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DECENTRALISATION AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The relationship between decentralisation and democracy is complex. Decentralisation is not necessarily linked to democracy. Local governments can in fact be distinctly undemocratic. My paper examines this rather ambiguous relationship between decentralisation and democracy in South Africa. My argument is that while the South African government has promoted strong decentralisation to local government there has not been a concomitant commitment to promoting local democracy.

Strong local government is an integral part of the 1996 Constitution which makes provision for co-operative governance rather than competitive federalism. There are three spheres of government, national, provincial and local, which are distinctive, interdependent and interrelated. Local government also has entrenched functions and powers in the Constitution. Further, one of the constitutional objects of local government is 'to promote democratic and accountable local government'.

In practice there is one party dominance by the African National Congress (ANC) at national, provincial and local level. This has two negative implications for local government which will be explored in the paper. Firstly, there is an assumption that local governments are primarily instruments of national government development goals rather than a sphere of representation. The ANC's viewpoint is that the problem of local government lies less in its democratic structure/function than its ability to provide services. There is an overreliance on technical considerations at the expense of local democracy.

Secondly, while there is formal participation, in the sense that people can vote and stand for office at local government, in some municipalities citizens cannot challenge local government officials and their policies. There are informal practices which limit contestation. These include harassment of opposition candidates, pressure on independent media, and the fact that many poor citizens are economically dependent on the government for jobs and/or grants.