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Book Review

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## Book Review of Township Politics: Civic Struggles for a New South Africa

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### Abstract

This book review discusses the 2023 edition of "Township Politics: Civic Struggles for a New South Africa" by Mzwanele Mayekiso, which explores grassroots activism in Alexandra Township from 1985 to 1995. Originally published in 1996, the updated version includes a prologue by Thozamile Botha and a foreword by Mel King, situating the civic movement within pre- and post-apartheid contexts. Mayekiso, a key leader in the Alexandra Civic Organisation, offers an insider's perspective on organising protests and the socio-political dynamics of resistance under apartheid. The book challenges neo-patrimonial interpretations of African politics by emphasising community-driven initiatives that opposed state repression. It also critiques the post-apartheid transition, highlighting how neoliberal policies have co-opted civic leaders, diminishing grassroots autonomy. Combining history with personal reflection, "Township Politics" provides a thoughtful analysis of activism's potential and fragility. This review underscores its significance as a historical document and a contribution to social justice and civic engagement debates in South Africa.

**Keywords:** *Activist, Grassroots, Movements, Civic organisations, Politics*

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Mzwanele Mayekiso is a prominent South African activist and urban planner known for his significant contributions to the anti-apartheid movement and post-apartheid urban development. He explained his background in the book "Township Politics: Civic Struggles for a New South Africa" 2023 Edition, first published in 1996. The book analyses grassroots activism during a pivotal era in South Africa's history. Mayekiso reflects on his upbringing in the Eastern Cape and early involvement as a student activist, setting the stage for his deep commitment to social change. He draws his arguments from personal experiences as a leader within the Alexandra Civic Organization (ACO); he thus provides an insider's perspective on the civic movements that challenged the apartheid regime between 1985 and 1995.

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The book is a second edition to the original 1996 publication. Notably, this edition features a new prologue by Thozamile Botha, who provides a comprehensive background of the book focusing on pre- and post-apartheid in South Africa and how colonial legacies have led to the formulation of township activism. Botha, who received a UJ Sociology PhD in 2022, is considered the founder of the civic movement based on work in Gqeberha in the late 1970s. The 2023 edition, published by the University of Johannesburg Press, highlights a renewed academic interest in Mayekiso's work. While the essential content detailing the internal dynamics and objectives of the civic organizations in Alexandra township during the 1980s and 1990s remains unchanged, including recent perspectives offers readers an updated understanding of the challenges and developments in South African township politics over the past decades.

US community activist Mel King wrote the Foreword to emphasise the significance of international grassroots civic movements in challenging apartheid and fostering democratic transformation. King highlights Mayekiso's firsthand experiences as a leader within these movements, offering readers an authentic perspective on the complexities and triumphs of township-based activism.

Following several sections contributed by external authors, the book provides a preface from the primary author, Mzwanele Mayekiso. This preface lays the groundwork for an in-depth exploration of civic movements' historical and contemporary roles. It gives valuable insights into their potential to bring about meaningful change within South African society.

The book is then divided into four main sections, each examining different facets of life in the township and the essence of resistance. Mayekiso vividly depicts the severe living conditions in Alexandra Township during the 1980s-90s, highlighting the structural inequalities that spurred collective action.

As the narrative unfolds, Mayekiso delves into the organisation of protests, the emergence of civic movements, and the intricate dynamics between community members and authorities. He offers a frank account of the internal challenges faced by these movements, including ideological disputes and the personal toll of activism, exemplified by his imprisonment. This reflection provides valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of grassroots organizations operating under repressive conditions.

A significant strength of "Township Politics" lies in its narrative style. Mayekiso skilfully transitions between a tour-guide approach, immersing readers in the daily realities of Alexandra, and a diary-like introspection that reveals the emotional and psychological dimensions of activism. This method humanises the broader political discourse, emphasising the collective efforts of ordinary citizens, men, women, and youth, who united for a common cause. Mayekiso's account challenges the notion that African political systems are neo-patrimonial—the ACO's efforts to democratise local governance and promote community-driven development contrast with the neo-patrimonial framework.

According to the late political scientist Thandeka Mkandawire (2015:565), neo-patrimonial systems are inherently predisposed to clientelism and patronage. Mayekiso illustrates how the civic movements operated autonomously, often in opposition to the apartheid state and traditional patron-client networks. Mayekiso's narrative demonstrates that in the context of Alexandra Township, collective action and institutional innovation were instrumental in resisting systemic oppression and fostering democratic practices.

Additionally, the book provides a critical analysis of the post-apartheid transition, emphasising the tensions that have arisen between grassroots organizations and the newly formed democratic government. Mayekiso raises concerns about the move towards neoliberal economic policies, which he argues have marginalised communities that played a crucial role in the liberation struggle. This critique resonates with the broader discourse regarding the impact of neoliberalism on post-colonial societies, where market-driven reforms often exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine local initiatives.

Mayekiso critically engages with academic interpretations of the anti-apartheid struggle, challenging scholars who, in his view, lack a nuanced understanding of township dynamics. He presents well-substantiated counterarguments to various misconceptions, reinforcing the legitimacy and necessity of the strategies employed by civic movements. This critique highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge and lived experiences in informing sociopolitical analyses.

The book thoroughly explores the civic struggles faced by various communities, highlighting historical and contemporary issues. While some readers may find the extensive detailed analyses and academic critiques somewhat challenging to navigate, these elements significantly enhance the overall narrative. They introduce a level of rigour that deepens the reader's understanding of the multifaceted nature of grassroots activism.

The book offers invaluable insights into the complexities and nuances characterising the fight for social justice and civic engagement by dissecting these movements' motivations, strategies, and outcomes. This multifaceted approach enriches the narrative and encourages readers to reflect critically on the dynamics of activism and the various factors that influence its effectiveness.

In the book's concluding pages, Mzwanele Mayekiso explores the decline of civic movements such as the ACO following South Africa's transition to democracy. He attributes this decline to the co-optation of civic leaders into formal political structures, particularly within the ANC. As a result, both national and local governments gained better-trained staff and leadership. However, this integration led to a loss of autonomy for civic organizations and a depoliticisation of grassroots activism. Moreover, these organizations faced challenges transitioning from resistance movements to governance entities, often lacking resources and independence. Mayekiso critiques this shift, arguing that civic organizations should have maintained their working-class focus to confront capitalist exploitation in post-apartheid South Africa effectively. He warns that without independent civic activism, the democratic gains of the liberation struggle may be jeopardised by bureaucratic inefficiencies and elite-driven politics.

"Township Politics" is essential for those seeking to grasp the multifaceted nature of South Africa's journey toward democracy. Mayekiso's firsthand account not only documents historical events but also serves as a testament to the power of community mobilisation in the quest for justice and equality. The book significantly contributes to socio-political literature, providing a nuanced understanding of how localised struggles can affect systemic change.

## References

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