Analysing the Relationship Between South African Mayors and Municipal Officials: A Case of the Western Cape

KI Theletsane
Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Abstract: Politics within municipalities are a cause for concern. They have a major impact on service delivery. Municipal administration is continuously influenced by politics. The relationship between mayors and municipal officials is important for the benefits of service delivery. The purpose of this paper was to analyse the relationship between mayors and municipal officials in a municipality in the Western Cape. Similar data is not available in other municipalities in South Africa but is available in other countries such as Thailand, France and the United States, analysis makes no methodological claims of comparability. However, the nature of the problem or relationship between elected and appointed officials will be similar to many other parts of the world. In South Africa, political interference is a major theme in governmental setting.

Keywords: Mayors, Municipal administration, Municipal official, Politics

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the politics and leadership in local government. Europeans tend to approach the subject from legalistic-administrative, anti-theoretical, and pragmatic perspectives. South Africa has been preoccupied with reform, politics, and public policy perspectives. Municipal leadership is associated with the behaviour of political and administrative elites, ministries and departments, premiers, mayors, municipal managers, and municipal officials. Despite abundant literature, municipal administration continues to be influenced by the politics/administration dichotomy. This dichotomy relates to two central values in the South African government: democracy, as associated with representation, elections, community participation; and competent government, as associated with the efficient and effective service delivery. These divisions are entrenched in the theory and practice of public administration.

Research on municipal administration mainly focuses on municipal managers to the exclusion of mayors. However, in South Africa and other countries, evidence exists that mayors are also administrative leaders by virtue of their frequent involvement in the administrative details of service delivery. This paper examined the relationship between mayors and municipal managers in general, in one municipality in the Western Cape. The municipality cannot be named as agreed between the researcher and the municipality. This is a work in progress, with the study focusing on 30 municipalities in the Western Cape; however, this paper only reports on one municipality. For many municipal officials, the administrative role of mayors is often one of interference which results in tensions and conflicts between elected and appointed officials. For mayors working with administrators has its limitations. The paper analysed these phenomena in relation to the politics/administration dichotomy.

Thornhill (2008) was correct, at least within the traditional framework of politics and administration, local government is a sphere governed closer to the people and must promote the principles of good administration to make local government more competent. Local government is supposed to be more competent in administration and not politics (Williams, 2012). This paper analysed the relationship between mayors and municipal officials in a municipality in the Western Cape. Similar data is not available in other municipalities in South Africa but is available in other countries such as Thailand, France and the United States, analysis makes no methodological claims of comparability. However, the nature of the problem or relationship between elected and appointed officials will be similar to many other parts of the world. In South Africa, political interference is a major theme in governmental setting.

2. Methods and Material

This paper utilised both qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure scientific rigour and

soundness. In theory, using a mixed-methods approach enhances the understanding of complex social phenomena under investigation since the combined approaches are able to systematically complement each other – thereby satisfying a key requirement of the concept of triangulation (or cross-validation). A literature study of appropriate primary and secondary sources containing authoritative publications, books, journals, the internet, and official documents, such as departmental policies, was conducted to gather information. Data was collected by means of questionnaires and interviews. In this study, 68 municipal officials participated including five former mayors and one sitting mayor. Included in the participants were five former municipal managers and one sitting municipal manager. Mayors completed the questionnaire and were also interviewed.

3. The Politics of Municipalities

As municipal politics emerged juxtaposed to municipal administration, a great deal of attention was focused on analysing the role of the municipal managers. During the 1960s, a large body of literature examined the politics of city managers in America (Aldrich, 1995). As with most critics of the politics/administration dichotomy, writers on the politics of municipal managers either misunderstood or misrepresented Woodrow Wilson's traditional distinction between politics and administration (Timothy & Welch, 1987). In the traditional concept of politics, Wilson's pejorative usage was defined as partisan political activity (De La Cruz & Ramirez, 2009). By the 1950s this concept was replaced with newer definitions of politics: involvement in the policy process and the competition for power and influence (Aldrich, 1995). In so doing, these writers noted, by definition, that municipal managers were involved in politics because of their policy relationships with councils (Thornhill, 2005). The recent theory of politics and administration discarded the dichotomy by redefining the concept of politics. As a result, municipal managers became a major subject in the fields of municipal administration and local government politics (Wooldridge, 2008). Concentrating mainly on the municipal manager-mayor political relationship, the academic literature neglected other equally important role relationships of municipal managers with mayors, departmental heads, interest groups, press, civil society, government, and other local authorities.

4. Political Interference of Mayors

Historically, mayors are seen as powerful and have a political power base (Greasley & Stoker, 2005). Other studies examined mayors' formal-legalistic authority in terms of multi-hat roles – chief executive, chief legislator, party leader, ceremonial head, and political leader (Farrar, 2011). McNeill (2001) attempted to develop typologies of mayoral behaviour based upon comparisons of different leadership styles. Kotter and Lawrence (1974) challenged the textbook image of mayors as ceremonial leaders and stated that mayors are important policy leaders.

It is apparent from a review of the literature on municipal administration that more is known about municipal managers than mayors. Furthermore, although a mayor officially occupies a principal political position and a municipal manager a chief administrative officer or position (Ntliziywana, 2009), more information is available on the political role of mayors' administrative role. The continuing separation of politics from administration partially accounts for the imbalance in research and knowledge on municipal leadership roles (Thornhill, 2008a). Although conventional wisdom now holds that politics and administration are inseparable (Kesselman & Rosenthal, 1974), numerous writers continue to study mayors and municipal managers in isolation of one another (Thornhill, 2008b). At best, mayors are viewed as politicians and municipal managers are seen as administrators. What is required is a body of literature on mayors as politicians in administration or on the relationship between mayors and municipal managers or between elected and appointed officials. The key to understanding the mayor's involvement in the administrative process is the recognition that their activities may come into direct conflict with those of the municipal manager, they may displace the activities of the municipal manager, or they may complement their activities (Svara, 1999).

Though mayors may tend to dominate the council in some cases, the policy-making arm may also tend to invade the area theoretically reserved for professional administrators (Svara, 1998). If a municipal manager is weak, or if several members of the council do not accept the spirit of the manager's plan, a good deal of political interference in administration may result (Svara, 1999a). Councillors may bypass municipal managers and deal directly with administrative officials of departments (Sansom, 2012) or

seek to influence administrative decisions on the basis of short-range constituency considerations rather than professional standards and values (Rodgers, Barnett & Cochrane, 2009).

Other studies, utilising different perspectives and concentrating on other aspects of municipal government, have reached similar conclusions. Kotter and Lawrence (1974) found that mayors in America generally lack organisational skills for setting agendas and managing day-to-day administrative routines. Lipsky (2016) pointed to the distinctive bureaucratic nature of local government and the inability of leaders to control street-level bureaucrats and manage the local government policy process. Loveridge (1971) noted that mayors in Virginia exert policy leadership and that many city managers welcome such leadership. However, Loveridge failed to note that mayors also interfere in the administration of service delivery. Many municipal managers rightfully do not welcome the administrative leadership of mayors as they feel they clearly understand what constitutes proper political and administrative role behaviour.

Administrative leadership is not always the sole sphere of municipal managers. At times, municipal managers compete for influence with department heads and other administrative officials (Surty, 2010). At other times, the administrative leadership of municipal managers is challenged by the actions of elected officials – the mayor and council members (Thornhill, 2008a). Although a mayor formally occupies a chief political position and a municipal manager a chief administrative position (Sansom, 2012), more information is available on the administrative role of municipal managers than on the administrative role of mayors.

Out of the colonial experience administrators came to see themselves operating the full machinery of state and to regard politicians as emotional, corrupt, irresponsible disrupters of the orderly process of government (Lipsky, 2016). The politicians, on the other hand, were able to consider themselves more than adequate for handling all aspects of government and they felt little need for, but great uneasiness about, the skills of administrators.

Most studies have focused on either politicians or administrators and have speculated about their relationship. This is an inquisitive reflection since politics and administration are supposed to be inseparable (Svara, 2001). In rejecting the dichotomy, several questions become important: what is the relationship between elected and appointed officials, between politicians and administrators, and between mayors and municipal managers?

5. Administrative Politics of Municipal Officials

From the study conducted by Sansom, it is clear that municipal officials seldom become involved in partisan politics. As professionals, however, they engage in administrative politics, which means they influence the formulation and implementation of policy as well as compete for influence and power (Sansom, 2012). For some municipal officials, daily administrative routines can never be separated from administrative politics.

According to Sansom (2012), it appears that the relationship between mayors and municipal officials is marked by recurring conflicts over delineating proper political and administrative leadership roles. Many municipal officials accuse mayors of interfering in routine administrative matters by frequently by-passing the formal chain of command in communicating directly with the municipal officials' subordinates. Both mayors and municipal managers accused each other of misunderstanding the rules and regulations. This conflict is not new, and remains a central, unresolved issue in the municipal system (Sansom, 2012). From the perspective of municipal officials, mayors pose many challenges for the disciplined legislative authority and administration of municipal government. The provisions of law permit the mayors and council to provide oversight over municipalities. Mayors and council exercise the municipality's executive and legislative authority and use the resources of the municipality in the best interests of the community (Section 4(2) of the Systems Act). However, it transpired that mayors at times require administrative matters to be reported to them by junior members of the municipality. Consequently, this is not in accordance with administrative principles since the position of mayors is political. Mayors should have authority only over policy-making matters, not over routine administrative operations (Moodley, 2019).

According to some of the officials, functions of the municipal administrators are extremely complex because they have to coordinate with the executive council members, who have direct policy

responsibilities. Most council members have never been in any administrative position in government (Bell, 2013). They know nothing about subordinates in government – that the life of a government official involves discipline, customs, traditions, rules, and regulations (Svara, 2001). It thus appears that mayors do not understand the life of government officials.

Mayors are elected and in return they want to help the people even if it means violating the law (Svara, 2001). Anyone who tries to prevent this gets labelled and could jeopardise their opportunity for future promotion. Politicians must be prohibited from interfering in the administrative work of municipalities (Bell, 2013).

Most municipal officials are concerned that mayors behave like unprofessional administrators, violate rules and regulations, interfere in policy implementation, and distrust municipal managers. Implicit in their complaints is the belief that mayors are politicians and do not understand principles of good administration. As a result, municipal officials feel that mayors contribute to the overall unstable, unpredictable, and ungovernable nature of municipal government.

Mayors and municipal officials perceive the nature of municipal politics, personnel, and policy differently. As noted in the questionnaire responses in Table 1, these differences are especially pronounced concerning the political behaviour of executive council

Table 1: Data Analysis Results

POLITICS		Percentage Agreement	
		Mayors N=6	**Officials N=68**
1	Executive council members behave more like administrators than politicians	20	95
2	Executive council members usually play politics with municipal officials	20	87
3	Municipal governance is threatened by politics	20	96
PERSONNEL		**Percentage Agreement**	
		Mayors	**Officials**
1	Mayors believe they are the direct superior of municipal officials	20	87
2	Mayors interfere in the municipal administration	20	98
3	In practice, the municipal administrators have little authority.	15	85
4	The municipal administrators' subordinates are more loyal to the executive council than to the municipal administrators	15	78
5	Municipal administrators have their own system of traditions (culture) which executive councils hardly understand	30	96
6	There are too many people to satisfy in the process of doing my job	30	88
7	Mayors do not trust municipal officials	30	76
8	Being a municipal administrator is a difficult occupation	30	66
9	Municipal administrators have too many superiors they must satisfy	20	89
10	In practice the municipal administrators have little authority	20	87
POLICY		**Percentage Agreement**	
		Mayors	**Officials**
1	Mayors do not like to delegate authority to municipal officials	20	76
2	Most municipal officials are better qualified to make good decisions than council members	30	70
3	Mayors often give orders without first passing through the municipal administrators	20	79
4	Mayors and councillors have more powers over municipal administrators	30	86
5	The executive councils (mayoral committee) should have the authority to hire and fire municipal clerks	30	14
6	Municipal administrators have more policy-making authority	20	56
7	Municipal policy making is done very haphazardly	30	88
8	Municipal administrators should have their own protective association	20	65
9	Most mayors do not understand good principles and practices of administration	20	98
10	Supervision of various sections by councillors is confusing	20	98
11	Mayors and their committee have a say in municipal officials' appointments	30	100

Source: Author

members and the relationship between mayor and municipal officials. However, underlying these orientations are key administrative values which explain the basis for tensions between mayors and municipal clerks.

6. Analysing Data

The nature of the conflict between mayors and municipal officials was probed methodically by developing an operating method for evaluating mayors as well as for identifying key values of municipal administrators. Each municipal official was asked to evaluate their mayor according to certain behavioural characteristics.

The questionnaire was divided into policy, politics, and personnel characteristics with sub-characteristics. Each sub-characteristic was placed on a five-point Likert-type scale for the respondents to choose the degree to which they agree or disagree. In analysing this data, evaluation scores for each characteristic were aggregated and rank-ordered by the group mean.

On completion of the questionnaire, municipal officials were then asked to choose, from each of the three panels, the five most important characteristics they felt mayors should possess. As a result of this, an aggregate model of municipal clerk value preferences and perceptions of mayors' behaviour was constructed. This was based on ranking of means ranging from 1.00 (certainly true) to 5.00 (not true). The five most negative work-related characteristics are listed in Table 1 on the previous page. Of all characteristics, mayors received the lowest evaluation on understanding the principles of good governance and control of their work. Mayors' knowledge of rules and regulations are ranked between these two extremes.

On contrary, mayors were given the most positive work-related evaluation on the characteristics listed in Table 2 below.

Although mayors were considered weak on work-related characteristics, their relationship with the people received the most positive evaluation. Mayors were found strong on the following characteristics listed in Table 4 on the following page.

In the final group of characteristics, municipal officials evaluated the relationship of the mayor with the municipal officials. Municipal clerks saw their mayors as particularly weak on the following items in Table 5 on the following page.

Not all characteristics were of equal value to municipal officials. In fact, some were irrelevant to numerous respondents. Analysis indicates that the communication and decision-making aspects of work relationships are considered more important.

Table 2: Ranking Characteristics

Ranking	Characteristics	Means
1	Understanding governance	3.86
2	Knowledge of rules and regulations	3.75
3	Controls work well	3.36
4	Never interferes with my work	3.26
5	Assists when work is difficult	3.20

Source: Author

Table 3: Ranking Characteristics

Ranking	Characteristics	Means
1	Is resolute or certain	2.56
2	They are honest	2.60
3	Good organiser	2.70
4	Maintains good morale	2.75
5	Apply their mind	2.76

Source: Author

Table 4: Ranking Characteristics

Ranking	Characteristics	Means
1	Well-known in the community	2.32
2	Polite	2.35
3	Is "informal" with the people	2.35
4	Belongs to many community organisations	2.35
5	Assists in private matters when appropriate	2.46

Source: Author

Table 5: Ranking Characteristics

Ranking	Characteristics	Means
1	Puts politics first	3.42
2	Always tries to be helpful and facilitate	3.42
3	Understands the people	4.30
4	Trusts the people	3.25
5	Listen	3.25

Source: Author

The positive spinoff is that officials tend to place high value on principles of public administration. Most highly valued mayors are those who behave like competent politicians in conducting their work. Other highly valued work-related behaviours include knowledge of the rules and regulations and problem-solving ability. Other responses stress that good mayors should have a collectively good working relationship with officials, and not interfere in the administration.

Interestingly, when municipal officials' evaluations and value preferences are compared, in certain instances a complete lack of congruence exists between the two. Of the five most highly valued work-related characteristics, mayors received the second poorest evaluation on "knowledge of rules and regulations". Mayors did not even come close to meeting the work-related value preferences of municipal officials.

There is a high degree of congruity between municipal officials' values and positive evaluations of mayors on the people-related panel of characteristics. For example, municipal officials evaluated mayors very highly on two people-related characteristics: "well-known in the community" and "honest with the people".

The relationship between municipal officials' values and evaluations of the mayor-municipal officials' relationship is a mixture of fulfilled and unfulfilled expectations. Of the five most highly valued characteristics, mayors received a negative evaluation on one key item: "Never interferes with my work". On the other hand, mayors received relatively positive evaluations on two of the most highly valued items: "assists in private matters when appropriate and is polite".

A composite picture of mayors' behaviour as perceived by municipal officials can be constructed by combining the three panels of characteristics and comparing the evaluations with the expectations. This results in the following municipal officials' anticipation: Mayors are nice and well-meaning officials who, on a personal level, get along with most people. But as municipal government officials, they do not know how to conduct work very well. In short, mayors are fine fellows but incompetent politicians.

Responses are almost unanimous in stating that a mayor: (1) interferes in the municipal officials' work and; (2) violates the laws, rules, and regulations. Both responses are connected. Since the job of mayors entails overseeing the laws, rules, and regulations, violation of the regulations means interfering with the municipal official's job (Svara, 2001). It is also quite worrying to see that most municipal officials feel that mayors want to have a say in the appointment of officials. Furthermore, interference and

violation are seen as functions of both intentional and unintentional behaviour of mayors. Some mayors unintentionally behave in this manner because they do not understand the regulations and administrative methods. In open-ended questionnaire responses, municipal officials explained that other mayors intentionally interfere with the municipal official's work and violate the regulations because of the following:

- They are not trustworthy and want to personally benefit from the municipality.

- They are biased and use politics to divide administrators.

- They succumb to political pressure of their parties regardless of legal obligations and restrictions.

It appears that municipal officials are quite disturbed with the mayoral behaviour. In spite of everything, municipal officials are professional administrators whose education, training, and assigned duties place high value on the legal and disciplined aspects of government (Thornhill, 2008b). As mayors allegedly conduct municipal government according to their own personal and political whims, the most important administrative values of municipal officials are violated often. When this happens, municipal officials become dissatisfied and frustrated; they see municipal government operating more as personal political freedom for accumulating wealth and exercising power than as legal entities for the efficient and effective delivery of public services (Sansom, 2012).

7. The Mayors' View

The administrators' view is not complete without the mayors' view, i.e. the mayors' evaluation of municipal officials and municipal government in general. As much as municipal officials feel that mayors pose a threat, mayors also feel that municipal administrators pose numerous problems for both democracy and administrative efficiency. The study interviewed five former mayors and one sitting mayor.

Five of the six mayors indicated they feel that bureaucracy, rules, and regulations governing municipalities limit their ability to get things done. Moreover, the administrative field tends to place mayors in a more vulnerable political position. Mayors said they feel that they should have more powers in the administration than a mere oversight role.

Because mayors are politically vulnerable, they often break rules and regulations in order to make the administrative arena more responsive to their needs (Sansom, 2012). By so doing, they are seen to be interfering in the administration of the municipality. An effective mayor must learn to penetrate the relatively closed nature of the bureaucracy in order to enhance his political position (Sansom, 2012).

All six mayors indicated they feel that after only a few months in office, day-to-day operation of municipal administration often changes their initial optimistic expectations into either frustrations or realistic politics of administrative affairs. Mayors identified several expectations which are also problems. The first set of expectations involves several unanticipated problems they experienced with each level of government. The problems relate to the painful bureaucratic landscape of municipal government. At the municipal level, many municipal officials are divided into factions, challenge instructions of executive council members, and are at times incompetent, lazy, and dishonest. Mayors said they feel that most of the senior administrative appointees are closer to the previous mayors and it takes some time to win their trust. At the provincial level, mayors have difficulty getting cooperation due political squabbles, especially if the municipality is run by an opposition part. Mayors also complained about the centralised nature of the municipal system.

Six of these mayors had never worked in municipality or local government prior to their appointments, they are career politicians. They realised that they needed influence to make things happen. However, administrative officials said they are aware that mayors change frequently and at times they tend to resist new mayorship and often resist orders. Six of the mayors indicated that in order to get work done they have to satisfy officials first.

All mayors said they feel that they should have control over the police. Police are under the control of the province, a major cause for friction between municipalities and the police. Mayors view police as important to their role, but it is difficult to get police cooperation.

Mayors were asked to identify the weak and strong points of their municipal officials, as well as to

identify what things municipal officials do both to their dissatisfaction and that of the council. Mostly, mayors cited the clerks' avoidance of responsibilities; playing politics with subordinates; resisting the mayor by manipulating the rules and regulations; and being uncooperative, incompetent, and dishonest. In short, mayors held an uncomplimentary view of municipal clerks: many were considered incompetent administrators who "played politics" with municipal officials.

The following were identified as challenges for mayors:

- Factions within the administration that attempt to oppose policies.

- Difficulty in providing oversight to officials.

- Service delivery protests that are politically motivated.

- Citizen complaints about services that are not local government responsibilities.

- Unskilled, incompetent, lazy, and dishonest municipal officials.

- Lack of support from the police.

- Lack of cooperation from other governmental departments.

- Invasion of land.

- Housing challenges.

- Migration.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has emphasised the importance of evaluating the relationship between mayors and appointed officials in local government. While mayors generally become involved in the politics of oversight and influencing policy, at times they become involved in the administrative details of service delivery. In so doing, mayors enter an arena which theoretically is the domain of administrators. When this happens, conflict between mayors and municipal officials is likely to take place. Furthermore, this behaviour tends to be viewed as interference on the part of mayors. The pattern of

mayoral involvement in the administrative arena raises an interesting question for those who discard the politics/administration dichotomy. The data in this analysis suggests that mayors want it only one way, their involvement in administration. Viewed from the middle, politicians in administration place additional constraints on the power of administrators. Viewed from the top, administrators are anything but cooperative, trustworthy, apolitical, and competent. Viewed from both perspectives, the politics/administration dichotomy appears to be alive and well and in need of further research.

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