

# The administrative effects of political killings of officials in South African Municipalities

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**Dates:**

Received: 04 Aug. 2023

Accepted: 08 Dec. 2023

Published: 28 Feb. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Takalani, H. & Lavhelani, P.N, 2024, 'The administrative effects of political killings of officials in South African Municipalities', *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 5(0), a161. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jolgr.v5i0.161>

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**Background:** Politically motivated killings have been an increasing concern in South Africa since the dawn of democracy in 1994. Over the years, various municipalities have seen a rise in the killing of local government officials. While there are records of the number of incidences of killings in provinces such as Kwazulu-Natal, Gauteng and Limpopo, it remains unclear how these occurrences affect local government administration.

**Aim:** This study seeks to explore the administrative effects of politically motivated killings of officials in South African municipalities.

**Methods:** Using the adversarial and politicised bureaucratic models, the study relied on secondary sources of data from accredited journal articles, books, conference proceedings, official reports and academic theses. A desktop qualitative review of data was used.

**Results:** The research found that politically motivated killings of municipal officials have detrimental effects on good governance and service delivery such as staff rotations, destabilisation of the councils, skills erosion and continued political tensions.

**Conclusion:** This study finds that the killings are part of the deeper crisis of politics and administration dynamics in the public service with detrimental effects on the governance of municipalities in South Africa. The study recommends that local governments introduce stringent minimum requirements for appointing officials to minimise the contestation between politicians and government administrators.

**Contribution:** This study seeks to stimulate further research interest in the anatomy of political killings, specifically the diagnosis and specific measures to help curb this phenomenon for better governance within local government.

**Keywords:** political killings; local government officials; councillors; municipal councils; corruption.

## Introduction

South Africa has a history of political violence including a culture of violent service delivery protests and the killings of local government officials. Shaw and Thomas (2017:598) note that there is a trend of individual assassinations linked to political actors in South Africa and this has become frequent in local news reporting. In recent times, many local government officials have lost their lives in various provinces in Kwazulu-Natal, Gauteng, North-West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces. Bruce (2009:2014) argues that the key motive behind these killings of government officials can be linked to the value of public office. The causes of political attacks are in this view linked to squabbles over the control of municipal financial resources and cadre deployment positions. Napier (2018) argues that there is a problem with the separation of political and administrative power in the public sector, especially in the local government. However, studies ignored this phenomenon. Ward councillors have considerable power to influence the access to municipal coffers through involvement in tender and contract awarding processes for houses, the building of roads, water and sanitation and the supply of goods and service. This paper investigates the administrative effects of the killing of local government officials in municipalities within South Africa. This paper suggests that the rise in politically motivated killings is a result of the politicised local government administration characterised by cadre deployment and continuous political disputes. The study finds that the tensions and related killings have serious impact on governance by causing instability and compromising the municipality's capabilities to deliver services efficiently and effectively to the communities they serve.

## Background

Von Holt (2014) indicates that the political killings of government officials and intimidation are common in most developing nations like Mexico because of poor socio-economic conditions and poverty (Calderón 2018). In Africa, political tensions are often related to mass government corruption. While the dynamics, causes, implications and curtailing measures may be slightly different, political tensions are no less of a threat to government efficiency in those countries. In Tanzania for example, Tanzanian bureaucratic arrangements for licenses and permits were known to be burdensome because of time spent and corruption (GAN Integrity 2019). The Anti-Corruption Unit was established to safeguard against corruption. Xinhuanet 2017 indicated that President Magufuli established the anti-corruption court in presidential campaigns for the October 2015 general election because reducing corruption was one of his priorities. Later, the court was coded into law in 2016 under the *Economic and Organised Crime Control Act* (Dolve & Mullard, 2019) with the hope of minimising the killings of government officials and corruption.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) encourages respect for human life and democracy. The present democratic dispensation is built on constitutionalism that promotes peace and stability. However, it has been characterised by political killings, particularly in the Kwazulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Limpopo Provinces. According to the Global Initiative on Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC 2022), there has been a marked increase in targeted killings since 2000 with a recorded 418 political hits between 2000 and 2021 nationwide. Two hundred and thirteen of these killings are reported to have taken place in the last 7 years, with 118 of these murders taking place in the Kwazulu-Natal (KZN) province. In response, the South African government established the Moerane Commission to investigate the motive for the killings since 2011. The commission found among other things that a weak criminal justice system and criminal elements by political players for political and personal gain have escalated the murders (Nomarwayi et al. 2020:15007). Mongale (2021:159) notes that areas like KZN have been inundated with political-related violence since the 1980s. Most notably, the early 1990s was characterised by inter-party African National Congress (ANC) versus Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) conflicts for political dominance. The dominance of the ANC in KZN over the years has however exacerbated the situation and shifted the dynamics towards intra-party conflicts where the ANC members fight each other over government positions such as mayoral posts and ward councillor positions.

The political instability that sometimes leads to political killings stems from a culture of unaccountability that compromises service delivery at the municipal level. A Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018) study notes that corruption, nepotism, theft, embezzlement, negligence and a culture of impunity undermine the bureaucratic efficiency and

effectiveness of the South African government. Fourie (2018) indicates that municipalities are required by law to provide several monopolist services such as water distribution, refuse removal and sanitation that may not be provided by other service providers. Municipalities thus have a high degree of control and discretion regarding the procurement of services and the appointment of service providers. Deviations from the prescribed processes because of the prevalent culture of non-accountability create a conducive environment for corruption, disruption, political instability and tensions. Lack of transparency in supply chain processes (SCM) increases risk factors that are also often attributed to corruption, skills shortages and knowledge deficits. Masete and Mafini (2018) posit that ambiguity in the power and roles of both appointed and elected public officials results in poor or sub-standard service delivery. Mbandlwa, Dorasamy and Fagbadebo (2020:1645) also assert that the South African local government sector is in a mess because of the unethical conduct of those in leadership positions who focus on intra-party and inter-party-political battles but fail to instil a culture of accountability against corrupt individuals. Consequently, despondent communities resort to service delivery protests in many parts of the country.

In view of the discussions so far, the problem that underpins this paper is that although there is sufficient documentation of politically motivated killings, it is unclear what effects these incidences have on governance and the delivery of social services particularly in the local government sphere where the killings are rife. The aim of this study is therefore to explore the effects of political killings of local government officials on the administration and governance in South African local municipalities.

## Theoretical framework

### The adversarial model

The adversarial model was adopted as a framework for this study. The model was first conceptualised by Peters (1987) as one of the five ideal-typical models of politico-administrative relations. It posits that there is a permanent struggle for power between politicians and administrators where administrators and politicians fight for authority over public policy processes (Carboni 2010:90). Hulst et al. (2015) concur with Peters' adversarial model adding that the model is not characterised by collaboration between politicians and administrators but instead by a constant battle by both parties to gain and maintain control. The assumption in this regard is that both administrators and politicians are driven by their desire to maximise their goals and interests including electoral power and personal benefits. Furthermore, there is an overlapping of roles between politicians and government administrators. Peters (1987) and Svava (2006) assert that politicians will end in an administrative state if government administrators structurally dominate decision-making or politics driven by a personal and partisan interest in politically dominant decision-making. This framework is used to explain the killing of municipal officials which

mainly reflects a struggle for political control and also for administrative control of the municipal resources and processes. In the South African government context, the politicised model is anchored in the cadre policy and development strategy of the ruling party, which emphasises the recruitment from the ruling party and that potential recruits are made to understand and accept the basic policies and programmes of the South African governance.

### Politicised bureaucratic model

In addition to the Adversarial model, the Political Bureaucratic model was also used. The latter complements the former by asserting that elected office-bearers or public administrators are politically mandated to manage and control public service administration. This includes the appointments of politicians in senior bureaucratic positions such as senior managers and general managers (Heywood 1997:335). These appointments are thus viewed to control bureaucrats and civil service processes. The model emphasises the inseparable nature of politics and public administration. In other words, through this politicised bureaucratic model, politicians lead government administrative processes. In the case of South Africa, this is reflected more evidently in the ANC's cadre deployment policy and development strategy of 1997, which encourages the recruitment of party members into administrative positions (Masuku & Jili 2013:3). This paper relied on the Politicised Bureaucracy model to argue that the politicisation of municipal official appointments leads to heightened contestation for municipal positions and consequent killings of local government officials.

## Methodology

A desktop qualitative approach was adopted, and data were sourced from available published article journals, books and statutory reports and documents generated by government entities. Leavy (2014) asserts that qualitative research employs inductive approaches to knowledge building aimed at generating meaning. Researchers use this approach to explore; robustly investigate and learn about social phenomena; to unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations and events. It is for this reason that numerous studies and records were reviewed and analysed to obtain an overview of the state of the killings of government officials in various municipalities across the nine South African provinces. Scholarships on political conflicts in local government, political interference and related local government challenges were reviewed and analysed to understand how all these factors have considerable consequences for local government administration.

Best and Kahn (2016) asserted that research credibility is about adhering to the highest scientific standards, rigour and transparency towards the public. It is established by how research findings correspond to real-world situations under investigation. Creswell (2013) posits that the validation of research findings increases the trustworthiness and dependability of study results. To ensure the credibility and

trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher relied on credible secondary data in the form of published articles from reputable platforms and journals. The researcher also used statutory data generated by official state organs. The researcher was therefore able to verify the authenticity of the data to ensure that the findings and conclusions presented paint a realistic picture of the situation under study.

## Causes of the killing of municipal officials

### Cadre deployment

This study submits that cadre deployment contributes to the killings of local government officials as there are no minimum requirements for the position and consequent high contestations for positions. Cadre deployment implies the administrative practice whereby party loyalists or representatives are 'deployed' to positions in public office based on their political dependability as opposed to their suitability for the positions (Siddle & Koelble 2012:118). Magomane (2012) cited in Mlambo, Zubane and Thusi (2022:13) argued that the ANC's failures in the delivery of basic service delivery are partly attributed to the practice of cadre deployment in the local government sector. In addition, municipalities are impacted by related nepotism, cronyism and political interference around the appointment of officials in strategic or key positions. The cadre deployment policy is fit one fit all which in turn attracts competition from various political players to occupy government as well as municipal and council positions. This in turn increases political tensions over municipal positions and power. Reddy (2018) argues that municipal politicisation and cadre deployment practices as a substitute for merit-based selection and appointment of political office bearers result in poor service delivery and loss of public confidence. These political arrangements are also applied in the promotion, staff retention, rewarding and disciplining of municipal officials. The practices ignore human development capability and deploy cadres based on political party loyalty rather than competency, knowledge and skills required for the job. This blind employment of cadres in local government and other spheres of government is unethical as it deprives society of capable and competent office bearers.

### Political interference

Masiya (2020) found that the picture of the internal local government environment is that of negative political power struggles between administrators and political players. The culture of political interference is embedded within the local government structures and processes as they navigate their existence through 'commanding authoritarian language from politicians' and nonappreciation for their skills and expertise. Consequently, these create and cause officials to feel pessimistic about their ability to undertake their tasks in a professional manner, and create dissonant workplaces (Masiya et al. 2021:105). The killing of government officials in South African municipalities is sometimes led by inter-party-political

dynamics and the contestation over political power and this hinders the delivery of services. De Haas (2016) indicates that the manipulation of party lists results in violence among different political organisations was another contributing factor in Kwazulu-Natal for killing government officials and this has led to the assassination of most councillors. Similarly, Bruce (2013) and De Haas (2016) assert that the lack of qualifications of politicians coupled with their desire to protect their positions results in political turfs to the extent of eliminating their competitors. Duncan (2010) indicates that the fusion of politics and business through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies drives politicians to an intimate relationship between political power and material accumulation, where they view election to public office as the best way to quickly accumulate wealth. De Visser (2009) posits that the problem of division of power and responsibilities among politicians who are also office bearers in municipalities has been a persistent cause for tensions and municipalities have found it difficult to adapt to the new political-administration dispensation. Research shows that most municipalities have no job description for speakers and consequently have no procedure for conflict resolution. Furthermore, municipal positions have 'highly charged' political profiles and this has contributed to shifting the appointment control to political parties (De Visser 2009:17–18).

## Corruption

The National Planning Commission (2011) identifies corruption as a leading factor in the killings of government officials. Moreover, political violence negatively impacts effective service delivery as some senior officials resigned because of acts of violence. Raophala (2013) points out that service delivery is a tormenting issue in South Africa because of the malpractices of the local government officials. The provision of quality service delivery to communities is compromised by corruption rooted in the local government officials. Soliman and Cable (2011) observe that corruption is a huge challenge in developmental countries such as South Africa because resources allocated to address the socio-economic and developmental objectives are abused by the local government officials as they benefit themselves, relatives and friends and neglect the core functions of municipalities. The lack of capacity of senior administrators results in the delay of municipal service delivery in South Africa. Hale (1989) cited in Gaines and Kappeler (2015) asserts that most people regard crime, misappropriation of funds and cadre deployment of political office bearers as evidence of corruption. Gaines and Kappeler (2015) outlined corruption in the workplace to include sexual harassment of employees, discrimination or favouritism in staff promotion and inappropriate work-related activities in which political office bearers may participate. Wraith and Simpkins (2011) also note bribery, nepotism and delegation of authority according to self-interest rather than merit as part of corruption. Mafunisa (2003) points out that senior managers and other government administrators are mostly members of the governing party and are employed because of their political affiliation. The approach is that senior local government

officials are deployed to run certain government departments and entities without meeting the job requirements. In this case, the employee's ability to carry out the political mandate is the only criterion used for employment office bearers.

## Effects of political killings on municipalities

### Staff rotation

Ndevu and Muller (2018) argue that there are many staff vacancies in various local municipalities across South Africa, but there is slow progress in filling those positions. This along with the municipalities' inherent inability to maintain and manage public infrastructure, cadre deployment, corruption and already prevalent skills shortage leads to mediocre quality of services. The killing of officials therefore adds to the skills gaps in institutions where there is already limited training and capacity challenges (Chakunda & Chakaipa 2015). Office bearers such as municipal managers are the most targeted because they head municipal administration as mandated by the *Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000)*. In addition, municipal managers provide a communication link between the council and administration and therefore are prone to political pressure from conflicting political interests. Similarly, other senior officials such as Chief Financial Officers are at considerable risk as custodians of public funds of the municipality as proclaimed in section 81(1) (a) of the *Municipal Finance Management Act 2003*. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) suggested that the reasons for killing and threatening municipal managers and other senior municipal officials relate to employment, tenders and salaries (SALGA, 2016). Von Holt (2014) also argues that competition for socio-economic opportunities and resources that are managed by local authorities and senior municipal officials causes political killings. Consequently, there is no stable, structured and strategic leadership required for good governance because of the killing of officials in strategic positions.

### Municipal councils

In his classic, Poejie (1917) identifies directly elected municipal councils as a core institution of democratic local government. He argues that it is important to have effective and efficient governance as well as professionals in the local government who would marshal services to the communities. He adds that this would increase levels of formal awareness and assertiveness and increase capabilities. More than 40 years later however, far from professionalism in local government, Mamokhere (2022:16) argues that political instability is a major problem for municipal councils. The author posits that political rifts within the ruling party are a concern for service delivery where many municipal councils have in some instances failed to convene meetings because of rampant political infighting. This in turn undermines the delivery of basic services and corrodes public trust in local government's ability to meet the needs of communities. Political violence negatively impacts decision-making and

the adoption of resolutions in municipal councils. At the heart of the constant, conflict at the local government level is the inability to separate administrative responsibilities from political dynamics by office bearers who are also political players of represented political formations. To support this, Mhelembe and Mafini (2019) argue that although councillors are prohibited from political interference in administrative issues by the Code of Conduct affairs and from partaking in tender decision processes, by Section 118 of the *Municipal Finance Management Act* (MFMA), political interference in these activities remain a key challenge. Sibanda, Zindi and Maramura (2020) argue that this blurred distinction between administrative and political functions results in increased political interference and tensions, which consequently affects governance and service delivery.

### Service delivery

Government politicisation has compromised local municipalities' capabilities to provide services. The increasing killing of municipal officials is partly a result of the politicised local government administration characterised by cadre deployment and continuous political disputes. Thornhill and Cloete (eds. 2014) suggest that the appointment of senior municipal officials such as municipal managers and Chief Financial Officers has also been made based on political affiliation rather than expertise and ability to manage fiscal challenges. In support of this view, Pieterse (2021) argues that political killings in South Africa have coincided with appalling financial mismanagement and skill capacity challenges. Furthermore, the politicisation of the executive and administrative positions and political interference are major causes of ongoing skills depletion in various municipal departments. Thus, there is little strategic leadership in most municipalities because of skills shortages coupled with a high turnover of political leadership. Corruption in procurement is often a result of these political contestations between local government administrators and politicians. Sibanda et al. (2020:9–10) posit that political interference is to corruptly have an influence on tenders and contracts at the Municipal level. As a result, municipalities provide sub-standard service and award tenders to those linked to councillors and officials. This is even though the municipal councillors' Code and Conduct and Section 118 of the MFMA forbid undue political interference and bar municipal councillors from partaking in tendering and other administrative issues.

### Good governance

Political instability influences governance continuity in local municipalities. Onwuegbuchulam (2021) posits that while patronage and political party power struggles are at the centre of killings of officials and other political violence in KZN, there is a growing culture of violence especially in intra-party politics, which has detrimental effects on the work of government. For example, the ANC's political infighting, wholesome corruption and related service delivery failure led to the change of governments in many metros including Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson

Mandela through coalitions with the minority parties (Bradshaw & Breakfast 2019:115). Part of good governance in local government is the requirement to hold free and fair democratic elections. Midlarsky (1998) suggests that democracies are more stable than autocratic governments and characterised by minimal domestic political violence. However, political violence and murders as seen in the build-up and during the 2016 and 2021 local government elections are a direct threat to this crucial democratic exercise. SALGA (2017:1) observes that the act of 'violence or even to the extent of killing municipal councillors and/or senior managers should be viewed within the contestation of power, therefore undermining democracy'. The heightened killing of local government officials and political violence during the time of local government elections affects democratic consolidation at the municipal level. Electoral regimes where democracy is fully entrenched should be capable of conducting free and fair elections where political formations or parties that win the contestations replace those who previously occupied power in a peaceful and democratic process (Huntington 1991:267 cited in Nomarwayi et al. 2020:6).

### Discussion

This study explored the administrative effects of the killings of local government officials within municipalities in South Africa. Despite quick progress made in the governance of local government since 1994, South African local government's sphere is still faced with a myriad of inherent systematic, institutional and administrative challenges. The political tensions that sometimes result in the killing of officials in local municipalities fall within this political-administrative crisis. The study found that the killing of local government officials is a major concern in Kwazulu-Natal, Limpopo and North-West Provinces. Cadre deployment policies, corruption and conflicts over the control of municipal resources are among the major causes of political tensions and the killing of officials. Cadre deployment is a consequence of no-requirement policies for municipal councils, which makes all those with party affiliation potential contenders for council. The appointment of unqualified and unskilled party officials to strategic positions for personal or political gain is also a major contributor to the political tensions.

The killings of local government officials continue to pose detrimental threats on the sustainability of these institutions. Removal of officials because of death results in unoccupied positions and high staff rotation, which compromise the municipalities' capacity to provide basic services. The delayed provision of service delivery affects poor communities and has often caused violent protests. Furthermore, the killing and political squabbles result in leadership instability, which in turn exacerbates governance challenges at municipalities. According to Ndaba (2007), the African National Congress itself admits that the infighting within the organisation has contributed to instability and consequent service delivery protests in various municipalities across South Africa. The Department of Cooperative Governance, Human Settlement and Traditional Affairs (2017:8) cited in Mamokhere (2020)

states that political tensions and infighting have a negative impact on the provision of services and development in many municipalities. The inter-party conflicts affect the democratic processes of free and fair elections and by-elections used to constitute local government councils.

To help curb the political tensions that lead to the killing of municipal officials, this study makes the following recommendations:

- In dealing with contestation over the occupancy of municipal positions, the South African government should develop the minimum qualifications and competency requirements of government positions. This is likely to limit the number of targeted killings of municipal positions.
- Municipal structures should investigate ways of professionalising the role of ward councillors and impose qualification requirements where possible. This will not only address the skills and capacity challenges but enable councillors to move beyond serving their political principals and representing communities and their municipalities.
- The tender and procurement policies should be reviewed with the intention to limit corruption, which has in the past ensured that municipal officials award municipal contracts to family members, friends and political affiliates.
- There should be a clear distinction between political and administrative roles at the municipal level particularly for municipal officials who are also political players.
- The study recommends that effective cadre deployment policy goes with the minimum qualifications of the senior positions in the municipalities.
- Municipal structure should be strengthened through the effective implementation of relevant public administrative policies like the *Municipal Finance Management Act* (MFMA) to guard against unfair and corrupt practices in procurement and other local government functions.
- Municipalities should impose effective accountability mechanisms for municipal office bearers who are found guilty of malpractices linked to political interference. This should include harsh legal action against individuals and political parties engaging in political violence and targeted killings.
- Furthermore, municipalities should invest more in the training of officials. Some high-ranking municipal officials including Municipal Managers do not have the necessary administrative and modern technological skills to deliver proper services to the communities. Training will assist managers in solving institutional problems such as political and personal disputes, absenteeism, ineffective and inefficient performance, low productivity, disputes and overall poor service delivery.

## Conclusion

This study sought to explore the administrative effects of the killing of municipal officials in municipalities within South Africa. The article adopted a qualitative desktop approach to

gather data. The study relied on the Adversarial and Political Bureaucratic theoretical models to explore how the politico-administrative relations at local government lead to political killings and the consequence they impose on the continuity of governance. The study found that these targeted killings signify much deeper issues within the municipal structures including contestations over resources, political interference and easily accessible municipal positions linked to cadre deployment practices. The paper submits that the killings have detrimental impacts on municipal functions and government continuity. The killings also have various financial implications and affect the overall provision of good quality services by municipalities. The study found that government officials such as municipal managers, senior municipal officials and ward councillors are at risk of political violence. The study concludes by recommending that the South African government must develop measures and strengthen appointment policies focusing on competencies and skills requirements to minimise contestations for positions and improve service delivery. Furthermore, the paper submits that there should be a clear distinction between administrative and political roles within municipalities and other government structures supported by the effective implementation of current policies and regulations against malpractices. The paper adds that the government should take serious action against perpetrators of political interference, corruption, killings and other related offenses. Lastly, the paper seeks to stimulate further interest in research on specific measures to help curb political instability within local government and other government structures.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

H.T. and P.N.L. meet the criteria for authorship as outlined in the authorship policy and author contribution statements. H.T. and P.N.L. equally contributed to the research, development, editing and reviewing of the manuscript.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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