

■ OPINION / COLUMNISTS

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# NEVA MAKGETLA: Housing and electricity at the root of burgeoning protests

Old problems have been worsened by Covid-19, and the state continues to push costs onto poor communities

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The Red Ants destroy shacks and houses that had been illegally built by residents of Kokotela informal settlement in Lawley, south of Johannesburg. Picture: ALON SKUY

The pandemic has brought escalating protests in SA. In July the Institute for Strategic Studies counted eight a day, four times the average from 2013 through to early 2020. Two causes stand out: housing and electricity. Both underscore how the state is still pushing costs onto poor communities, instead of seeking new solutions to the old problem that has been worsened by Covid-19.

In our new jargon, Cape Town is the protest epicentre. From mid-July to August 5 it saw 90 protests — more than a third of the national total, though the Western Cape holds only a 10th of SA's population. Many arose from land invasions as informal landlords evicted people who could no longer afford rent.

Protection for property rights remains selective 25 years after apartheid ended.

Though the lockdown bans evictions, the state hasn't prevented them for informal renters. But it uses force to block the newly homeless from taking unoccupied land. Meanwhile, 1.2-million urban households live in shacks.

In the Western Cape alone about 600,000 households are on the housing list, with an

average wait of 15 years. More recently, to limit Covid-19 outbreaks the national government committed to fast-tracking new housing for dense settlements. So far, however, it has resettled only a few hundred households.

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Other metros also bulldozed informal houses during the pandemic, usually saying they were unoccupied. If they got it wrong, the authorities say, the owners can lay a case. But how many informal residents have the resources, time or know-how to go through the courts?

The evictions follow a long-standing trajectory. Under apartheid, urban planning and land-use rules were core to the denial of citizenship to the majority, refusing them rights to quality government services and economic opportunities.

The often violent enforcement of discriminatory residential rules meant that in the late 1980s half the population lived in the impoverished and deprived “homeland” areas. Today, as people vote with their feet, the figure has fallen to about a quarter. According to Quantec estimates, since 1994 the national population has climbed 45%, but Johannesburg has grown 125% and Cape Town 80%.

Formal housing has expanded rapidly since 1994, especially in Gauteng. But it has barely kept up with the urban population. In most metros a fifth of households live in informal housing, either self-standing or in backyards. Even though apartheid laws no longer exist, these families still have only tenuous property rights. Residents now own most formal township housing, but backyard housing is usually rented, and the state does not recognise ownership in most informal settlements.

Similarly, historical inequalities in the use of state power underpin Eskom’s policy of shutting off electricity to areas with many illegal connections. Eskom claims it wants to avoid overloading its substations in areas it supplies directly. But the shutdowns mean even fully paid-up residents face hours without electricity, in winter, during a lockdown.

Again, these measures underscore the contradictory role of the state. It would be more effective for Eskom to pay for investigators to track down illegal connections. Instead, it seeks to externalise the cost onto neighbourhoods that have neither the capacity nor the resources to undertake this task. As under apartheid, it is imposing collective punishment on historically black townships and informal settlements, leaving no alternative but protests — as seen to date in Mamelodi, Tembisa and Phola Park, among others.

The pandemic has placed unimaginable costs on SA. To maintain the social cohesion required for a functional society and economy, the state has to be single-minded in protecting the majority of citizens. That means it has to stop falling back on the unjust practices of the past, but rather seek new solutions, including by ensuring the new infrastructure push meets the immediate needs of the urban poor.

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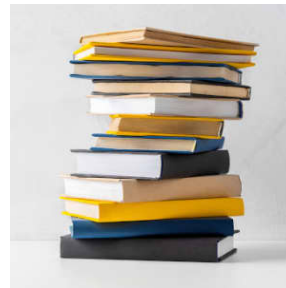
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