

Political Culture(s) and Violent Conflict: The Case of Chieftaincy in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)

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The literature on political culture in general and likewise on political culture in South Africa is dominated by studies relying on the conceptual tradition of Almond & Verba (1963): this “subjective concept” ties political culture to the attitudes, predispositions and views of individuals and their socialization within a political system. Thereby, the subjective concept has a strong normative dimension emphasizing that democratic consolidation depends on the democratic attitudes and values of the citizens. In contrast to this well-established tradition in the theory and research of political culture, the paper starts from a different angle and criticizes „conventional” political cultural research of being ahistorical, individualistic and evolutionary. In contrast, political culture is perceived here as conflictual, dynamic, and anchored in history. The paper follows an actor-centered approach and looks at conflicts, institutional routines, symbols and rituals; more specifically it focuses on the role of chiefs in the making of political culture(s).

Regionally, the focus of the paper is on the province of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) which has been seriously affected by violent conflict since the early 1980s. While mostly being perceived as a clash between two political organisations (UDF/ANC vs. IFP) in the context of anti-apartheid resistance, the violence was substantially driven by micro-level conflicts and motives. The paper argues that the effects of violent conflict on political culture(s) in the post-apartheid era are of major importance and it investigates 1) the role of chiefs in the dynamics of violence and in the diverse efforts to re-establish order and 2) their current relationship with local/regional political leadership and administration on the one hand and with local citizens on the other.

By a case study of the eThekweni (Durban) Municipality the paper highlights the partly conflictual and partly co-operative interaction of chiefs with politicians, civil servants and local citizens and starts finding answers on the following questions: How are political debates and conflicts conducted against the background of the history of violent conflict? What is the role of violence in local political cultures and how is violence legitimized? What notions of power structure political conflicts and political action by local/regional leadership? What is the meaning and relevance of concepts such as “political opposition” and “change of power” in local political cultures? What is the meaning of politics, how is it represented and legitimized?