

BOOK REVIEW

Mcebisi Ndletyana. *Anatomy of the ANC in Power: Insights from Port Elizabeth, 1990–2019*. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2020. xiv + 338 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-7969-2587-9.

As the governing African National Congress (ANC) imploded in the mid-2010s during the presidency of Jacob Zuma, a stream of books emerged on the subject of corruption and “state capture.” Biographies of leading politicians—such as Ace Magashule, Cyril Ramaphosa, and Jacob Zuma—exposed factional infighting inside the national party. Yet much of the power inside the ANC is held in decentralized branches and regions, whose squabbling factions struggle for the control of the treasuries of provincial, municipal, and city governments. While South Africa’s excellent regional and city-based newspapers provide daily headlines on the latest events, relatively few researchers have looked beneath the surface into this important aspect of post-apartheid politics. This is what makes Mcebisi Ndletyana’s book on the collapse of the ANC-run city of Port Elizabeth (*Anatomy of the ANC in Power: Insights from Port Elizabeth, 1990–2019*) such an important read.

Port Elizabeth/Nelson Mandela Bay (population 1.25 million) might be a relatively obscure rustbelt city, set into the backwaters of the Eastern Cape—certainly compared to Cape Town, Johannesburg, or Durban—but it is historically important to the ANC’s ruling alliance. Govan Mbeki turned the city into a bastion of ANC support in the 1950s Defiance Campaigns, in consequence giving local activists huge clout in national leadership circles and on Robben Island. In the 1980s, too, the city was famed for the militancy of its trade unions and United Democratic Front civic activism. For Ndletyana, the city serves as a paradigmatic example of how these rich civic and political traditions were lost when the ANC drew diverse leaders from the broad anti-apartheid coalition into a post-apartheid government in the mid-1990s. The events that followed went from bad to worse. A local government reorganization that granted Port Elizabeth “Category A” metropolitan municipality status in 2001 was supposed to embed the ruling ANC as a dominant force in the region. However, Port Elizabeth politicians failed to use their control over large housing, transport, and infrastructure budgets to construct a hegemonic governing coalition, in contrast

(arguably) to Durban, when Mike Sutcliffe was city manager and John Mchunu regional secretary in the 2000s. Rather, Port Elizabeth saw a kleptocratic scramble for resources that forced the city into emergency administration twice, before the ANC lost power to the Democratic Alliance opposition in 2016.

Ndletyana's book is fascinating on the "nuts and bolts" of city-level government—something of a lacuna in the South African historiography, given the preference for studies of "popular struggles." Moreover, his focus on the decline of the ANC as a dominant party reads well as a companion to Crispian Olver's extraordinary account of encountering corruption in Port Elizabeth. (*How to Steal a City: the Battle for Nelson Mandela Bay* [Johannesburg, 2017]). All the same, for a book that pays homage to the South African Communist Party leader and intellectual Govan Mbeki, it is a shame that Ndletyana says relatively little on the crisis of deindustrialization of Port Elizabeth, a "Motor City" that has been home to Ford and (later) VW since 1924. South Africa's crisis of unemployment and deep-embedded inequality are surely important contributing factors in any analysis of the politics of service provision, redistribution, and rent-seeking—"Let there be housing and comfort and government tenders for all," one might say. Again, the ability of ANC politicians in Durban to construct a "growth coalition" with Toyota and Tongaat-Hullet—at least, for a time—might make an interesting comparison to the disarray in Port Elizabeth.

Quibbles aside, this book deserves plaudits on many fronts, not least for the sheer doggedness of research. Ndletyana writes of the difficulty of getting ahold of official documents when "bureaucrats are fearful of suffering reprisals for releasing information that may embarrass politicians" (xiii). Quite apart from the politicians' desire to cover their tracks, there is a wider, worrying structural problem here. Large parts of South African officialdom have struggled to transition from paper-based bureaucracy to the routines of digital data management, with the result that very little is systematically stored and archived. Likewise, South Africa's excellent regional newspapers—so important for their investigative journalism and (later) as a record for historians—are suffering severe staffing cutbacks as readerships transition to online formats. There are even university executives who think that their institutions' government publications library sections should close, because surely everything can be found on Google nowadays. The many people Ndletyana thanks in the acknowledgements—the journalists on the Port Elizabeth *Herald*, government officials committed to transparency, and librarians dedicated to preserving records—remind us that not all is entirely lost.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.25

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Ferguson, James. 2007. "Formalities of Poverty: Thinking about Social Assistance in Neoliberal South Africa." *African Studies Review* 50 (2): 71–86. doi:[10.2307/27667187](https://doi.org/10.2307/27667187).
- Krämer, Mario. 2020. "Violence, Autochthony, and Identity Politics in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa): A Processual Perspective on Local Political Dynamics." *African Studies Review* 63 (3): 540–59. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.69](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.69).