

CRITICAL HUMAN RIGHTS

THE POLITICS OF NECESSITY

Community Organizing and Democracy in South Africa



ELKE ZUERN



The Politics of Necessity

*Community Organizing and
Democracy in South Africa*

Elke Zuercher



The University of Wisconsin Press

Publication of this volume has been made possible, in part, through support from the **ANONYMOUS FUND OF THE COLLEGE OF LETTERS AND SCIENCE** at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and from the **EVJUE FOUNDATION, INC.**, the charitable arm of *The Capital Times*.

The University of Wisconsin Press
1930 Monroe Street, 3rd Floor
Madison, Wisconsin 53711-2059
uwpress.wisc.edu

3 Henrietta Street
London WCE 8LU, England
eurospanbookstore.com

Copyright © 2011

The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any format or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without written permission of the University of Wisconsin Press, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles and reviews.

5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Zuern, Elke, 1968–

The politics of necessity: community organizing and democracy in South Africa /
Elke Zuern.

p. cm.—(Critical human rights)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-299-25014-0 (pbk.: alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-299-25013-3 (e-book)

1. South Africa—Politics and government—1989–1994. 2. South Africa—Politics and government—1994– 3. Community organization—South Africa. 4. Basic needs—Government policy—South Africa. 5. Poverty—Political aspects—South Africa.
- I. Title. II. Series: Critical human rights.

DT1971.Z84 2011

322.4'30968—dc22

2010011579

Copublished with University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

Customers in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland should order from University of KwaZulu-Natal Press at www.ukznpress.co.za.

Critical Human Rights

Series Editors

Steve J. Stern  Scott Straus

Books in the series **Critical Human Rights** emphasize research that opens new ways to think about and understand human rights. The series values in particular empirically grounded and intellectually open research that eschews simplified accounts of human rights events and processes.

In the mid-1990s, South Africa underwent a remarkable transition from an apartheid state to a multiracial democracy. This book raises key questions about what that democratization has achieved and what democracy itself means. Most discussions of democracy and democratization focus on liberal political rights and procedural matters. That is, the standard questions are: Is the playing field fair? Are elections competitive? Are civil society institutions, including the media, free to operate in their societies? Elke Zuern argues that this focus on civil and political rights, as well as on procedural matters, misses a fundamental set of issues related to equality and material well-being. Many people in poor societies expect democracy to bring with it improvements in their standards of living, including income, health, housing, and education. Zuern contends that the fight against apartheid was rooted in such concerns for social and economic rights, and that current dissatisfaction with the postapartheid regime stems from its failure to address these substantive issues adequately. Reflecting a deep engagement with South Africa, *The Politics of Necessity* also speaks to the situation in other countries of Africa as well as in parts of Latin America. In challenging narratives that concentrate exclusively on one category of rights, this book prompts us to consider what rights are fundamentally human.



To
BERTA and ROBERT ZUERN,
for your love and support



Preface

This book investigates the creation of democracy from the perspective of the ordinary people who helped to bring it about by organizing, protesting, and demanding a wide range of rights. The initial idea for the project developed during my work interviewing volunteers with the Wits/Vaal Regional Peace Secretariat in mid-1994, just after South Africa's historic democratic elections that brought Nelson Mandela to the presidency. I was struck by the great contrast between the stories that these volunteers told and those that I had read in both journalistic and academic texts on South Africa's transition. Many popular accounts described the creation of nonracial democracy as a miracle. In-depth analyses of the transition often suggested that the real work was done by elites during the on-again, off-again negotiations that began even before Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Neither the image of a miracle nor that of elites ironing out the details of the new democracy captured the experiences of these volunteers. They found themselves on the front lines of the struggle for democracy, standing as peace monitors between rival political parties, working to prevent violence from erupting, and trying to minimize it when it did occur. They often could only enter tense areas in armored vehicles dubbed "doves," named so because of the Peace Secretariat's logo, a blue dove, emblazoned on the side of the vehicles. For these volunteers, as for so many other South Africans, the creation of a democratic regime in South Africa was not the miraculous product of elite actions but rather the result of a long and ongoing popular struggle.

Since 1994, I have followed the work of many community organizations, from the older township-based civics to newer social movements. As a PhD student, I conducted preliminary fieldwork in South Africa in 1995 and then returned for the year in 1997. The most important insights that I gleaned came from the many interviews that ordinary South Africans granted me. It was

through these interviews that I began to develop an understanding of how people living in the impoverished townships created by apartheid viewed the struggle for democracy, their sacrifices, their achievements, and the shortcomings of their new system. These interviews also placed an important check on many of the models of democratic transitions that I had read before engaging in fieldwork. I was frequently struck by how poorly those models matched the realities described by the people I interviewed. Not only were many of the broader understandings of how transitions happen incorrect, but, as I was to learn, they led researchers to ask the wrong questions. I began with questions about how people believed their country had achieved democracy but learned that I needed to ask what democracy was and what people were actually struggling for. I have been very fortunate to return to South Africa regularly since 1997. These annual visits offered me an opportunity to see the changes that occurred from one year to the next and to continue interviewing the people who sought to be part of ongoing political processes in their local communities. Their answers to my many questions and their rephrasing of these questions form the basis of this book.

The struggle for the overwhelming majority of the people I interviewed is a struggle for human rights and democracy, but not in the way in which mainstream western approaches most often employ these terms. Liberal democracies such as the United States and prominent international human rights organizations tend to focus on civil and political rights while sidelining socioeconomic rights. This narrow view that ignores the fundamental indivisibility of all human rights is a legacy of the cold war and the triumph of capitalism. During the cold war, the United States could point to its respect for civil and political rights and demonstrate the general absence of those rights in the Soviet Union. A focus on socioeconomic rights would have complicated the argument of straightforward U.S. supremacy. Since the end of the cold war, the ideology of neoliberalism has worked to perpetuate this partial attention to human rights by defining freedom as the focal point in rights-based discussions. Within this framework, the state engagement required to ensure socioeconomic rights is often presented as limiting fundamental civil and political freedoms. South Africans have directly challenged this approach by arguing that freedom can only be realized when civil, political, *and* socioeconomic rights are protected and enforced.

This book traces the struggles of community organizations and social movements in South Africa and compares their experiences to those of popular actors in other transitioning societies. In so doing, it fills a gap in the literature on democracy, social movements, and material inequality. Numerous texts have addressed questions of democratization in African states (e.g., Ake,

Democracy and Development in Africa; Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*; for South Africa: Alexander, *An Ordinary Country*; Sisk, *Democratization in South Africa*; Wood, *Forging Democracy from Below*), and many others have investigated the power of movements across the globe in effecting regime change (e.g., Goodwin, *No Other Way Out*; Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections*; Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000*). Relatively few have followed the impetus of this book: to investigate the key interactions between popular movements and states in the production and critique of democracy as it is fought for, established, and institutionalized. Those that have pursued these questions have tended to focus on Latin American cases studies (e.g., Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*; Foweraker and Landman, *Citizenship Rights and Social Movements*; Paley, *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictatorship Chile*). Although this book is centered on the South African experience, it investigates the lessons offered comparatively, by engaging other African as well as Latin American histories of mobilization during and after political and economic transitions.

Two central methods are employed in this study: the comparative method and process tracing. Comparisons are made across time and space. Within South Africa, the experiences of community organizations are compared from the late apartheid period, to the extended period of negotiations to end formal apartheid, to postapartheid democracy. During the three decades from 1979 to 2009, many existing organizations have folded, and new ones have been created. Some have managed to survive despite the dramatic changes occurring around them. To illuminate the lessons of these organizations, the experiences of popular actors in South Africa are briefly compared to those in other African and Latin American countries. These comparisons do not form in-depth case studies. They present an opportunity to consider the broader implications of the South African findings and to further develop arguments concerning the connections between protest and democracy. Process tracing is employed within the South African case to demonstrate the mechanisms that bring about shifts in perceptions, actions, and organizations.

In order to limit the analysis without sacrificing the insights it offers, the in-depth investigation of grassroots politics and protest in South Africa focuses on the African townships around four major metropolitan areas: Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni (East Rand), Tshwane (Pretoria), and Nelson Mandela Bay (Port Elizabeth). These four metropolitan municipalities are based in areas where the African National Congress (ANC) has faced little challenge from opposition parties and where civic organizations have been consistently active. In Johannesburg the areas addressed in this study include townships in Soweto (Dobsonville, Zola, Moraka, Meadowlands, Orlando West, Diepkloof, and

Kliptown) as well as numerous zones in Alexandra; in the Vaal region, south of Johannesburg: Sharpeville, Sebokeng, Bophelong, Boipatong, and Evaton; in the East Rand, the townships of Katlehong, Thokoza, Vosloorus, KwaThema, and Wattville; outside Pretoria: Mamelodi and Soshanguve; in the Port Elizabeth area: Kwazakele and New Brighton as well as Uitenhage, Cradock, and Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. Movements in Cape Town and Durban (the two remaining major metropolitan areas not covered in the earlier research) are also included in the postapartheid period. For each time period, the local organizations chosen were among the most vocal and influential in the country. They attracted the greatest media attention for their work and their challenges to the state, the regime, and the ruling party.

The primary data upon which arguments are based include archival records, court transcripts, nongovernmental organization (NGO) project reports, survey research, newspaper sources, and well over two hundred interviews conducted during the first fifteen years of South Africa's experiment with nonracial democracy. From 1994 to 2009, I interviewed civic and social movement leaders from the local to the national level. I also conducted interviews with local government leaders and members of NGOs and other community organizations. Several interviewees chose to remain anonymous due to the politically sensitive nature of our discussion; when I have cited them, they are simply defined by their general job description and their broader geographic area. Together, these interviews conducted both on and off the record provide key insights into how civic and social movement participants and others perceived the work and the role of local associations over time. They demonstrate how a range of ordinary people viewed the transformation process as a whole. As South African politics shifted, so did the opportunities and challenges for its new citizens. Many respondents were interviewed on more than one occasion, often as they moved from work with local organizations to government or private business. As a result of their changing roles, many were willing to keep talking only if our discussions were off the record.



Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the contributions of many South Africans who shared their experiences of struggle and their expectations for democracy. Mzwanele Mayekiso first introduced me to civic organizers and members in Alexandra and beyond. As the interviews snowballed, so did my debts. Donovan Williams, Mike Tofile, Ntsokolo Daniel Sandi, Maynard Menu, Emmanuel Tseleii, Ali Tleane, Philemon Machitela, Mandla Mazibuko, Vuyisile Moedi, Aubery Nxumalo, Mlungisi Hlongwane, Lucas Qhakaza, Jabulani Tshabalala, Trevor Ngwane, Ashraf Cassiem, and Max Ntanyana, among many others, were all incredibly generous with their time. The political studies department at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Johannesburg all provided institutional homes at different points in this project. Historical Papers and the South African History Archive at Wits, as well as the Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives at the University of the Western Cape, provided an incredible bounty of original documents from the apartheid period. The South African Media Service at the University of the Free State provided newspaper clippings from 1979 to the late 1990s. Over the years, Rupert Taylor, Tom Lodge, Phillip Frankel, Shireen Hassim, Jeremy Seekings, Imraan Valodia, Richard Ballard, Sakhela Buhlungu, Ashwin Desai, Sophie Oldfield, Patrick Bond, Stephen Greenberg, Anthony Egan, Steven Friedman, Leila Patel, David Moore, Peter Alexander, and Luke Sinwell have all shared ideas and helpful advice. Adam Habib has always offered generous support and ample opportunities for debate.

In Johannesburg, I found a home away from home and a wonderful friend, Samantha Yoewart. She graciously cleaned out her study again and again as I kept returning to Johannesburg for just one more research visit. Sam talked me through more puzzles and contradictions than I care to remember,

smoothing over the rough bits with coffee, wine, and whiskey. Her family, Bill, Tinks, Tessa, Doon, Al, and Mandy, welcomed me into their family. Naveen Naidoo, who first suggested Sam take me in, has been incredibly supportive from the beginning and has remained a true friend.

In the United States, Columbia University, Amherst College, and Sarah Lawrence College provided both intellectual and material support for this research. At Columbia, Tony Marx, Chuck Tilly, Ira Katznelson, Mahmood Mamdani, Linda Beck, and Ron Kassimir provided a wonderful mixture of critique and encouragement. Special thanks go to Chuck Tilly, who passed away before this book was completed, for always providing speedy comments and creating a welcoming and engaging intellectual home in the Contentious Politics seminar. Amherst College offered crucial time away from full-time teaching with an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship and, a few years later, a Karl Lowenstein Fellowship. Pavel Machala, Amrita Basu, Uday Mehta, Austin Sarat, Tom Dumm, and Anston Bosman talked through ideas and offered helpful comments. At Sarah Lawrence College, Robert Desjarlais, Jamee Moudud, Frank Roosevelt, Shahnaz Rouse, the late Ray Seidelman, Mary Porter, Barbara Kaplan, Geoffrey Danisher, Lillian Ho, Kristy Staniszewski, and Rosemary Weeks supported this project in many different ways. I have benefited enormously from discussions with my students both in class and outside. Allison Ferrier, Eleanore Hyde, Cody Trojan, Jennifer Campbell, and Katherine Graham provided crucial help as incredibly able research assistants.

In New York and beyond, Sean Jacobs, Jessica Blatt, Jacqueline Klopp, Jose Antonio Lucero, Maria Elena Garcia, Marybeth MacPhee, Ebenezer Obadare, Anne Pitcher, John Krinsky, Vince Boudreau, Sun-Chul Kim, Roy Licklider, Zehra Arat, Stephen Ellman, and Penny Andrews critiqued and inspired my work. Invitations to speak at the Africa Workshop at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; the South Africa Reading Group, New York Law School; the Seminar on Human Rights at Columbia University; the AIDS and Civil Society Reading Group at CUNY; and the Comparative History of Ideas Program at the University of Washington all offered stimulating discussion and critical feedback. Martin Murray, Michael McDonald, and Heinz Klug provided extremely helpful comments on the full manuscript. Gwen Walker, Sheila McMahon, and many others at the University of Wisconsin Press transformed a stack of papers into a finished book, and Bob Schwartz created a comprehensive index.

Finally, Sumedha Senanayake, my partner and best friend, defender of a far wider range of rights than those covered in this book, and graphic-design emergency specialist, provided the love and support to sustain me through this project. I can't imagine this journey without him.



Abbreviations

AbM	Abahlali baseMjondolo
AAC	Alexandra Action Committee
ACO	Alexandra Civic Organization
ADESS	l'Association pour le Développement de la Sous-Préfecture de Sakété (Sakété District Development Association)
AEC	Anti-Eviction Campaign
AIG	American International Group
AJSS	l'Association de la Jeunesse de la Sous-Préfecture de Sakété (Sakété District Youth Association)
ANC	African National Congress
APF	Anti-Privatization Forum
AZAPO	Azanian People's Organization
BC	black consciousness
BDP	Botswana Democratic Party
BLA	Black Local Authority
CEDC	community economic development center
CKGR	Central Kalahari Game Reserve
COSAS	Congress of South African Students
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CP	Conservative Party
CRADORA	Cradock Residents' Association
DA/DP	Democratic Alliance/Democratic Party
ESKOM	Electricity Supply Commission
EZLN	Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation)
GEAR	Growth, Employment, and Redistribution
GDP	gross domestic product

HDI	human development index
HSRC	Human Science Research Council
IDASA	Institute for Democracy in South Africa
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
LPM	Landless People's Movement
MEC	member of executive council
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
MOSOP	Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People
MPAEC	Mandela Park Anti-Eviction Campaign
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement)
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NARCO	National Association of Residents and Civic Organizations
NICC	National Interim Civics Committee
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NP/NNP	National Party/New National Party
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress of Azania
PEBCO/PEPCO	Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization/Port Elizabeth People's Civic Organization
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)
PWV	Pretoria Witwatersrand Vereeniging
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Program
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SACP	South African Communist Party
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
SANCO	South African National Civic Organization
SAPA	South African Press Association
SCA	Soweto Civic Association
SDU	self-defense units
SECC	Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee
SIH	SANCO Investment Holdings
SPD	Soweto People's Delegation
SRDI	SANCO Research and Development Institute
TAC	Treatment Action Campaign
TCLSAC	Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa/ Toronto Committee for Links between Southern Africa and Canada
TPA	Transvaal Provincial Authority

UDF	United Democratic Front
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VCA	Vaal Civic Association
WCAEC	Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign



Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xvii
 Introduction	 3
1. Community Organizing in South Africa	22
2. Material Inequality and Political Rights	42
3. Power to the People!	68
4. Disciplining Dissent	98
5. Contentious Democracy	133
6. Substantive Democracy	168
 <i>Notes</i>	 189
<i>References</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	235



Illustrations

Map of South Africa	2
Vaal Civic Association flier	31
Federation of Cape Civic Associations newsletter	49
Income by population group, 1995–2008	56
Operation Khanyisa Movement poster	63
Soweto march flier	85
SANCO membership flier	117
National Assembly election results, 1994–2009	143



The Politics of Necessity