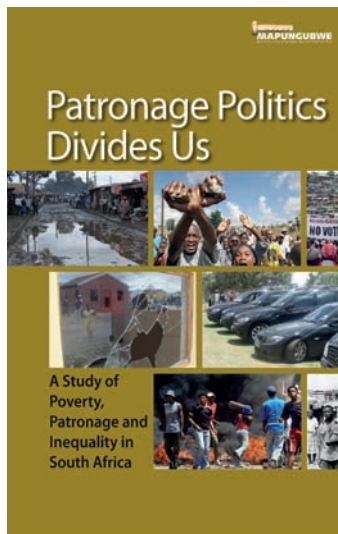


# Patronage Politics Divides Us:

## A Study of Poverty, Patronage and Inequality in South Africa

Reviewed by **Martin Nicol**

*Mcebisi Ndletyana, Pholoana Oupa Makhalemele and Ralph Mathekga  
Johannesburg: Real African Publishers, 2013*



This research report from the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) is a well-meaning – even earnest – book. The authors show a deep concern for the ways in which poor South Africans are caught up in the toils of political patronage. The book is mostly well-written and easy to read and comes with a helpful list of recommendations.

But it does not work. Using a theoretical

framework guided by work on patronage politics in the United States, it fails to convince that this is a useful model for interpreting South Africa. Here, people follow this or that political faction because of hopes and promises, not because anyone commands a functioning patronage machine like Tammany Hall was for the Democratic Party in New York.

At the heart of the book are stories from interviews and focus groups held in five poor areas: Diepsloot in Johannesburg, Overstrand (Hermanus) in the Western Cape, Tsolo and Qumbu in the Eastern Cape, and two municipalities in Free State. These touch on such well-known problems as xenophobia, fishing rights, nepotism (including jobs for friends), the critical role of state grants, and the manipulation of housing lists, and little is new or surprising (although I did not know

that SASSA issued free paraffin along with the social grants).

Although the word “patronage” is sprinkled through the pages, there is no rounding conclusion that patronage drives local politics. The authors say that “political patronage happens when state resources are used to reward individuals in return for their political support”, but this is not actually demonstrated by the case studies. People respond to the promises and blandishments of politicians by supporting them with votes, but very few get their rewards from state resources. Local politicians provide Public Work Programme jobs, Community Development Worker posts and maybe housing list places for only a tiny proportion of those to whom they make promises. This is why communities are so angry. The problem is not “patronage politics”, but that it does not work for people. It only works for politicians, and even for them it often works only temporarily. New factions emerge supporting alternative promisers, who also cannot “deliver”. Turmoil is the result. Citing a US academic, Frank Sorauf, the authors define patronage as “an incentive system: ‘a political currency with which to purchase political activities and political responses’”. But Sorauf’s “political currency” in South Africa is counterfeit!

It is remarkable that the authors bypass alternative African scholarly literature on patrimonialism and neo-patrimonialism as they devote many pages to the worthy writings of Sorauf, Scott, Bearfield and others from the US. This diversion does not solve any questions raised in the fieldwork reports.

The authors point out repeatedly that conflict in local government revolves around struggles for positions in party structures. What they do not explicitly mention



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is an unusual feature of South African democracy: the Constitution's recognition of local government and the direct and equitable funding of local government through the Division of Revenue Act. These provisions, enacted to decentralise power to the people and to enable democracy, have set up local government as a terrain of struggle over resources. In other countries in Africa, local authorities have power (and often financing) that is derived from national or state governments, and which can be granted or denied at the whim of national politicians. This is not the case in South Africa, where local authorities are recognised as a co-equal sphere of government. There really is something to fight about.

Perhaps the most insightful section of the book is the short analytic note on political office as a source of

employment (and power struggles), which describes how "political rivalry amongst the local elites is spurred by spoils of office". This is followed by a list of recommendations, including one to eliminate factionalism within parties: "factional patronage politics has the tendency to attract crooks, who, by mimicking and exaggerating factional conspiracies, entrench themselves in parties and aggravate poor service delivery".

The other recommendations – such as fighting corruption, selecting candidates for local government based on democracy and merit, enforcing accountability, and ensuring that people know their rights – are all spot on. Political will is the missing element. And where will that come from?



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