



Ask any South African about taxis, and you're bound to get an earful. Notorious for their perceived lawlessness – their blatant disregard for passenger safety as they fly through red robots or gun it down the emergency lane on the highway, the cutting off, the cutting in – even former president Thabo Mbeki once referred to them as “mobile coffins”. Yet, commuters continue to use them in enormous numbers. Taxis are cheap, will take you where you need to go (dropping you off at your exact location – often to the detriment of the cars behind them, as they come to a crashing halt) and, above all, are fast. But attempts to regulate this industry have been fraught with the kind of terminology that makes for a gripping thriller – bribery, corruption, strikes and turf wars.

From the outset, the minibus taxi industry reflected the realities of apartheid South Africa. Under apartheid, taxis were the answer to a need to transport large numbers of black workers into the urban areas from which they had been forcibly removed. Ironically, the apartheid regime offered the economically suppressed black population the entrepreneurial opportunity provided by the blossoming minibus taxi industry, with both hands. How else could labourers get to work quickly and cheaply? Both currently as well as historically, the taxi industry is the only one dominated by black leadership, truly an example of black economic empowerment (BEE).

Deregulation in the late 1980s, which introduced the radius system to the industry, flooded the market with permits, creating an opportunity for those willing to use

violence to remain at the top of the food chain (often by killing off rival association members) when competing for the most lucrative routes. A taxi operator described the industry as a “Mafia-like trade organisation”. Much like their Sicilian counterparts, taxi operators were coerced into joining these mother bodies who would provide them with “protection” from other mother bodies, and for this honour they would hand over their money. In her paper titled, *From Low Intensity War to Mafia War: Taxi violence in SA (1987-2000)*, Jackie Dugard described operators as “lucrative empires cum protection rackets”. On an individual level, the striving for financial independence outside of the constrictive mother bodies and taxi associations was not always easy, nor was it viable for lone entrepreneurs. In addition, the industry was beset with problems such as bribery and corruption when dealing with the police; and the level of lawlessness only increased as the end of the inhumane apartheid regime drew to a close.

In 1994, with the arrival of the new government, something had to be done with an industry that threatened the lives of commuters, if not from the violence then from unroadworthy vehicles, and reckless drivers. The new government had in fact inherited a rogue industry that seemed to have “self-regulated”. Michael Wines, in the *Seattle Times*, reflected on the situation where it was deemed, “politics, race and crime have so muddied the cartels’ rivalries that they are beyond easy resolution”. In effect the new government had a number of problems to deal with – an industry that was synonymous with violence, no specific legislation, a large and increasing





Photographer Momelezi Nodada

POLITICS, POWER & THE SA MINIBUS TAXI INDUSTRY

BY SUZANNE JEFFERIES

number of illegal or “pirate” taxis in operation and a police force ill-equipped - if not a little scared - to crack down.

In 2001, the South African National Taxi Council (Santaco) was founded, engaging all stakeholders in the taxi industry to find a way forward. Policy took the form of a Taxi Recapitalisation Plan (TRP) to re-regulate the industry and improve safety standards. But the taxi operators were not so foolish as to assume that any policies were aimed at bettering their industry - they were savvy enough to realise that government’s broad aims for policy were directed towards better commuter satisfaction and safety - any additional benefits for the taxi operator were merely secondary. Another problem with trying to legislate the industry was that any intervention by government was seen as an attempt to disempower black economic opportunities. Conditions were ripe for the staging of numerous taxi strikes which effectively brought, and still do bring, South Africa to a standstill.

Jump forward 10 to 15 years and many of the issues have yet to be resolved. Within the industry itself, there are cracks surrounding the representative bodies, with split allegiances and no central overseeing body. Attempts to legitimise the industry as a viable business, subject to taxation as well as labour laws, and to protect the rights of taxi drivers, who have previously been exploited by less-than-savoury associations, have been fraught with tension.

Yet, according to TaxiChoice, a representative of the business interests of the taxi environment, the industry is the biggest purchaser of fuel in the country

- an indirect contributor to tax via the fuel levy. An additional 5% of the total fuel price goes to the Road Accident Fund. Furthermore, taxi operators need to have a valid income tax clearance certificate in order to acquire or renew their annual taxi operating licence. Therefore, taxi operators are certainly being forced into tax compliance. At present, about 60% of taxis have valid operating licences. However, those not registered are frowned upon by other operators.

Of the South African public transport market, Arrive Alive, a road safety information portal, estimates that minibuses have a market share of 65%, with buses at 20% and rail at 15%. As an industry, it comprises of more than 20,000 owners and 600,000 jobs (drivers, rank managers, associated service providers), with more than 150,000 minibus taxis on the roads, and an estimated turnover of R40-billion. It’s further estimated that 15 million commuters make use of this industry each day. Fifteen million. Contrary to popular belief, only 3 in 36 road-related deaths can be attributed to taxis. For all intents and purposes, the minibus taxi industry is an economically viable, legitimate public transport system. Yet, the industry still suffers immense reputational damage for its perceived “lawlessness”.

Changing the distrust of operators towards government policy interventions, not to mention that of motorists and government towards operators, could prove more than challenging considering that the taxi industry has continued to survive and grow, both in spite of and because of the political environment and the policies that have sought to regulate them. ☑

