

SOUTH AFRICA'S REBELLION OF THE POOR

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Over the past ten years South Africa may have experienced more protests per capita and more strike days per worker than any other country. While some action has grabbed international attention, notably the Marikana Massacre, most events have been localised, though sometimes insurrectionary. There has been a substantial gap between community protests, characterised as a 'rebellion of the poor', and strikes, which some people now refer to as a 'rebellion of the workers'. Focusing on the former rebellion, this paper is based on five years years research that includes analysis of more than 165,000 police reports of 'crowd incidents', a data base of more than 2,500 media-reported community protests, and more than 300 qualitative interviews that were conducted all over the country. It offers a preliminary explanation of some aspects of the phenomenon, doing so by pointing to links between, on the one hand, a brief description of the movement and issues raised by protesters and, on the other, protesters subjective assessments of underlying causes. Conclusions are drawn by relating these to the authors' assessment of key features of the context in which the rebellion takes place.

Context

In 1994, apartheid rule was overthrown and replaced by a democratically elected government dominated by the African National Congress (ANC). This transformation arose in some measure from a growing crisis in South Africa's political economy and from international pressure, but principally from popular insurgency, in which trade

¹ This paper emerges from a large project involving the three authors, but it has been drafted by Peter Alexander, and the errors are his alone. Comments can be addressed to him at palexander@uj.ac.za. The Research Chair in Social Change is funded by South Africa's Department of Science and Technology, administered by its National Research Foundation, and hosted by the University of Johannesburg. The authors are grateful to these institutions, and also to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which provided additional funds. We are obliged to many people who provided assistance, in particular Mahlatse Rampedi, Boitumelo Maruping and Dawu Sibanda.

unions played a critical role. Armed liberation struggle of the kind that predominated elsewhere in Southern Africa, was relatively insignificant. Most resistance occurred independently of the ANC, which, though, was gaining support from the late 1980s, partly through backing from union leaders, partly from its encouragement to 'make the townships ungovernable', partly because of the stature of its leader, Nelson Mandela, who had spent 27 years in gaol.

The ANC favoured a national democratic revolution, in which the majority's rule extended beyond government to domination of the economy, both through nationalisation and black ownership. This was enshrined in its Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955, in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which was the ANC's 1994 election manifesto, and in aspects of the Bill of Rights, a cornerstone of the country's 1996 Constitution.

But, in practice, South Africa underwent a 'double transition' in which democracy was linked to neoliberalism, enforced through the 1996 Growth, Employment and Reconstruction policy.² Some state-owned industries were denationalised, Black Economic Empowerment benefitted a tiny minority, which worked closely with white capitalists, and major South African corporations were allowed to move their primary registrations off-shore, to London and elsewhere. In consequence, black people are mostly worse off economically. The official rate of unemployment and the gini co-efficient for income are higher now than in 1994, and are not surpassed by any country with a larger population. Unemployment rates are presented in Figure 1. According to the latest data (2014 Q4), the expanded rate (which includes discouraged work-seekers) stood at 35.8%, and the labour absorption rate (people employed, even informally, as a proportion of working age population) was only 43.3%. A 2015 official report recorded 53.8% of the population living in poverty, which might be compared to the first post-liberation study, published in 1998, which showed 50.0% below the poverty line.³ Now, 21.7% have incomes insufficient to provide food required for 'good health - and this in a country regarded as 'upper middle income'. With all socio-

² 'Double transition' is taken from Eddie Webster and Glenn Adler, 'Towards a class compromise in South Africa's 'double transition': bargained liberalization and the consolidation of democracy', *Politics and Society* 27, 3 (1999): 347-85.

³ Julian May (ed), *Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Report prepared for the Office of the Executive Deputy President and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Poverty and Inequality*. Durban: Praxis Publishing, 1998.

economic statistics - ownership, income, unemployment, life expectancy, education, housing, etc - whites remain very much better-off than blacks.

In the 2014 general election, only 35% of the voting age population supported the ANC (compared to 54% in 1994), and it is highly possible that it will lose control of the Johannesburg City Council and other metros in elections scheduled for 2016. However, it still won a comfortable majority of votes cast in the general election, 62%, and still controls 7 out of 8 metros. Its success is underpinned by three main factors. First, there has been some 'trickle down', with pension and welfare payments markedly greater than in 1994. Secondly, the ANC still wins support from older voters as the 'party of Mandela'. Thirdly, the principal opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, has been white led and has difficulty extending its supports beyond the 22% received last year.

The ANC's continued electoral support can be contrasted with growing dissatisfaction and anger. This discontent existed before the 2007/8 crash but, in common with mass movements around the world, it has mushroomed since. Official statistics recorded a decline of 1.0 million employed adults in the five quarters from 2008 Q4 (when the total was 13.8 million). There have been two distinct responses to economic hardship. Firstly, one based in working-class communities from, in particular, unemployed and underemployed youth, and, secondly, from workers, mainly in the form of strikes. The former is reflected in graphs that come later; the second is apparent in Figure 2. From the end of 2009, we were writing about a 'rebellion of the poor' (a formulation soon taken up by the Congress of South African Trade Unions, COSATU), and, in the wake of the August 2012 Marikana Massacre, others responded by noting there was also a 'rebellion of the workers'. In retrospect, this second phenomenon was already well underway, marked, especially, by the 2010 public sector workers' strike, South Africa's largest ever stoppage in terms of days lost. At the end of 2012, the massacre was followed by a wave of wildcat strikes across the mining industry; there were numerous large official actions in 2013; and, then, in 2014, platinum mine workers (including those at Marikana) participated in the longest major stoppage in the country's history, a five-month strike that ended in victory.

A rebellion of the poor⁴

This paper focusses on the rebellion of the poor, the heart of which consists of community protests. In terms of size these vary from under a hundred people to more than 10,000, with a median somewhere around 500. The emblematic form of protest is the construction and defence of barricades made principally of burning tyres. But very many are just street processions; some involve arson, looting and physical attacks on councillors or 'foreign' traders; and others include stay-aways by workers and/or school-students. Most last for a day or less, but many go on for three days, and some have lasted for weeks and even months.

So far, there is no reliable estimate of the number of these protests. One potential source is the police record of 'crowd incidents', with these divided into 'peaceful' and 'unrest'. We are in the process of analysing the data for these, and should be able to say more at the conference. Incidents are not necessarily protests; many, perhaps about half, are state occasions, sporting occasions, large funerals and so on. Of the protests, the largest number are related to labour issues. However, among unrest incidents, since 2009 the biggest category has been 'service delivery', the most common motive for community protests. Figure 3 shows crowd incidents captured by the police's Incident Registration and Information System (IRIS). The trend for both peaceful and unrest incidents is upwards. In Figure 4 we compare unrest incidents with statistics on our database of South African media-reported community protests (the largest of its kind). The trends for both are similar, with peaks in 2012. Our data shows that 2014 had the second highest number of protests (we do not yet have IRIS figures for 2014). A growing proportion of these actions is either disruptive (e.g. barricades) or violent (e.g. destruction of buildings). This is reflected in Figure 6 and in the increased proportion of crowd incidents defined as 'unrest'

South Africa has not experienced the enormous protests witnessed in Cairo and elsewhere, but it has had one of the highest levels of protests per capita in the world,

⁴ For other publications on the rebellion see the following. Peter Alexander, 'Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests - a preliminary analysis', *Review of African Political Economy* 37, 123 (2010): 25-40. Peter Alexander, 'Barricades, Ballots and Experimentation: Making Sense of the 2011 Local Government Election with a Social Movement Lens,' in Marcelle C. Dawson and Luke Sinwell (eds), *Contesting Transformation: Popular Resistance in Twenty-first Century South Africa*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. Peter Alexander and Peter Pfaffe, 'Social Relationships to the Means and Ends of Protest in South Africa's Ongoing Rebellion of the Poor: the Balfour Insurrections,' *Social Movement Studies* 13, 2 (2014): 204-21.

with many of these taking the form of local uprisings. Another distinctive aspect is that the protests are occurring in parallel with massive labour unrest.

Some of the key features of South Africa's rebellion are as follows:

1. It has affected rural as well as urban areas, and we have media reports from all but a few small municipalities.
2. Quantitive analysis of municipal-level data reveals a strong correlation between numbers of protests per capita and proportions of the population living in informal housing (most of which is concentrated in shack settlements).
3. Most protests have been in black townships, with virtually none occurring in formerly white suburbs. Closely related to this, almost no whites have participated, but there has been action by 'coloureds' and some Indians, as well as black Africans.
4. Community-enforced stay-aways are quite common, but involvement of workers qua workers, through unions for example, is rare, and workers generally participate as community members.
5. Support cuts across generation and gender, but youth come to the forefront when there is street fighting, and this draws in more males than females (though the latter are also present).
6. Action is highly localised, usually involving no more than a single township or informal settlement, though sometimes extending to a collection of villages, a whole town or part of a city.
7. Associated with this, the main focus of protests are councillors, mayors and local officials. Occasionally provincial and national political leaders get drawn in, and police are generally the object of displeasure and even violence.

Issues

We now turn to analysis of issues raised in community protests. An overview, drawn from our database, is presented in Figure 7. The bars represent the number of protests in which a particular issue was raised, given as a percentage of the total number of recorded protests. This graph is unpacked below. Illustrative examples from press reports have been inserted, and, in passing, these reveal something of the character of the particular incident. The examples are drawn randomly from large and medium sized protests recorded in 2013 and 2014 - they are not exceptional.

Service delivery is often used a generic term by reporters who have not probed details, and is unhelpful analytically. Housing is a major issue. Sometimes it concerns poor quality of housing, usually government-built RDP dwellings; sometimes it is about evictions; and sometimes it is about absence of housing. Where citizens attempt to establish a new informal settlement it is often linked to land. The following is an example of this (and also mentions services):

Wielding an assortment of home made weapons ... thousands of infuriated residents ... protested against their eviction and lack of services ... Thick black smoke ascended into the air from burning objects such as tyres, rubbish and trees, aimed at preventing police from entering the area. ... [R]esidents were concerned that the municipality was refusing to pay the owner of the land, believed to be a British national, for his land, a move that would allow the squatters to continue living there. [#2189, 30/09/2013, Mooiplaats informal settlement, Centurion, Tshwane, Gauteng]

Water & sanitation are the most basic services. In the past, municipalities connected a stand pipe when an informal settlement was established, but nowadays this is often refused. 'Water' also covers things like lack of supply to a formal settlement, and poor-quality water. 'Sanitation' includes, for example, opposition to bucket toilets and failure to remove waste. Roads is another important issue, especially in rural areas, where poorly maintained dirt roads can prevent people having access to jobs, shops, hospitals and welfare pay-out points. In this example, residents link water with another key service Electricity.

1000 residents ... protested about their living conditions ... [T]hey said they had been without electricity and water for over a year. ... What started off as a peaceful protest - bar the burning tyres - descended into anarchy. ...

[S]tones and bottles flew through the air at the same time as a [police] stun grenade went off in the crowd. [#2343, 24/02/2014, Comet and Angelo informal settlement near Reiger Park, Ekurhuleni, Gauteng]

The case below brings together housing and sanitation. It is interesting because residents from four settlements were united in their action.

... protesters clashed with police, who used stun grenades and rubber bullets to disperse a crowd demanding houses and toilets. [A resident] said: 'This is a temporary relocation area ... but many of us have been here for more than ten years. It is disgusting to live here ...'. She said local informal settlement committees were in contact with one another ... and had co-ordinated similar protests in [four areas of Cape Town]. [#2352, 20/03/2014, informal settlements across Cape Town]

Representation generally refers to lack of accountability by a councillor. Municipal administration is usually about incompetent, inefficient and uncaring council officials.. Demarcation issues are relatively few in number, but many of the biggest protests come under this heading, because they tend to mobilise whole communities, often regardless of class. They do so around simple demands, such as a municipality being placed in a different province or the creation of a new municipality, but other issues are commonly entwined with these. The central government, which is generally hostile to demarcation demands, frequently gets involved. The following is an example of a fairly small representation protest.

Residents of ... Ward 21 ... blockaded roads in protest against a by-election candidate they alleged had been imposed by the ANC's Ehlanzeni region in preference to their preferred candidate. Police dispersed the protesters after they had prevented residents from travelling to work. [#2234, 27/11/2013, Pienaar, near Nelspruit, Mpumalanga]

Corruption/nepotism is mostly linked to councillors and sometimes officials receiving, or thought to be receiving, monetary rewards or political support for awarding a tender or providing somebody with a job. Self-evidently jobs may be linked to nepotism, but it also relates to cases where it seems that, in general, outsiders are being favoured over locals. For example:

Residents burned tyres on the road ... [They] were angered by the failure of contractors appointed by the Maquassi Hills municipality to employ local labour. [#2360, 20/04/2014, Chris Hani township, Wolmaransstad, Northwest]

Popular explanations

One could assess the rebellion in terms of the specific issues being raised by protesters, but social scientists must reach for deeper levels of interpretation. These might be achieved through quantitative analysis, but the rebellion is a complex phenomenon and, so far, few variables have revealed a high level of correlation. In the account that follows we have sought clues in explanations provided by our interviewees, most of whom have been active participants or sympathetic residents. Quotes have been translated into English from a variety of South African languages. Typically, popular explanations connect one of the above issues with something more fundamental, and sometimes they link these deeper matters. One can disentangle four major themes.

The first of these is anger about unfairness, with this related to jobs and poverty. Some examples:

Whenever these opportunities come, for instance when 20 people are required by the [Expanded Public Works Programme], the municipality does not call on all members of the community to apply, so that everything is fair. Instead, the municipality unilaterally chooses those people. [115MAF]

It's just hunger if you are not working, [so] you are always upset. [147PE]

When you do not have money, you cannot even 'buy' a job. That means you will remain at home, being a sit-along (lehlalela) ... One has no income but ... you must have' something' in order to 'buy' employment. [166ZRT]

Such problems are frequently linked to questions of accountability. For instance:

The councillors, we never see them. The councillor we elected on 18 May, we knew each other very well, but when I have a problem he doesn't know me. [103KW]

This issue is: the reason why leaders are so stubborn is because they know that the community does not have the authority to remove them. This person was elected by us, so if we feel that the person is incompetent we should have the right to dismiss that person and appoint another one to lead the people. [05BB]

Residents are saying we elected those people but now we do not want them any more, because they are not doing anything for us. But those people still want to hold onto power. ... We have our own government now but it is not accountable to the needs of the people, it is accountable to its own needs. It is far removed from what the people want. [207SB]

For some, unfairness takes on a class character and lack of accountability extends to a critique of 'democracy'. For instance:

Democracy is for rich people ... I am still staying here, but the democracy is there. We have no water here, but the democracy is there. We've got no toilets here, we've got no services. We have to march. [232CTM01]

Democracy is for those who have money and everyone who can afford. I think now you have to buy democracy. [107KW]

We mobilised the masses because we have nothing else to lose but the chains of poverty that bind us. [230KG]

Finally, these matters are given an historical and political edge in the form of disappointment with the ANC, as in these cases:

Eh. We are not happy, to be honest enough. Service delivery is not what we expected of the 1994 campaign of the ANC, which is jobs and houses for all. [92KHU]

Interviewer: Would you say South Africa is a democratic state? Interviewee 1: In the documents there is democracy, in terms of the Constitution, but practically it does not exist. Interviewee 2 : Let me make you an example. The African National Congress believes in the principles of the Freedom Charter, and the Freedom Charter states that everyone should have equal access to free and better education, but practically the young children living here pay for school fees, so that is a contradiction. [237PE03]

Conclusions

Issues raised in the unrest and protesters' explanations of their discontent echo key features of the context offered in the first section. Protests about services and complaints about unemployment are a direct response to the ANC's failure to advance economic policies benefitting the majority of the population. Issues and explanations around accountability connect with the poor quality of democracy in South Africa. Moreover, there is a high level of confidence and righteousness, which probably arise, at least partly, from the character of the struggle that overthrew apartheid (those who won the victory have not secured the rewards).

But, at least in the quotes presented here, there are limits. There is no suggestion that material deprivation is linked to the ANC's neo-liberal policies, or to capitalism more broadly. There is absolutely no awareness of similar conflicts in other countries, no sense of connections to the battles of workers, and only limited recognition of benefits to organising alongside people in neighbouring communities. Analysts might connect the dots to the incomplete character of South Africa's liberation, and the ANC's role in imposing limits, but rank and file actors have a narrower focus. This is not to suggest an absence of critical, political activists - actually, there are many - but the language of anti-capitalism does not prevail in South Africa's rebellion of the poor.

The popular explanations recorded here are based on experience. One interviewee contrasted lack of water, which is 'here', with democracy, which is 'there'. While this has radical potential, the formulation implies that the better life, democracy, was visible below the horizon. Similarly, mobilising the masses because there was 'nothing else to lose but chains of poverty' has revolutionary resonance, but the speaker uses 'we' and 'us' to describe people in a circumscribed community. As matters stand, the rebellion is highly localised, and experience alone constrains popular explanations and inhibits strategic thinking and conceptualisation of alternative futures (though it also creates powerful community loyalties).

The 'scale shift' necessary to take the rebellion forward will, in all likelihood, require political intervention, though sympathetic political organisations will have to respond to its strengths, limitations and complexities.⁵ Since the Marikana Massacre two important new formations have grown out of fragmentation within the ruling

⁵ The notion of 'scale shift' is taken from Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 331-5.

alliance. The first is the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a fully-fledged party, already the third largest in parliament, led by Julius Malema, former President of the ANC's Youth League. The second is the United Front (UF), seen as a step towards forming a workers' party - it was initiated by Africa's largest union the National Union of Metalworkers, which was recently expelled by COSATU. The main social base of the EFF consists of working-class youth, many unemployed, and that of the UF comprises employed workers, mostly older. Although both organisations seek wider support they reflect the dynamics of the two rebellions. A critical problem for both the EFF and UF consists of reducing the divide between 'the poor' and workers, and thus, necessarily, forging working agreements linking the two organisations. This is not merely a political problem, narrowly defined, it also involves recognition that the rebellions can only succeed if they become a revolution of the oppressed against capitalism. While this process may start in South Africa, it can only succeed if it connects to revolutionary movements slowly emerging from recent upheavals around the globe.

Figures

Figure 1. South Africa's Official and Expanded Unemployment Rates 1994-2014
(September for years to 2007, Q3 for 2008 and later)

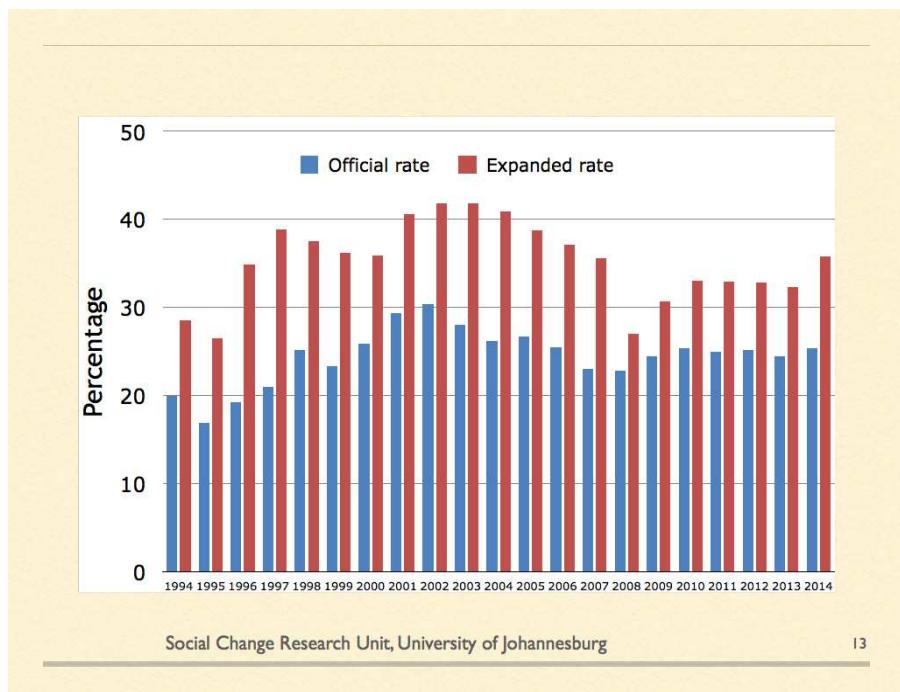


Figure 2

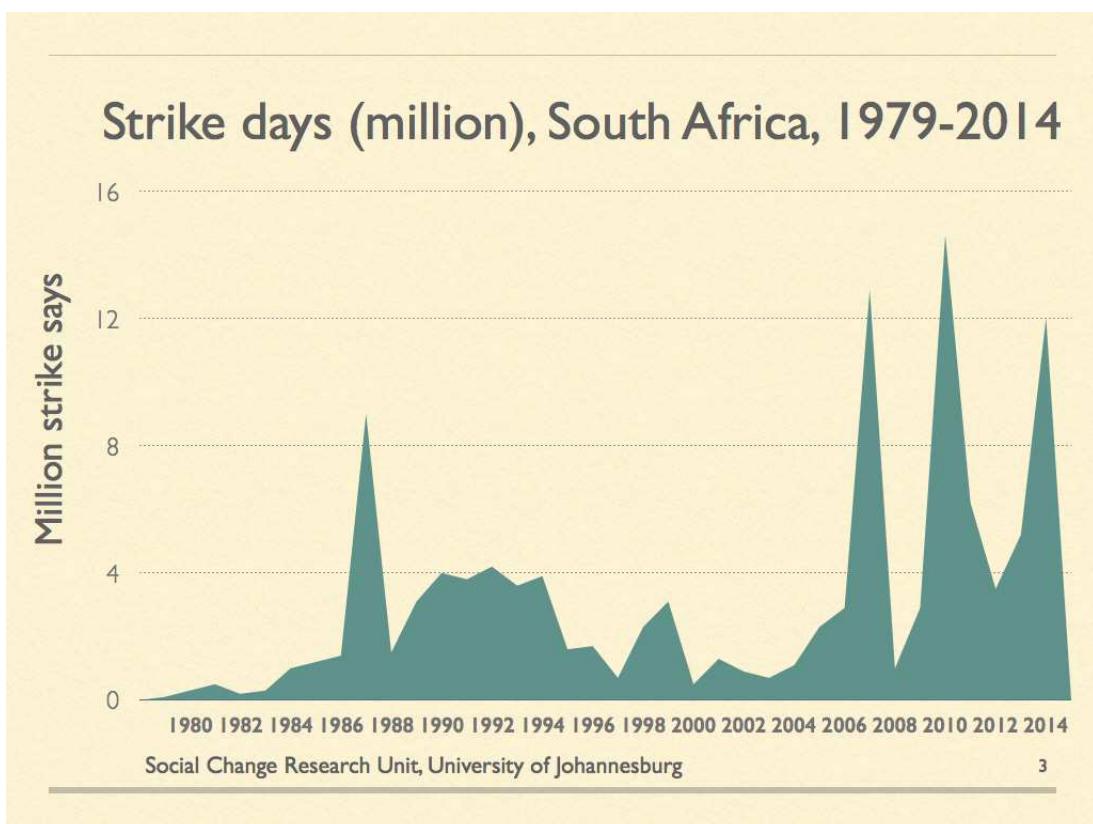


Figure 3

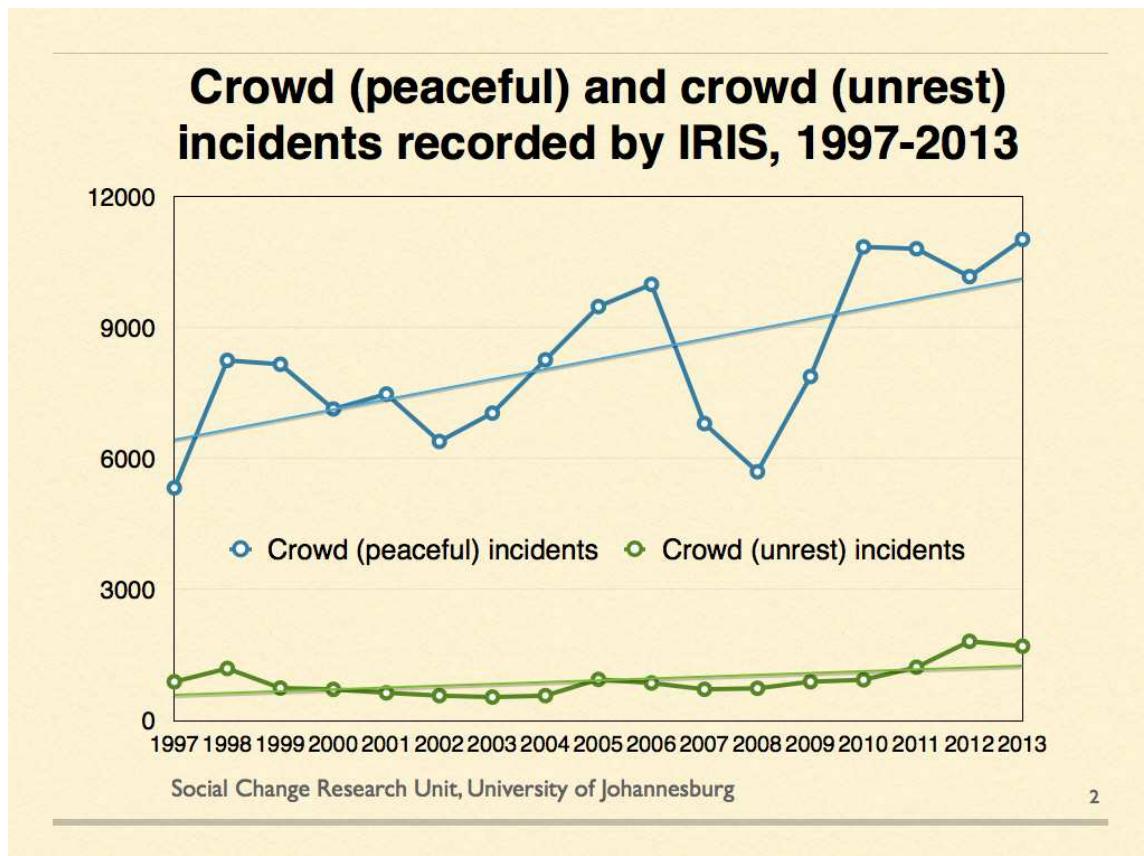


Figure 4

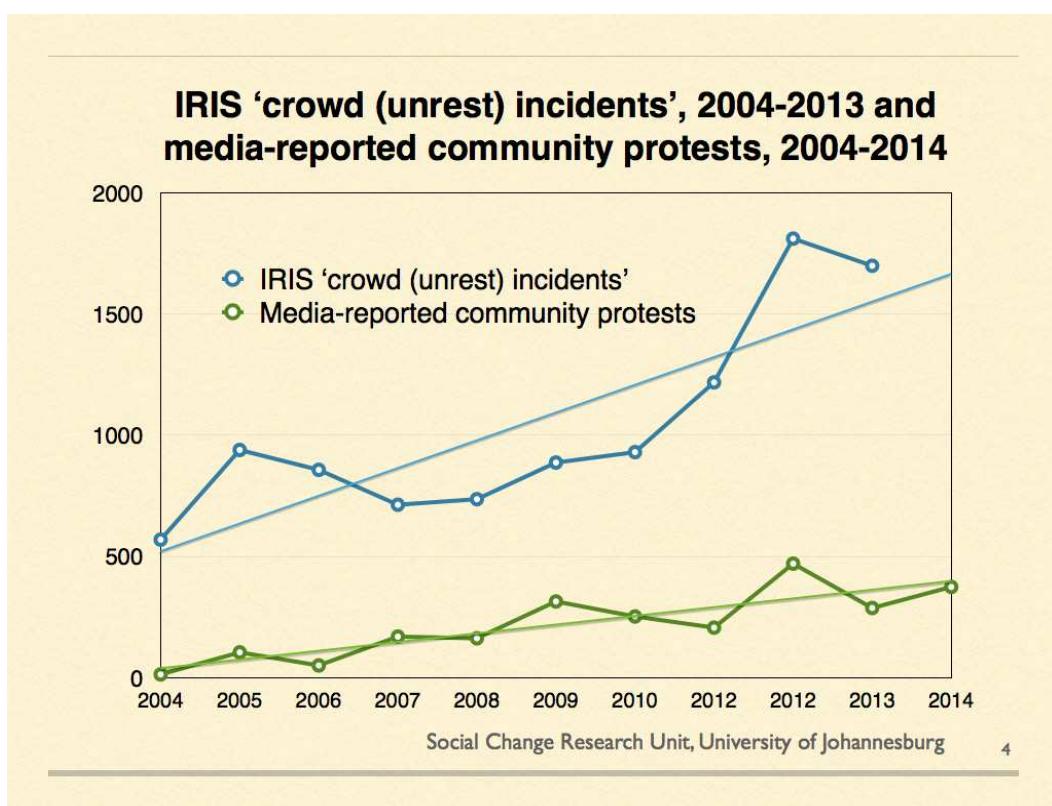


Figure 5

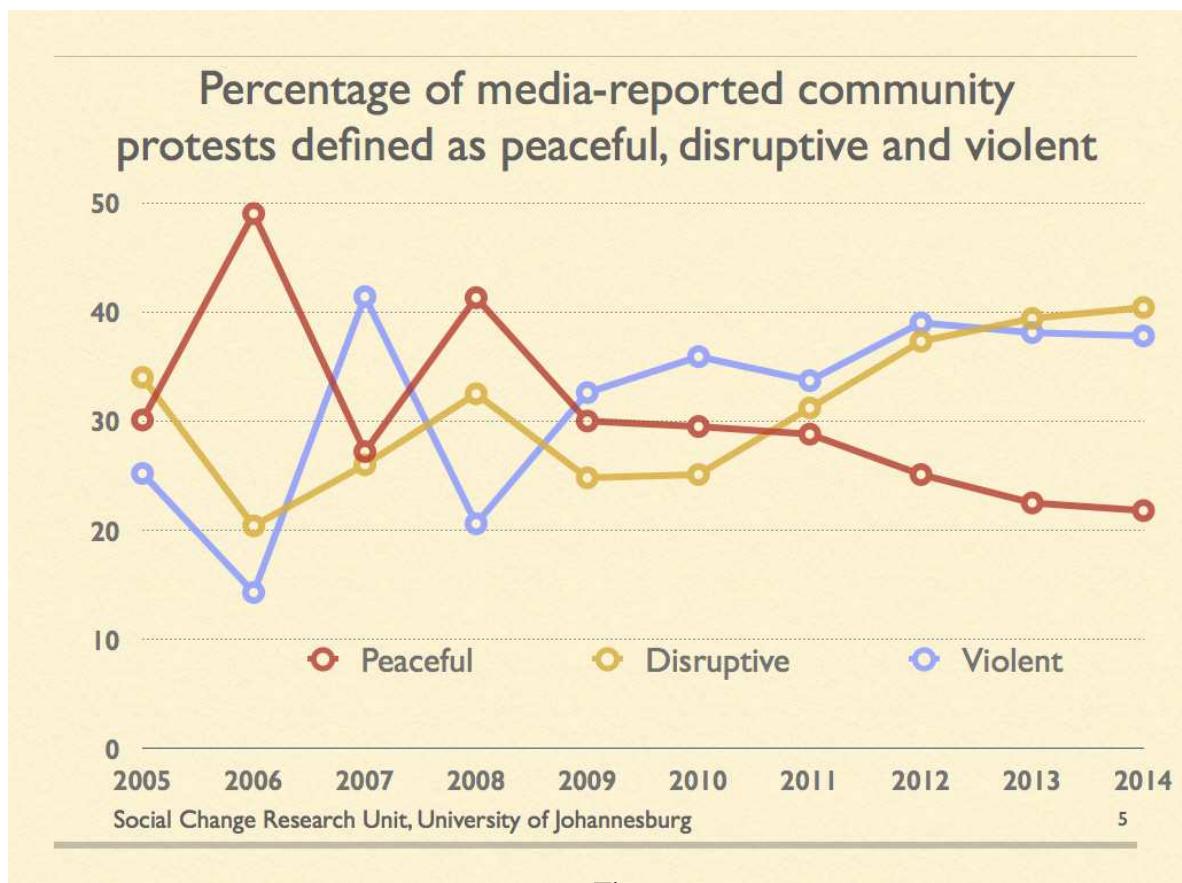


Figure 6

