grassroots struggles,” and they expect the same from other political parties.⁶⁷

The student activists involved in #RMF and #FMF are similarly disenchanted with “politics.” Activists from both #RMF and #FMF often roundly condemn politics as “unreceptive” or “fruitless,” as they asserted in a tweet from 2015, saying “This has now become bigger than any political party; it’s now a student movement. Therefore we will not entertain the @WitsPYA.”⁶⁸ Activists have also intervened to stop current political leaders from addressing protesters or attending protests, as when Parliamentary opposition leader Musi Maimane was physically escorted off of the University of Cape Town campus by #RMF participants.⁶⁹ In initial student activist meetings in 2015, #FMF leaders repeatedly called for their movement to

be apolitical, especially asking participants to refrain from wearing partisan “regalia,”⁷⁰ and stating their central goal as the establishment of “an apolitical, independent body.”⁷¹

Although these three organizations’ apolitical stances have taken different avenues, all three have repeatedly asserted an alienation from and dissatisfaction with, “politics” especially in reference to political parties in South Africa. What is particularly striking about this multifaceted rejection of “politics” is that the dependable functioning of free and fair elections, albeit ones that have been dominated by a single party at the national level, has failed to satisfy the demands of the relatively powerful (as with the economically and racial privileged constituency of Afriforum), the young (as in #RMF and #FMF), or the economically marginalized (as with the membership of *Abahlali*).

The Benefits of Being Non-Political

Framing political actions as non-political or apolitical is a potentially beneficial strategy, rather than an obfuscation or a misunderstanding. Political action is risky, and self-styled apolitical groups that have chosen to petition governments for policy change, like human rights organizations in Uganda,⁷² are often operating within high-repression or at least high-risk environments in which avenues of political dissent are meaningfully restricted or foreclosed. As such, groups that engage in active critique of the regime are likely to face severe consequences. This seems to be a central part of the rationale for South African groups claiming their non-political status. For at least one of the organizations under review here, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, their characterization as “political” led to censure by city authorities in Durban, specifically the suspension of rights to public demonstration.⁷³ This intervention by the city government, on the grounds of the group’s involvement in “politics” suggests that there is a potential liability to

being perceived as “political” while petitioning the government or seeking policy change. Yet in the context of South Africa which been broadly democratic for the last two and a half decades, more complex motivations seem to be at play.

If averting arbitrary or authoritarian governmental censure is not the primary goal in avoiding “politics,” then what are the potential benefits of framing actions as apolitical? I argue that the benefits of being non-political lay in framing political activity as negative, which opens opportunities for groups to frame their activities in positive lights. Politics is routinely characterized by these groups according to three broad categories: messy/corrupt, frivolous, and ineffective. By contrast, then, the groups themselves see their activities as stemming from purer considerations, with more pressing needs, and addressing those needs through efficient means.

If politics is framed as dirty, messy, nasty or polluting, then actions of non-political groups organizing collective action can be seen to be the converse: based on higher moral ground, stemming from purer motivations or ethically less problematic. In interviews, as well as social media platforms, activists echo these sentiments. Toward the beginning of the #RMF and #FMF movements in 2015, the official Twitter account of #RMF posted “Politics and the co-opting of radical movements towards liberal rhetoric for publicity. *Sies.*”⁷⁴ Interestingly, Afriforum activists also use language of disgust and contamination when talking about politics. In an interview with a young woman who worked as a campus organizer for Afriforum said of the organization:

We are avoiding doing the whole politics thing...we are *apolitis* (apolitical)...We are a civil rights movement, and that is it. Everything with rights, that is what we do. When it comes to elections and stuff, we stand back...The politics of today are messy. I do not

want to get involved in something that is so messy. So, this entire rights thing is the answer to us, not politics (Interview with Author).

While politics are messy, the language of rights shields the speaker and her organization from such contamination. Similar framings of “politics” have been employed by *Abahlali* members and observers of the movement. One scholar closely associated with the *Abahlali* movement, Richard Pithouse, characterizes the movement’s stance as a “principled decision to keep a distance from what is widely seen as a mode of politics that has an inevitably corrupting influence”⁷⁵. This stance is demonstrated partially in a “commitment by everyone who accepted elected office in the movement to place themselves last on the list when housing was won. This was a dramatic break with the politics of local patronage so typical of the ANC...”⁷⁶ In one interview with an *Abahlali* community organizer, quoted by Jared Sacks, the activist asserted that his local government councilor “was ‘focusing on politics’ ...rather than listening to the needs and grievances of the community. He was a corrupt strongman of the settlement who would...give out Disaster Management blankets to ANC members only and steal food donated to the crèche to give to his friends.”⁷⁷ The fact that these organizations themselves are “apolitical” can be a way to distance their activities from those of political parties, which are corrupted or corrupting.

Alternatively, if politics is frivolous, petty or corrupt, then perhaps the work of organizations like *Abahlali*, #RMF and Afriforum is meaningful and vital. There is considerable evidence from leaders within each of these organizations that they see their actions in this light. Patel notes this dichotomy at work within *Abahlali*, in an ethnography of an *Abahlali* meeting run by movement co-founder Sbu Zikode, when he says, “At the beginning of today’s meeting, Zikode has asked, to nods and murmurs of approval from all gathered, that ‘politics’ be left out

of this space... ‘It must be clear that this is not a political game. This movement is a kind of social tool.’”⁷⁸ This framing, of politics as separate from, or perhaps less urgent than the material concerns of constituent populations is also echoed in social media by the #FMF campaign, when they retweeted one of their members, saying “If people want to play politics, they should go out and join organizations. It is the lives of students and workers that concerns us.”⁷⁹ The implication, in the first case that politics is merely patronage, and in the second that it is frivolous, are both ultimately contrasted with the assertion that the amelioration of material concerns of supporters constitutes a separate and more important form of collective activity than “politics.” The actions of these self-styled non-political groups, then, is of greater import and social merit than the “politics” of parties and elections.

Lastly, if politics is ineffective at delivering these necessary and important goods, remaining free of “political influence” allows groups to pursue such goals without inhibition or outside influence. This rejection of “politics” could be related either to the largely non-competitive nature of South African elections since 1994, or the perceived lack of opportunities for opposition-based engagement in a dominant party environment. The end result, however, is that all of the groups view “politics” as a category as frustrating and fruitless. In a 2016 post by Afriforum’s deputy CEO, entitled “Party Politics is not the solution, your community is,” he alleges that “a good election strategy requires a poor governing strategy” and claims that the power to fix the material needs of a community lies in “civil society.”⁸⁰

Echoing the same sentiments in 2016, after the failure of negotiations between protestors and university administration, the #RMF account tweeted, saying “[We must] move past the reactionary politics of whiteness & partisan politics. As we run in circles, Blacks suffer.”⁸¹ After an address by union leader Joseph Mathunjwa, University of Pretoria #FMF student activists

quoted his direction to “make sure that you don’t allow political parties to hijack your movement,” on their social media.⁸² Frustration with the seeming lack of action by political parties has also been reported as a major theme of interactions with *Abahlali* members, as Sacks reports, saying, “Disillusionment with political parties was a recurring theme of committee members, even if they had voted in previous elections. As Nobanzi [an *Abahlali* committee member] stated, ‘people are voting every time, but there’s nothing [to show for it]. We don’t know why we are voting now, because there’s no use of this voting.’”⁸³

The Ramifications of Being Non-Political

The question remains, however, as to whether these groups’ “apolitical stance” matters in the broader terms of South African democracy. As stated earlier, there is substantial agreement that South Africa is a broadly democratic country and has been since 1994. Vibrant civil society organizations are often associated with consolidating democracy, building social trust, and increasing levels of citizen participation. So, does it matter that these organizations call themselves apolitical, especially in a country that has seen sustained, high-levels of voter turnout⁸⁴ and partisan affiliation?⁸⁵ I contend that it does, in line with the theoretical expectations outlined above, because these organizations are representing constituencies with the most precipitous decline in political participation—the youth and the economically marginalized⁸⁶—and because the lack of institutional incentives to cooperate can lead to social and legislative impasses. In talking about the escalation of protests in late 2016, commentator Sisonke Msimang wrote of both parties and social movements in South Africa:

We are in a new phase, one that is characterised by a rejection of compromise as a tactic for managing democratic intercourse... While bridge builders continue to be seen as

‘leaders,’ their credibility is diminishing. As the very notion of democracy goes on trial, radicalism and intransigence are increasingly replacing compromise as the go-to instincts of the body politic...compromise as a political tactic has come to be associated with selling out...where the country stands today is a consequence of many separate sections of society saying that they have had enough of compromise.⁸⁷

Although Msimang did address both party behavior and social movement organizations, both theoretical and empirical work on the behavior of political parties and social movements shows that because of the absence of either electoral or legislative incentives, social movements are less likely to compromise or work with opposition groups. Therefore, when the vibrancy of opposition politics shifts from a party-based system to a set of social movements that are explicitly detached from and rejecting of the party system for effecting change, the likelihood of such gridlock rises.

While the organizations under examination here have often called for unity and collaboration to achieve certain goals, such collaborations have been, as is consistent with the theoretical expectations, short lived. *Abahlali*’s understanding with the Democratic Alliance lasted for one election cycle.⁸⁸ Afriforum has coordinated with organizations like the South African Police Service,⁸⁹ but little has come of the memorandum since its adoption. The #RMF and #FMF organizations regularly post to social media about their aversion to compromise with university administration, claiming that they are “unwilling to negotiate with Management”⁹⁰ and that they “can’t compromise.”⁹¹

The lack of institutional incentives to cooperate is reflected in the ways that activists in these organizations talk about working with opposition, and structure their constituents’ understandings of the role of non-affiliated groups in pursuing substantive goals. This dynamic is

especially powerful in the context of accusations of betraying the cause, as when #FMF activists asserted on social media that they “will not sell out *idabi labantu* (the struggle of the people)” in the context of a proposed round of negotiations with university administration.⁹² Similar language was used in a press statement by Abahlali’s leadership, defending their 2014 understanding with the DA, wherein they asserted:

[People on the so-called left] see our decision as stupid and as a sell-out while they are nowhere to be seen in our times of great difficulty...Our decision aims at trying to keep the space open for us to liberate ourselves by making a tactical move. We do not love the DA or agree with its policies. Why do people who failed to condemn the ANC attacks on us get so angry with us when we try to punish the ANC by making a tactical vote for its enemy?⁹³

The end point of discussing opposition in terms of betrayal is, as Msimang points out above, deadlock. Although such an outcome is certainly possible in the context of party politics, institutional incentives for cooperation and compromise do exist, especially in proportional representation systems like South Africa. No such regular incentives exist for movements that are primarily outside of the partisan system, and indeed the rhetorical stances regarding “selling out” as a characterization of working with opponents to reach desired ends seem to indicate that cooperation outside of the group is seen as a betrayal.

Conclusion

This analysis begs the question of whether these stances are the result of a different definition of politics, in the vein of research by Schaffer.⁹⁴ As both Williams⁹⁵ and Zuern⁹⁶ have demonstrated, South Africans often do have working definitions of democracy that are

meaningfully distinct, or include facets that are not central to the definitions of democracy outlined above. However, both authors found that the groups they were examining—rural South Africans regarding traditional authority and community organizations seeking economic redress, respectively—expressly engaged with “politics” and “democracy,” rather than shying away from either.

Zuern’s fieldwork, conducted in 1995 and 1997, and Williams’ research, conducted in 1998-1999, found populations that were expanding and shaping the notion of politics and the experience of democracy. These groups, active almost two decades later, have begun to reject “politics.” Whether this term is used in the strict or capacious sense, this stance has implications for democracy and compromise in the post-apartheid context because it implies that perhaps the very substantive concerns regarding socioeconomic inequality or the relative power of traditional authority that were previously understood as fixable within the context of democratic functioning are no longer considered by those groups as such. Because such a wide variety of groups, with their correspondingly wide array of priorities, are seeing institutionalized politics as inadequate to represent their needs, some of the possibilities for democratic amelioration of grievance presented in Zuern’s and Williams’ studies seem to be fading.

Groups from across the political spectrum in South Africa have, especially in the last few years, started talking about their actions in terms that divorce them from “politics.” The implications of this rhetorical abandonment of “politics” are not only in the patterns of participation that they reflect (or possibly even help to create). The idea that these groups frame themselves as distinctly “non-political” opens up avenues for them to claim purer, more ethically motivated courses of action, which are also more efficacious and less corrupt. While such a stance can, of course, command loyalty, it also disincentivizes participation of constituencies in

partisan politics. Additionally, because of the lack of institutional incentives present for movements disconnected from partisan activity to engage with opponents, such an abandonment of the terrain of “politics” could lead to a climate of deadlock, and unwillingness to compromise. The increasingly contentious, and sometimes violent, nature of recent protest movements, both in confrontation with one another and agents of the state, demonstrate some of the potential implications of this shift in opposition energies.

This stance is more than simply the positioning of these groups as “non-partisan” or “non-aligned.” These groups are specifically positioning themselves as at odds with the parties that are currently contesting elections, and sometimes even with the processes of democracy itself. While this stance does not fundamentally change the issues being raised by these groups, it puts the workings of these groups in opposition to and antagonism with, political parties and many of the mechanisms for institutionalized contestation present in South African democracy.

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