

Chapter 68

Political–Administrative Interface at the Local Sphere of Government With Particular Reference to South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing political-administrative dichotomy discourse, which is steeped in public administration history, manifests in uncertainty about how the relationship between politicians and administrative officials should be structured. South Africa was democratized in 1994 and local government has subsequently undergone a fundamental socio-political transformation. “World class” local government legislation, with an entrenched constitutional development mandate, was introduced; however, the large numbers of public protests bear ample testimony to major challenges in basic service delivery. A critical issue impacting negatively on the functionality of the post-1994 local government dispensation is the political-administrative interface. The National Development Plan has mapped out a socio-economic vision to 2030, with stabilization of the political-administrative interface a priority. Consequently, the political-administrative interface has to be critically reviewed relative to the quality of local democracy, impact on efficient and effective service delivery, and good local governance.

INTRODUCTION

Politics constitutes the basis of public governance, as the public sector is the governmental machinery used for implementing government policies and programs. Party politics has always been an integral part of local government and this has become more evident since the post-1994 local government dispensation. In the local government context, the majority of municipal councilors are from the ruling party and are responsible for executive oversight in the municipality (De Visser, Steytler & May, n.d.; Thornhill, 2012). More specifically, councilors are responsible for ensuring that the policies and resultant programs

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that they have approved are implemented by the officials that they have appointed. The success of any given policy, therefore, will be largely determined by the executive councilors and officials.

The crux of the politics-administration interface is the relationship between the administrative and political components at the municipal level; it is this relationship which will largely determine whether policy and programs are successfully implemented (Azunu, 2013; Thornhill, 2012). Members of the political arm of the municipality are elected by local citizens and entrusted with decision-making on their behalf. The politicians are of the view that they have been elected to govern on behalf of the electorate and this would include *inter alia* ensuring the successful implementation of municipal policies and programs to enhance the quality of life of local communities. De Visser et al. (n.d.) have pointed out that, although legislation makes a distinction between the council and administration, it is an established practice that councils comprising local politicians appoint people based on political patronage, rather than for their experience and requisite skills.

At the core of the protracted debate on the politics-administration interface is the separation of politics from administration (Azunu, 2013; Cameron, 2003; Thornhill, 2012). The debate has particular relevance for developing countries such as South Africa (Cameron, 2003, 2010; De Visser, 2009, 2010; Mafunisa, 2003; Ndudula, 2013; Thornhill, 2012), which is a relatively young democracy and where the politicians and administrators tend to compete with each other and assert themselves to gain political supremacy within the broader public governance domain. The results in the majority of cases are conflicts that impact negatively on the overall performance of municipalities and more specifically on municipal service delivery (Azunu, 2013). This chapter assesses the state of the discourse and locates it within the local government sphere in South Africa. A brief overview of the local government democratization and transformation process shows the impact of politicization on the performance of municipalities and service delivery in South Africa. Recommendations in response to the critical thematic issues are highlighted, with emphasis on improved service delivery within the broader framework of good local governance. In addition to desk analysis of the relevant literature, the discussion benefited from conversations with executive councilors and high-ranking officials of selected municipalities and non-governmental organizations in Kwazulu Natal, one of nine provinces in the country.

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTEXT: THE POST-1994 DISPENSATION AND BEYOND: GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES

Given its social and political history, South Africa after 1994 is described as democratized and features a restructured and transformed local governance model aimed at facilitating and strengthening local democracy, the evolution of which was marked by three distinct phases. Critical to the process was the initial constitutionalization of developmental local government. Several key principles then drove the evolving process: non-racialism, non-sexism, redistribution, efficiency, and effectiveness, which were all high on the municipal agenda (Reddy, 2014). The first phase of the local government transition process was the introduction and implementation of the *Local Government Transition Act 209* of 1993. This was followed by elections in 1995/6, which constituted the second phase. Three core pieces of legislation – *Local Government: Municipal Demarcation Act 27* of 1998; *Local Government Municipal Structures Act 117* of 1998; and *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32* of 2000 – brought a degree of finality to the process in the form of the December 2000 elections, thereby ending the transitional period and the final, third, phase. The resultant effect was a reduction in the number of municipalities nationwide from

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