

Communities hurt by more frequent and more violent protests

**Karen Heese
and Kevin Allan**

The sustained series of service delivery protests over the past three months is a record for a single quarter since we first started keeping a tally in 2004. In addition, protests staged against municipal performance (or lack thereof) have become more violent in 2018, according to data from our Municipal Hotspots Monitor, with nine out of every 10 protests impinging on the rights of others to go about their daily lives – whether it be to commute safely, attend school or keep a business running – without fear of looting or arson.

Traffic reports include almost daily road closures caused by protests. This phenomenon is an important one, raising the ire of no less than the cabinet, which described such protests as an “act of economic sabotage”.

The great irony of road closures is that while they seek to escalate grievances in the public gaze, the disruption they cause undermines the substance of grievances and risks criminalising protesters’ actions, especially where these spin out of control.

In addition, there is an arms race of sorts: attempts to grab media attention tend to escalate as participants seek greater levels of disruption. The recent closure of the N1 between Johannesburg and Pretoria was the ultimate in such one-upmanship.

The majority of recent road closures due to protests have taken on a violent dimension. The World Health Organisation defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or

community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”.

Our Municipal Hotspots Monitor similarly defines protests that impinge on the freedom of movement or property of others – including the state – as violent. This includes road closures that threaten passers-by or damage road and community infrastructure. If a community blocks a road and threatens cars or pedestrians who try to pass, the violence is clear.

Few objective observers facing an illegally blocked road, angry protesters and burning tyres would define this situation as nonviolent, nor would they be willing to test the nonviolent nature of such a situation by forcing their way through.

Resulting damage, according to state-owned special insurer the SA Special Risks Insurance Association (Sasria), has reached unprecedented proportions, confirming our finding that violent protests are on the rise (from about seven out of every 10 protests recorded on the Municipal Hotspots Monitor). According to Sasria’s 2017 financial report, not only did claims increase by 22%, but their severity rose by 29%.

The increase in violent road closures have been accompanied by incidents of looting of vehicles, “tolls” being charged and even petrol-bombing, daunting prospects for commuters that undermine citizens’ ability to access educational, work, recreational and health facilities.

Where violence escalates, trucks, police and municipal vehicles are often hijacked, looted and/or torched. For bona fide community activists, this morphing of protests poses a serious risk to the

legitimacy of protests and undermines their grievances.

The road closures also divert policing to restoring traffic rather than marshalling peaceful protests and ensuring stability in affected communities. Tools for this engagement become violent too – stun grenades, teargas and rubber bullets – escalating violence and further alienating communities from those in authority. A major concern amid the ensuing stand-off between police and protesters is criminal opportunism. Not only are small businesses looted, but records show that microlenders are frequently torched under the veil of xenophobic sentiment. The net result is a torn social fabric where grievances are lost and protesters more likely to be criminalised than heard.

There is a view, among some anti-Trump supporters in the US, for instance, that “disruptive” protests (such as blocking airports) should not be considered violent, but this overlooks the nature of recent illegal road closures in SA that are enforced by violence or the threat of violence. The danger to the public in such incidents is so clear that the standard police procedure is to divert traffic away from such road blockages.

Our uniquely SA history of anti-apartheid campaigns sought to make areas “ungovernable”. Boycotts, stayaways and no-go zones were used as tools to assert collective disapproval of the government. Not only has the legitimacy of such techniques been eroded by democracy and participation in governance, the great tragedy is that those who are affected tend to be the very communities raising grievances.

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