7

After Apartheid: Civic Organizations in the ‘New’ South Africa

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1 Introduction

One striking change in South African politics since 1990 has been the rise and decline of township-based civic organizations, or ‘civics’. Between 1990 and 1993, civics played an active role in local and even national politics. At the local level, civics were prominent in local government restructuring and development initiatives. At the regional and national levels, the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) was formed in 1992, with hitherto independent civic organizations becoming ‘branches’ of SANCO, although in practice most continued to operate with as much autonomy as before. In 1992–93 SANCO played a high profile role, taking the lead in the negotiated transformation of local government and in initiatives around urban housing and infrastructural development. Since 1993, however, the prominence and influence of both SANCO (as a whole) and individual civics (or SANCO branches) have diminished greatly.

The marginalization of civic organizations is evident in almost every aspect of their activities. Local civics had played a central role in the negotiated reform of local government, but they lost influence as soon as new, democratic institutions of local government were set up. Similarly, local civics had played leading roles in negotiations around development, but in the mid-1990s ceded many of these roles to new institutions. At the national level, SANCO was gradually excluded from key decisions around housing policy, the Government-led Masakhane campaign (primarily concerned with the payment of rents, bond instalments and service charges) and the restructuring of state development agencies. SANCO was also marginalized within corporatist structures such as the National Economic, Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC).
Writing in 1995, American scholar Kim Lanegran assessed that ‘the civic association movement is gravely ill and may indeed die if it doesn’t find itself a new role to play in South Africa’s political or social sphere’ (Lanegran, 1995:24). Journalists, too, described SANCO as ‘an organization at the crossroads’. SANCO was said to have ‘found it particularly difficult to come to grips with post-liberation politics’ (Gumedé, 1996). SANCO leaders increasingly acknowledged that the organization was facing very difficult challenges. Moses Mayekiso, who from 1992 to 1994 had served as SANCO’s first national president, said that SANCO had to transform itself ‘in order that [it] can have a role and survive’.3

In April 1997, SANCO’s national general secretary reported to the organization’s national conference that the previous years ‘had not been an easy period’. The organization’s finances were in chaos, its membership was in a mess, and it was increasingly ignored by ANC leaders in government (Ntonti, 1997b:4). SANCO’s national president, Mlungisi Hlongwane, told the conference that the ‘sweeping political changes’ in South Africa had been ‘revolutionary in their pace’, catching SANCO unprepared (Hlongwane, 1997b:2).

Many civic leaders at the local level concur, at least in private. According to an activist from Guguletu, one of Cape Town’s African townships:

Civic structures are very very weak…. You can’t lie and say they are strong. We need to rebuild the structures…. SANCO is very weak and needs to be rebuilt.

In many areas civic organization is nearly chaotic. In Cape Town, to take one example, SANCO officials are uncertain how many branches there are in the area. Scheduled conferences had been postponed; co-ordinating structures had broken down; branches had collapsed. Nonetheless, a great deal of energy continues to be spent on civic issues. I estimate that at least one thousand civic activists participate regularly in SANCO structures or activities in metropolitan Cape Town alone (Seekings, 1997a). Thus, whilst civic organizations may have been marginalised and may be in a parlous condition, civic activism remains a potent force.

2 Living with democracy

Civic organizations played important roles in the struggles for democratization in South Africa, but found it difficult to sustain themselves once the institutions of representative democracy had been put in place. The