

The democratic state versus the developmental state: A false dichotomy

By Ebrahim Fakir

THE DEBATE ON democracy, decentralisation, delivery, politics and performance seems to be caught in a mutually exclusive binary, with proponents of one or the other seemingly emphasising one aspect (or set of aspects) over another, privileging one (or some) to the exclusion of others.

The binary seems to arise from a consideration of the State in two broad conceptual terms: the Developmental State on the hand and the Democratic State on the other. The debate on these two terms has been cast in largely mutually exclusive terms, with a tendency to confuse managerialism, public sector performance and delivery as synonymous with the developmental state. Of course the developmental state is this, but it is much more. On the other hand, there is the tendency to conflate and confuse the idea of the democratic state with the classic notions of democratic indicators – in all their guises, from the liberal to the radical. But as radical as the conceptualisation of the democratic state may be, its exclusive focus on rights, responsiveness, representation, consultation, accountability, oversight, participation and voice is perhaps its weakness, as the democratic state is all of these things, but also much more.

Crudely put, the debate can be characterised as follows. Those deliberating on the Democratic State seem to suggest that giving voice, expediting, crafting and streamlining participatory processes, promoting greater inclusiveness of the poor and marginalised and the deepening and consolidating of democracy in all its facets (diversity, protection and promotion of rights, representation and representativeness, institutional separation of powers and functions, transparent decision making, accountability and oversight) themselves become panaceas for effective governance. By implication, effective democratic governance means better service delivery, as the theory suggests that the government then really knows what the people want. But knowing what the people want, without really having either the infrastructure, capacity, managerial ability and process of delivering the elements of democracy themselves will ring hollow in the absence of a change in the material conditions by which people symbolise and internalise the world.

On the other side of the divide, those deliberating on the Developmental State seem to propose that developmentalism and the developmental state are somehow synonymous with the delivery state. Because there will be effective delivery, the state by its nature will then be democratic. Taking its cue, but somewhat crudely caricaturing the discourse emerging in the public service and from the locus of political power and office, the proposition is that managerial effectiveness, technocratic efficiency, and streamlined procedures and processes for the delivery of public goods and services alone will give concrete expression to a developmental or delivery-oriented state.

My characterisation obviously misses important nuances that either side proposes. But after a spate of social movement and civic protest activity in protest against the slow or perceptibly ineffective delivery of services, especially at local level, the polarisation between state – more specifically, the local state – and society has served largely to crudify much of the policy and politics debate, casting it in terms which in essence become incomprehensible if one were to think about democracy and delivery in tandem.

The question that can then be teased out, given that the role of government has highlighted differing views about how state institutions should relate to their constituencies and communities, is whether local institutions specifically should be predominantly concerned with efficient, cost-effective service delivery and raising as much revenue as possible, or whether local government should give more weight to building social capital – establishing trust, cooperation and coordination amongst people and institutions so that community life can flourish. Should councils, at local government level, treat their constituents primarily as customers for the services they provide, or as citizens – with much broader needs and expectations (rights) than just efficient and effective services?

The danger attendant with the polarisation of the debate between democracy and delivery and democratization and developmentalism may lead to tendencies that lead to an uneven balance between one and the other. Thus, it might correctly identify a need for better management – greater efficiency and effectiveness – but may fail to give sufficient attention to the need for better governance. One of the consequences of this 'lop-sided' approach to governance is that we could potentially see a shift in the balance of power within councils from elected members to appointed officials (managers) – a trend that is already evident. What exactly have been the effects of this? Mainly inappropriate and ineffective modes and models of service delivery being used and implemented; inefficient administration and implementation of service delivery processes, of registering indigents and the poor for the free services that accrue to them as a part of their social wage; a lack of oversight by elected representatives over their officials and administrators, and therefore a corresponding lack of accountability of the appointed officials to elected councillors; and, in turn politicians' lack of accountability to their parties, and moreover their constituents.

It is increasingly clear that much of the social protest activity in evidence around the country can be split into two broad categories. The one is social movement/civic activity, which itself is disparate, in often distinct but also interrelated ways. On the one hand, there are social movements that have a strategy (however inadequate) and an alternative policy and political project – signalled by organised political activity, a distinct ideological and political position, a political identity, organised structures and branches, regular meetings, and the like. On the other hand, there is also more spontaneous, unorganised activity that happens through social movements which may or may not have organised structures, branches, meetings, and a fixed identity or policy and political project, seeking simply alternatives to what they consider to be the current neo-liberal state trajectory. This cohort will be unhappy (in colloquial terms) even if service delivery and the availability and accessibility of public goods and services improve.

Secondly, some of the protests that occurred are simply spontaneous and instantaneous eruptions grounded in basic needs. These protests are expressions of frustration – with low or slow levels of service delivery by local government; the lack of transparency in decision making; inability to participate or ineffective participation; and, a lack of responsiveness or availability of their local politicians. This is much more about the perceived breakdown of local level democratic interfaces and technocratic inefficiency or inability – which would dissipate with improvements in this regard. In other words, this type of social protest activity does not seek to mobilise for an alternative political project. The fact that it may take on a racial dimension, particularly in the Western Cape, clearly adds to the complexity of what is already quite a complex political scene.

In summary, my contention is that politics and policy, democracy and delivery, transition and transformation, are essentially complementary rather than conflictual. Casting them on conflictual and mutually exclusive grounds serves only to stultify debate, at best, and hold the roll out of public goods and services to ransom. The need for a developmental state that emphasises performance, managerialism, technical and bureaucratic efficiency

and effectiveness, and institutional rationalisation and transformation must co-exist with the idea of a democratic state that creates a voice for the poor and marginalised, that promotes, enhances and protects the rights that accrue but pursues the obligations owed to it by citizens, and which inculcates diversity, responsiveness and representation and representativity, the institutional separation of powers and functions, transparent decision making, accountability and effective oversight. We are at an opportune moment to interrogate the idea and explore the contours of what an 'embedded', democratic developmental state may be.