ERSA Research Brief
June 2015

A Dream Deferred: the Microfoundations of Direct Political Action in Pre- and Post-democratization South Africa

Biniam E. Bedasso and Nonso Obikili

The public display of discontent is an essential feature of a democratic political order. In a democratic society, citizens can employ direct or indirect political action to ensure that their voices on political and economic matters are heard. However, persistent protests might endanger the stability of young democracies particularly because the economic legacies of the old autocratic regimes tend to outlive the defunct political structures. This contributes to simmering discontent. In South Africa, the steady increase in direct political action in recent years symptomizes a worrying trend of institutionalized mechanisms failing to address socioeconomic malaise.

In Bedasso and Obikili (2015), we track macro trends in economic growth and protest action at the same time as we attempt to furnish the micrfoundations for increasing direct political action. The aggregate analysis shows that the level of direct political action in South Africa is on the rise again, following a sharp decline around the end of apartheid in 1994. Protest action seems to have begun tracking economic slowdowns more closely in the post-apartheid period than before.

The micro-level analysis demonstrates that a consistently significant and sizable effect on direct political action comes from falling short of one's own expectation as measured by the gap between actual and expected income conditional on education. In recent years, unfulfilled expectations has been revealed to have a larger effect on the more militant form of direct political action (unofficial strike) than on the relatively benign form (lawful demonstration) compared to earlier periods. A scrutiny of the distribution of unfulfilled expectations shows that the average level of unfulfilled expectations has increased substantially in households with below median income whereas the same measure has declined among black South Africans since 1990. On the contrary, there is little evidence of the effect of relative deprivation as measured by the gap between a household's position in the income distribution and that of the top 10 per cent of households in the same province. When it comes to the direct effect of race, the negative effect of ‘whiteness’ on the probability of participating in lawful demonstration increased in the first decade of democracy before it dropped sharply after the new political order was consolidated. In general, poor people are less likely to participate in both forms of protest in all periods once other factors such as unfulfilled expectations are controlled for. Results from a municipal level analysis confirm the impact of unfulfilled expectations on direct political action. Unfulfilled expectations are shown to have a significant effect on actual protest even after controlling for race, education and measures of service delivery in municipalities.

Policy ideas

In what follows, we put forward a few policy ideas that may help limit protest action to a ‘healthy’ level by addressing its immediate triggers that are highlighted in our study.

a. Establish the need for sustained growth as a social and political imperative
It is obvious that promoting economic growth should be one of the priorities of any government. However, framing the growth question in the context of social and political stability is particularly relevant for a country like South Africa. Given the fact that growth declines may magnify the consequences of inequality and, therefore stoke discontent, maintaining sustained growth should be the first priority of policymakers in South Africa. Addressing historical inequalities can still be approached as a means to create broad-based capabilities and to fuel more sustained growth. But policymaking in general should be informed by the recognition that social stability is more responsive in the short run to economic growth than to slow-changing parameters such as inequality.

b. Promote high quality education and meritocratic remuneration

The unfulfilled expectations that may accompany increasing access to education can be destabilizing for a young democracy such as South Africa. One reason that there is substantial heterogeneity in the returns to education among people with the same years of schooling is differential quality of education. A second reason could be the lack of a meritocratic system of remuneration. Increasing the quality of education in South Africa remains a great challenge for policymakers and practitioners. But, in the meantime, the government should commit to linking remunerations to merit and education effectively at least in the civil service.

c. Promote mass flourishing (a la Edmund Phelps)

There is always a limit to how much education can contribute to promote individual welfare as long as the structural foundations of the economy remain unchanged. Conventional education should be supplemented by policy measures to promote “a culture protecting and inspiring individuality, imagination, understanding, and self-expression that drives a nation’s indigenous innovation”. Such an objective may require a broad set of policy measures running across the realms of social policy, economic policy and innovation policy. The bottom-line is that the power of unfulfilled expectations and the concomitant effect of political instability might not be tackled effectively by relying solely on conventional measures of increasing education quality and creating a meritocratic system.

References


---

1 In one of the classics of political science of the last century, Samuel Huntington (1968) discusses the disenchantment that access to education may create among the youths in changing societies.

2 In a book discussing the economic dynamism of the last two centuries, Edmund Phelps (2014) pins the origin of modern human progress on grassroots innovation and mass flourishing instead of on isolated scientific discoveries.