Freedom of Expression and Protest Culture in Makhanda: A Democratic Imperative

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In Makhanda, a small town in South Africa's poorest province (Eastern Cape), you can see the effects of its colonial past all around. The town was renamed from Grahamstown in 2018 to honour a Xhosa warrior, philosopher, prophet, and military man, Makhanda ka Nxele. Despite this effort towards transformation, it remains divided between the affluent western neighbourhoods surrounding Rhodes University and three of the top private schools in the country, and the apartheid legacy townships. In its eastern townships, where 73.9% Black African and 12.5% Coloured residents reside (Lang, 2023), citizens are robbed of their basic human rights due to the lack of service delivery. This is a result of Makana Municipality failing to deliver adequate drinking water, reliable water and sanitation services, and maintenance of aging infrastructure and treatment plants resulting in frequent outages and sewage spills that disproportionately affect marginalised communities (Tshuma, 2024).

Makhanda is the "urban" centre of the Makana Local Municipality, along with Riebeek East, Alicedale, and other smaller villages of Fort Brown, Seven Fountains, Salem, and Sidbury, which experience far worse conditions. The lack of basic services like water, sanitation, and electricity are the most common issues causing disagreements in the township and informal settlement communities, with South Africa crowned as the protest capital of the world (Masiangoako et al, 2022). The geographic divide, first carved by colonial military expansion in the 1800s, still controls whose voices are heard and whose needs are met in democratic South Africa.

Statistics South Africa (2019) identified the country as one of the most unequal societies on earth, with the Eastern Cape having the highest levels of inequality amongst the nine provinces. After the COVID-19 pandemic the situation deteriorated, government failures continued increasing unemployment levels to 34,9% in the third quarter of 2021. Research on small towns in SA has revealed that capacity constraints, poor governance, and institutional shortcomings plague local municipalities and their ability to bring about successful Local Economic

Development (LED) (Hoefnagels et al, 2022). The LED policy of South Africa "focuses on economic development on a local scale, aiming to produce robust, inclusive and highly contextualised strategies that utilise local resources and assets," (Hoefnagels et al, 2022:272). The most important "ingredient" of successful governance is cooperation with the civic society and stakeholders, and this ingredient is said to be missing in many LED initiatives in the country (Hoefnagels et al, 2022).

Black residents of Makhanda and surrounding areas often express their frustrations through protests. Preserved in Section 17 of the Constitution is the right to protest, stating, "Everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions," (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). When protesters march from the township east to the west side, where municipal offices are, they are not only exercising their constitutional rights - they are literally crossing the colonial divide of the city, an environment of inequality which makes those rights necessary for survival.

As enshrined in Section 16 of the Constitution, freedom of expression recognises that expression takes many forms beyond spoken or written words. Protests represent a collective exercise of this right, transforming individual grievances into public discourse and forcing society to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic failures. When citizens march through streets, occupy public spaces, or stage demonstrations, they are engaging in a form of political speech that demands visibility and accountability from those in power.

Lonwabo Kilana (2023) writes that Black protestors morally demand basic human rights and the way the State responds to this shows a deeper problem; Black people are not recognised as fully human. They seek visibility and recognition, hoping that this will lead to change. However, Kilana (2023) argues that just being visible does not work and can backfire. Rather than lead to understanding, too much visibility can mean that Black suffering gets shown continuously until people become numb to it. This hypervisibility is unproductive and further contributes to the invisibility of marginalised people (Brighenti 2010). For example, water protests in Makhanda have been happening for over a decade with the earliest protests happening in 2011, led by the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM-composed of Black township residents). Continued unrest erupted occasionally since then because of infrastructural failures, drought and municipal mismanagement (Cleary 2018, Pote 2019, Mthethwa 2021). Notable spikes in protests that

occurred recently, in February 2021, May 2023, and August 2024, included residents of the west side (including students and lecturers), and residents from the east all coming together to ethically demand their basic human rights from the municipality.

These protests highlighted entrenched issues stemming from municipal mismanagement, with residents experiencing prolonged periods without running water. Demonstrations included university shutdowns and marches to municipal offices, with protesters explicitly framing water access as a fundamental human right rather than a mere service provision issue (Masiangoako et al, 2022).

The western society's legal and recognition systems are built on anti-Blackness, therefore, Black people wanting to be recognised within these systems can be interpreted as asking for validation from the very structures that have denied it. Hence Kilana (2023) argues that Black protest should not aim to be recognised by these systems at all, but expose how they are incapable of truly recognising Black humanity. In Makhanda, this was exercised by UPM protestors back in October 2011, when they joined the Occupy movement staging an "Occupy Grahamstown" in solidarity with marginalised and poor people worldwide. The UPM protesters dumped "bucket loads" of faeces in the foyer of City Hall (Knoetze, 2013). This got the attention of the national government, Winnie Madikizela who was in the sanitation portfolio, visited Grahamstown and gave the local municipality money to eradicate the bucket system in Makhanda (AIDC, 2024). This is however not the case for the Riebeek East community that remains reliant on bucket-system toilets, failing to meet the basic sanitation needs of the residents (Tshuma, 2024).

"It takes the suffering that is usually hidden away as a private shame and makes it a public embarrassment to the government… When people experience their suffering as a private shame, things don't change. But when this suffering becomes politicised and collective action can be taken, especially in elite spaces, things really can change," said Ayanda Kota, founder of UPM (Knoetze, 2013).

It is disconcerting that government is not disturbed or affected by protests that damage and tear apart the same community demanding service delivery. Life continues normally for the wealthy South Africans as they are unaffected. "This nonchalant behaviour of the government towards

the destruction of Black communities' structures, amenities, and environments points to the history that South Africa is built on," (Kilana, 2023). When South Africa was formed in 1910, by two White colonising groups (British and Boers) that made peace with each other, they created a country designed to benefit themselves. Black people were only subjects to be controlled and never partners in making decisions, hence they have been fighting ever since to reclaim power and land. These ongoing policy and land battles are not just about resources, they are about whether society sees your body and existence as mattering (Kilana, 2023). The Makhanda 2025 land disputes are an example of this, where those privileged to have roofs over their heads could afford to be critical of road blockades and protestors. The protestors were fired with teargas and stun grenades by the police to disperse (Mjekula, 2025). Meetings were held by the municipality with the residents to put emphasis that they were not allowed to build on the land, however the residents were determined arguing that informal settlements like Enkanini and Ethembeni now exist, although the municipality was against them at first (Mjekula, 2025). The landscape keeps changing through conflict; protests destroy things, while policies control people.

The exercise of freedom of expression through protest is not without complications and tensions. While the Constitution guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, conflicts arise over where to draw the line between legitimate protest and public disorder. Some demonstrations in Makhanda have involved property damage or confrontations with authorities (Mjekula, 2025), raising questions about the boundaries of protected expression. State responses, including police force and the arrest of protest leaders, can have a chilling effect on the exercise of expressive freedoms, particularly in marginalised communities where people may fear retaliation.

Moreover, not all protests receive equal treatment or attention. Protests by university students often garner more media coverage and official response than those by township residents, reflecting ongoing inequalities in whose voices are heard and valued.

The ongoing need to protest the same issues year after year (water access, housing, violence) reveals the limitations of protest as a sole mechanism for change. Sustainable transformation requires not only the exercise of freedom of expression but also responsive governance, adequate resources, political will, and systemic reform of institutions. Nevertheless, the persistence of protest culture in Makhanda demonstrates citizens' refusal to accept injustice as inevitable and their commitment to holding power accountable.

The protest culture in Makhanda represents a vivid continuation of South Africa's democratic tradition of speaking truth to power. From the earlier water protest of 2011 and the recent ones, to basic human rights and housing demonstrations, these collective actions affirm freedom of expression as a necessary way to challenge injustice and demand accountability. While protests alone cannot guarantee transformation, they remain essential for maintaining democratic importance, giving voice to the marginalised, and refusing to normalise systemic failures.

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