



Briefing Paper 322

May 2013

How We See Our Members of Parliament

"It does not take a majority to prevail...but rather an irate, tireless minority, keen on setting bushfires of freedom in the minds of men"

– Samuel Adams

1. Introduction

The National Parliament of South Africa is a collection of representatives mandated to serve the needs and the interests of the people. Their role is not only to represent the people, but also to keep a watchful eye over the executive in order to ensure that it is doing its job and fulfilling its Constitutional mandate. It is appropriate, then, to evaluate what ordinary South Africans think about how well MPs represent them; do we trust them to deal with our concerns effectively? This discussion will seek to outline the role and the views of ordinary South Africans, as determined by a recent survey¹.

2. The Role of a Member of Parliament

Constitutionally, all MPs are mandated to carry out certain functions. Section 42 of the Constitution states:

"The National Assembly is elected to represent the people and to ensure government by the people under the Constitution. It does this by choosing the President, by providing a national forum for public consideration of issues, by passing legislation and by scrutinizing and overseeing executive action."

Based on this, we find that Parliament's role is separated into three functions, namely: electing the President; discussing issues that affect South Africans and passing legislation that improves

their lives; and overseeing the actions of the executive. The role of oversight is therefore an imperative function of parliamentarians, as they are to ensure that the government of the day performs its duties efficiently and accountably. Parliament's 'Oversight and Accountability Model' defines oversight in the South African context as being "a constitutionally mandated function of legislative organs of state to scrutinise and oversee executive action and any organ of state"². Parliament is therefore required to be watchful, and to assess whether budgets are being applied as stated, whether laws are being implemented properly, and whether government is providing necessary services to all South Africans.

The Oversight and Accountability Model goes on to define oversight as a prevention of abuse, seeing that no illegal behaviour occurs on the part of officials within government and that all rights of citizens are protected. Parliament must also ensure that tax-payers' money is used for legitimate and approved purposes, and not pocketed by civil servants and their partners in corruption. Lastly, it is a requirement that parliamentarians ensure "transparency of government operations and enhance public trust in government, which is itself a condition of effective policy delivery". If all these functions were being rigorously fulfilled, then it is evident that South Africa would be plagued by far fewer instances of corruption, and that government would be held far more accountable for its actions at all levels.

3. An Activist Parliament

In 2009 President Jacob Zuma called for an “activist parliament” during responses to questions after his State of the Nation Address³. He sought parliamentarians who would be more active in performing their role. Later, National Assembly Speaker Max Sisulu called for “more professional” MPs. (He also stated that the quality of legislation had worried him,⁴ and if it worries the Speaker of Parliament then it should certainly worry citizens.)

To judge by news reports, social media, letters to the press, South Africans rarely see parliamentarians actively engaging with citizens. It is a common complaint that public representatives are highly visible in constituencies in the run-up to elections, but are a relatively rare sight afterwards. Civil society organizations have noted how difficult it is to get MPs to listen to the issues that affect communities, such as sexual violence. This is evident in a recent roundtable discussion on human dignity and violence recently held in which not one Member of Parliament arrived and numerous civil society organizations complained about the lack of support on the part of government and parliament. All of this flies in the face of the requirement that MPs be accountable to the citizens that elect them. As Parliament stipulates, “During constituency periods MPs have a duty to:

- Be available to the public
- Help solve problems and
- Report back to their constituents on what is happening in Parliament.”⁵

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, while we do not have a constituency system, MPs are given a monthly allowance to run a ‘constituency’ office. These are unofficial constituencies, determined by the political parties, not by the electoral authorities; consequently, these offices often become party political facilities,⁶ serving the interests of a given party, rather than of the whole community.

4. The Citizens’ Point of View

We may have a lot of policies, rules and procedures in place that call for parliamentarians to be active and accountable; we may even have leaders such as the President and the Speaker of

Parliament calling for MPs to pull up their socks and do what needs to be done, but it seems that many ordinary South Africans feel differently. The Afrobarometer provides the results of a survey taken across South Africa with the intention of ascertaining the perceptions of South Africans about their experiences, their lives, the issues that affect them, and their feelings towards different organs of state. One such organ is Parliament. In 2011 Afrobarometer asked South Africans across all provinces – in both rural and urban areas – whether or not they felt that Members of Parliament had performed their jobs well in the previous twelve months. The results make very interesting reading.

4.1. MPs in Parliament

It will perhaps not be very surprising that a majority of South Africans are dissatisfied with the performance of their MPs. The statistics reflect a 58.5% ‘strong disapproval/ disapproval’ rate in relation to 41.5% who either ‘approve or strongly approve’. This is in keeping with the experience in most democracies, where approval rates tend to drop a few years after an election. However, if we look at the figures province by province, we find some rather unexpected results.

The province best-known for its ongoing crises in education and health,⁷ and the one with the worst-run municipalities⁸ – the Eastern Cape – had the highest approval rate for MPs, at 69.3%. It is difficult to understand why so many Eastern Cape citizens approve of the way MPs perform when the province is notorious for high levels of corruption and mismanagement, and correspondingly low levels of service-delivery. One reason could be the particularly strong ANC loyalty that is found in the Eastern Cape. It may also be that people are reluctant to blame national parliamentarians for what they see as localised problems.

On the other hand, the North-West province with 23.1% and the Limpopo province with 30.1% have the lowest ‘strong approval/approval’ rates; the former also has the highest disapproval rate. Limpopo, especially, has suffered from poor service-delivery in recent years; for example, the recent textbook scandal affected it more than any other province. Is it fair to conclude that citizens of these two provinces, unlike their Eastern Cape counterparts, hold members of the national parliament accountable for provincial/local

failures? If so, it would be interesting to know why their approach to accountability is so different.

After the North-West and Limpopo, the 'strong disapproval/disapproval' rates are as follows: Mpumalanga (68.5%), KwaZulu-Natal (64.8%), Free State (64.1), Northern Cape (58.7), Gauteng (57.2), Western Cape (53.4%) and the Eastern Cape (30.7) respectively. The Western Cape's figures are surprising, in one way, since it is the only opposition-governed province. One might expect, therefore, that many of its citizens would have a negative view of the national Parliament, dominated as it is by the ANC. Perhaps, though, the fact that Parliament is located in Cape Town, which allows citizens and organisations in this province to have a more regular physical interaction with MPs, is a factor. It is probably fair to say that people who visit Parliament and actually see MPs in action, especially in the committees, will tend to have a more positive impression.

4.2. MPs in Constituencies

As we have noted, MPs are expected to report back to their 'constituencies' and generally to give an account of their work as public representatives. Accordingly, the survey asked whether MPs were listening to the issues facing communities. With options of 'Never/Sometimes/Often/Always and Don't know', 41.4% of South Africans feel that MPs do not listen to them; 33.6% say sometimes; 16.4% say often; and 4.3% say always. The remaining 4.2% don't know whether MPs listen or not. Of course, the mere fact that survey respondents had not noticed MPs' visits does not necessarily mean that such visits didn't happen. However, it does suggest that they are infrequent or badly-publicised. Clearly, if MPs were regularly going to constituencies and listening to the people, many would feel heard and the 'sometimes/often' figures would be much higher. And in the process MPs would be performing their jobs on at least one very important level.

Strangely, respondents in the Eastern Cape, who gave the highest approval rate for MPs' parliamentary performance, also had the highest rate of perception that MPs 'never' listen to them, at 66.5%. This tends to suggest that, despite the loyalty that citizens of the Eastern Cape may have to their party allegiances, this has little effect on the accountability of their MPs; they appear not to listen to the very people who support them.

No province had a higher than 11.5% perception that MPs 'always' listen to the electorate. This is understandable – 'always' is a very high standard. Nevertheless, the overall results of this part of the survey indicate a worryingly low level of responsiveness and accountability. And even if it is argued that people's perceptions do not always reflect the reality, MPs have a lot of work ahead of them to convince South Africans that they are being listened to.

5. Concluding Remarks

The poor and marginalised are often overlooked, especially those who live in the rural areas far from the centres of power. Many have to find new ways of accessing state services through systems of patronage or protests; others simply choose not to have anything to do with the state. Being listened to is vital in a democracy; it means that your opinion matters and that those listening value what you have to contribute. On the whole, the Afrobarometer survey suggests that most voters feel that MPs are underperforming and that most MPs do not listen to them. As debatable as some of the findings may be, they certainly need to be taken note of by Parliament and by individual MPs. A greater overall level of responsiveness and accountability towards the country is needed.

Angelique Thomas
Research Intern

¹ The Afrobarometer is a survey created to assess the perceptions and attitudes of various citizens in any of the African countries that participate. This survey used for this paper comes from the round 5 results that was administered in 2011 and released in 2012.

² http://www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Category_ID=29

³ Makhudu, S. 2012. Sloppiness sinks activist parliament

⁴ Makhudu, S. 2012. Sloppiness sinks activist parliament

⁵ See 2

⁶ Rapoo, T. Constituency service at provincial level in South Africa: what role for provincial legislature

⁷ 3/02/2013, Eastern Cape health department revels 'devastating' corruption, Timeslive.co.za
⁸2012, municipalIQ.co.za

This Briefing Paper, or parts thereof, may be reproduced with acknowledgement.
For further information, please contact the CPLO Office Administrator.