Chapter 14
The Role and Significance of Traditional Leadership in South African Local Governance

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ABSTRACT

Traditional leadership in South Africa pre-existed both the colonial and apartheid systems of governance and was the main known system of governance amongst indigenous people. In any case, as opposed to the current political pattern of discrediting traditional leadership, Africans have their own comprehension of democracy, which is pointedly from the liberal democracy of the West. Traditional leadership was democratic based on its own unique way in what we these days allude to as 'consensus'. This chapter contends that the institution of traditional leadership is still significant as a trusted institution for governance by most of the people living in rural South Africa. The chapter contends as revered in the Basotho aphorism, mooa khotla ha a tsekisoe maxim, that traditional leadership is a sine qua non in rural areas. The South African post-apartheid government has neglected to conclusively characterize and unambiguously explain the role and significance of traditional leaders in local governance.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter intends to answer the question raised by Logan and Katenda (2021) when he asks the question:

Are Africa's traditional chiefs and elders the true representatives of their people, accessible, respected, and legitimate, and therefore still essential to politics on the continent, and especially to the building of democracies? Or is traditional authority a gerontocratic, chauvinistic, authoritarian and increasingly irrelevant form of rule that is antithetical to democracy?

To realise this objective, the chapter gives an appraisal of the role of traditional leaders in African governance. To start with, this chapter examines the often contentious governance role of traditional leaders in South Africa. In order to do this, the chapter takes a retrospective look through the country's pre-colonial, colonial/apartheid and post-apartheid epochs. The exploration of these periods reveals the role and relevance of traditional leadership, if any in local governance. It is pertinent to state that various interested parties in South Africa have expansively questioned the relevance and place of traditional leadership in a democracy (Indigenous and Traditional Leaders Indaba with Government and Stakeholders (ITLIGS), 2017). At the centre of the discussion is the notion of discordancy of this institution with democracy and human rights (ITLIGS, 2017).

BACKGROUND

Traditional leadership is defined as "a style where power is given to the leader based on traditions of the past" (Keulder, 2010). Ndima (2017) argues that "traditional leaders are seen as the representatives of the community and as such are entrusted with an important responsibility, namely that of harmonising community customs and traditions with the ethos of the Constitution". Section 211(2) of the Constitution regards traditional leaders "as primary agents of development". Undeniably, traditional leadership is a *sine qua non* for good governance. In this regard, it is pertinent to begin by acknowledging the endeavours of the South African government to reclassify the traditional system of governance and the role it should play in the new dispensation; in any case, one additionally needs to bring up the uncertainty and unclearness with which the same government treats the role traditional leaders should play in the current dispensation.

It is a notorious fact that traditional leaders are recognised by both the Constitution and other policy documents. However, both the Constitution and other policy documents are quiet about the particular role traditional rulers should play in their capacity as a part of local government structures. The discussion about whether the institution of traditional leadership is still important and significant in South Africa has continued since the time democracy was attained in 1994, and society is spellbound on the issue. The majority of those opposed to it argue that traditional leadership is associated with primitive and dictatorial practices owing to its manipulation under the colonial and apartheid rule (Bikam & Chakwizira, 2014). They perceive contemporary traditional leaders as remnants of the colonial and apartheid system as well as a vehicle for indirect rule, thus fundamentally incompatible with a modern democratic system (Baldwin, 2016).

Similarly, in Ghana, just like in most African countries, the role of traditional leaders remains vague. The Ghanaian Constitution recognises the institution of traditional leadership. Eugene (2016) discourses:

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