

People Vote with Their Feet: The 'Parallel Polis' in South Africa as a Reaction to the Neo-Patrimonial State

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Abstract : The South African experience of the general upsurge in protest movements internationally is characterised by a tension between a neo-patrimonial state on the one hand, and a society with growing middle-class needs and interests on the other. This tension translates into local community service delivery protests - often violent in nature - that have been steadily increasing in number since 2008, student uprisings that have reached their height in October 2015, and various continuing local social #MustFall movements that are geared towards addressing government corruption and transforming neo-liberal structures. As a result, growing citizen (and non-citizen) revolt in South Africa has seen the (i) creeping securitization of the neo-patrimonial state and (ii) the 'top-down' misuse of a current 'bottom-up' people's ideology, decoloniality, in an attempt by a faction in the ruling party (representing the neo-patrimonial state) to legitimize its actions and consolidate its power. The neo-patrimonial state's creeping securitization and ideological positioning lead to a further mistrust of public institutions, people's disengagement with traditional politics, and the creation of a 'parallel polis' by citizens and non-citizens that bypasses the official and oftentimes corrupt structures of the state. By applying the concept 'parallel polis' - originally developed by Václav Benda in connection with the movement Charter 77 in former Czechoslovakia - to a South African case study, it is illustrated that, even in the absence of overt oppression and the use of terror by a ruling elite, entrenched neo-patrimonialism can be potent enough to fuel the creation of various independent parallel public spheres (or, as a whole, understood as a 'parallel polis') to bypass dysfunctional state channels. A flourishing parallel polis offers possibilities for political, social and economic renewal. This is especially relevant in the consolidation of South Africa's relatively young democracy.

Keywords : decoloniality, neo-patrimonialism, 'parallel polis', protest movements, South Africa, state securitization

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