
Continuity, consolidation and change

Local government elections lead to politicised uncertainty and institutional ambiguity

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South Africans entered the 2021 local government elections in a mood of despair. While elections frequently signal renewal and hope, or at least an opportunity for it, EBRAHIM FAKIR argues the 2021 elections appeared to be accompanied by an air of despondency characterised by institutional mistrust, social polarisation, economic decline, niggardly welfare expansionism and organisational attrition.

At the November 2021 local government elections parties appeared to be seized with their own internal problems, petty issues and internecine internal squabbling. They were thus viewed as detached and insular and locked in battles with each other – frequently on

issues that had little to do with solving seemingly intractable public policy and socio-economic problems.

This insular, self-interested approach appeared to lead to constantly shifting alliances within and between political parties and it appears parties used the most popular issues and populist measures as a basis for policy, and which exploit issues of identity as an organising principle of politics and policy. But this masks more immediate and narrow accumulative concerns and claims. This crisis of representation and responsiveness is manifested in a general crisis of democracy and democratic governance. This is manifested in low levels of trust and confidence in institutions.

This might account for the exponential rise in independent candidates who contested the local elections, often emerging from the factional and fractional credibility crisis emergent in political parties. But there are other more cynical reasons why independents emerge. Some may be genuinely independent. Some may emerge out of residents or ratepayers associations and yet others as proxies from within political parties themselves.

Institutionally local government fares really poorly with trust in local councils at 24%. Trust in political parties is just as bad – trust in the ruling ANC was at 27% and in opposition parties at 24%, and both figures continue to decline. These [findings by Afrobarometer](#) (Moosa and Hofmeyr, 2021) are unsurprising, given that political parties across the board tend towards significant fragmentation and fracture, factionalism and fractionalism, and by turns either suffer from an ideological identity crisis or descend into projects of accumulation pursued through the politics of destabilisation, disruption and destruction.

The 2021 election saw the electorate increasingly disillusioned and disengaged with the state of South Africa's electoral democracy generally and the state of South Africa's democratic governance system in particular.¹ The Afrobarometer 2021 survey found that two-thirds (67%) of South Africans would be willing to give up elections if a non-elected government could provide security, housing and jobs.

The decrease in confidence in public institutions ought to be of major concern

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political parties ... tend towards significant fragmentation and fracture, factionalism and fractionalism, and either suffer from an ideological identity crisis or descend into projects of accumulation ...

and arguably demonstrates why the rates of participation and voter turnout in 2021 were substantially lower than other elections. A loss of confidence in public institutions translates into a deterioration in the democratic process and in the accountability and responsiveness required in sustainable democratic governance systems. A continuous decline in trust and confidence in public institutions leads to a concomitant decline in voter participation and turnout, which consequently results in uneven representation and responsiveness from those in elected office.

As trust in politicians, political parties and the country's key institutions plummeted, the economy appeared to be on a downward spiral and evidence of poor governance abounded, symbolised by the massive fiscal and operational problems of key parastatals and state-owned enterprises. This shaped the context going into the elections, as did the trajectory of political party support and social dynamics from the 2016 local



government elections and the 2019 national and provincial elections in which the seeds of the ANC's electoral decline can be traced (Calland & Dufour, 2016; Laterza & Van Wyk, 2016; Fakir & Potgieter, 2016; Fakir & Sarakinsky, 2019).

The 2021 South African local government elections consolidated an era of “substantive uncertainty” that was initiated after the 2016 local government elections (Fakir & Potgieter, 2016). In this era, no political party can now take voter allegiances for granted. This is a win for voters. It makes elections the repository of voters and not political parties and politicians, as the narrative crafted by the mainstream media and politicians in the lead-up to the election persistently pretended, and continue to do so in the post-election phase. That elections and the government(s) formed after them are in fact about people rather than parties appears to be a fact that both the media and political parties appear to forget.

But for “substantive uncertainty” to serve democracy, democratic governance and the interests of citizens, attitudes to power, authority and government have to change. Failure to do so may mean that the 2021 local government elections may in fact unintentionally

but ineluctably usher in a period of intractable politicised uncertainty and institutionalised ambiguity. The immediate future of politics may shift from contestation and competition to outright political confrontation and social conflict.

In order to explicate this diagnostic and its implications, it will be necessary to consider the nature of the narrative constructed about the elections, and the detail and pattern of results, before considering their implications.

The first misnomer, even in the post-election analysis of the results, is that the local government election was in fact a national one. There were in reality 257 separate elections – eight in metropolitan municipalities, 205 in local municipalities and 44 in district municipalities – each with their own particularities and specificities in terms of issues, demographics, development, social dynamics and party support patterns.

The 2021 local government elections were misleadingly cast as a single national one because of the misunderstanding that it would be an indicator of the ANC's prospects of governing after the 2024 national elections. It was also interpreted as ➤

a referendum on the ANC and its performance in government in general, and the leadership of President Cyril Ramaphosa in particular. Alternatively, it would be a gauge of what the repercussions inside the ANC would be, should the ANC perform poorly.

Overall, the outcome of the election provides a compelling story but no catch-all grand narrative emerged. This election tells a story of significant specificity and diversity across different spatial areas. Combined, it is a story of continuity, consolidation and change.

There is some continuity. The DA continues to control the City of Cape Town, even as it lost other municipalities in the Western Cape. The ANC commands control of the

overwhelming number of councils, but has lost both control, authority and influence in the centres of commerce, industry, finance and technology – the drivers of advancement, growth and redistribution. This is the story of change, as is the fact that the established political parties both lost support in this election. It is also shown in the emergence of political parties such as ActionSA and the Patriotic Alliance and the incremental emergence of independents. The EFF's stabilisation at 10% of the vote but with an increase of 221 seats in councils across the country solidifies this trend of change.

The diversity of representation may be good for inclusivity, diversity and representation, but can potentially

lead to instability and fragmentation in local democratic government when layered onto the latent and residual fractiousness within political parties. This encourages instability when minority governments are reliant on the potentially capricious support of smaller parties to remain in control of local governments.

A CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

In 2021, of the 26.1 million voters registered for the elections, only 12.3 million South Africans voted. With declining participation has come declining institutional credibility leading to declining claims to legitimacy. More people stayed away than voted for the majority party. A retreat from participation and engagement limits political, social and economic representation and consequently opportunities through public policy for social mobility and advancement.

The joint effect of social marginalisation and economic exclusion has been in part perpetuated by 20 years of poor policy and a myopic and self-serving political governance elite colluding with a corrupt corporate business leadership. Endemic social pathologies have worsened the situation. This has been ameliorated, to a degree, through the period of post-apartheid democratic governance and the benefits of black empowerment policies, affirmative action and preferential procurement in ensuring some social mobility for a black managerial and occupational technical class.

The inception of a social wage and welfare transfers have absorbed the worst of persistent absolute poverty. A large and well-organised working class has also assisted in some social progress through democratic collective action. Changes in the global environment, with a food, fuel and finance crisis from the previous decade (2007-2008), together with a decade of corrupt state capture, have rolled back some of the progressive gains Johannesburg made.

The ANC achieved a majority in 161 municipalities. The main national opposition party, the DA, achieved a majority in 13 municipalities, followed by the IFP which achieved a majority in 10 municipalities. In 66 municipalities, no party achieved a majority, resulting in hung councils.

A significant number of metropolitan municipalities were hung. Of the eight metropolitan cities the ANC won Buffalo City in the Eastern Cape where the ANC received 59% of the vote, the DA 19.52% while the EFF got 12.06%. The DA won the City of Cape Town in the Western Cape, where it received a clear 58.22% majority, the ANC 18.63% and the EFF 4.13%.

In Ekurhuleni the ANC got 38.19%, the DA 28.72% and the EFF 13.57%, while in the City of Johannesburg the ANC got 33.60% of the vote, the DA 26.47% and ActionSA 16.05%. In the capital city of Tshwane, Gauteng the ANC achieved 34.31%, the DA 32.34% and the EFF 10.62%.

In each of these metro's in Gauteng, the DA was voted into government as a minority government, with the support of the EFF. This opens up an entirely new set of possibilities for South African politics and policy.

In eThekweni, KwaZulu-Natal the ANC got 42.02%, the DA 25.72% and the EFF 10.48%, but after a botched deal with the IFP, the ANC was elected into government after it made a deal with the Abantu Batho Congress.

In Mangaung in the Free State, the ANC was at 50.63%, the DA 25.73% and the EFF 11.31% controlling the metro by the slimmest of majorities. In Nelson Mandela Bay in the Eastern Cape the DA received 39.92%, the ANC 39.43% and the EFF received 6.40%. Despite the even split between the two major parties the ANC was elected by a majority of one, in what is essentially a minority government, to lead this metro council.

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On the social front, changes in the labour market brought about by the combination of weak economic growth, rapid technological changes and massive corporate restructuring saw increasing job losses and the consequent casualisation of work increasing part time work and the rise of the “gig economy”. This affected forms of political organisation and collective mobilisation.

The outsourcing of local service provision and the corporatisation, subcontracting and outsourcing of core service delivery units, dating back to 2002, shaped a context in which increasing numbers of the hitherto well-organised working class joined the ranks of the urban “precariat”, both because they got poorer and services got more expensive, but also because they could no longer rely on the formal organisation of unions to politically pressurise government, or collectively pressurise capital.

Of course, union organisation declined because of this, but was exacerbated by schisms and splits within the largest union federation – the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) – mirroring the political, policy and personality clashes of the governing alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party. This left a once well-organised urban working class with fragmented organisational capacity



and weaker representation.

Residents can be categorised into four distinct classes:²

1. The urban wealthy cosmopolitan sophisticated suburbanites, who are well resourced, highly mobile and connected to the global circuits of finance, trade, commerce and the professions. There is some variation and differentiation in the extent of wealth and the racial composition of this category. Though it is largely white, it is significantly deracialised, and its composition is changing to include an increasing number of highly skilled migrants – both African and from other parts of the world. They make few political demands, but wield a great degree of policy influence.

Their political loyalties are split between the ANC and the DA, with party loyalty slanted largely towards the DA. Middle-income voters in this group largely vote for the DA, while fragments vote for the Freedom Front+, the African Christian Democratic Party or other smaller parties. A portion of this cohort, largely black, actively vote for or otherwise tacitly support the EFF, in line with the rise of identity politics globally, or because they consider the pace of transformation too slow. Some find the relative novelty and nimbleness of the EFF a faster way of fulfilling their political ambitions. They

participate in civic engagement through anti-corruption-focused, civil society, rights-based civil society, and through ratepayers associations, business chambers, professional organisations, guilds and potentially professional unions. They further engage with local Community Policing Forums and party leadership, but tend not to engage with ward committees or Integrated Development Plan processes.

2. The organised working class, including first generation technicians and professionals, are increasingly sophisticated but on the decline due the government’s inability to preside over redistributive growth, job security and job creation by both government and the private sector. The cohort is largely black in general, and African in particular, and lives and works in the inner city, largely concentrated in the formalised and relatively better developed parts of previous dormitory townships, and increasingly in the lower middle class formerly white suburbs and Indian and coloured townships. It includes some semigrants, and technically skilled and semi-professional African continental migrants. This group is politically organised and though concentrated political support lies in the ANC and its alliance partners, it is split on the basis of factions within the alliance and the ➤

schism and new formations of the labour movement. There is also support for the EFF, IFP and incremental support for the DA and other smaller parties. Affiliated to civic organs, rights based services, welfare and developmental civil society, and strong union organisation, these citizens sometimes engage and even organise protests and direct-action activities.

3. The precarious proletariat (precariat) is increasing in number, resulting from outsourcing, casualisation and informalisation of work and increasing reliance on debt, even though some asset accumulation is evident. This is almost exclusively African and includes South African semigrants and African migrants. This group is almost exclusively found in townships, RDP housing developments and in the extensions and makeshift accommodation in the backyards of township homes. Many also live in the inner city, often in hijacked buildings and are thus dependent on the protection and patronage of local political entrepreneurs and informal strongmen, often with links to criminal networks.

This group is almost exclusively African and includes unskilled African migrants. Support is concentrated in the ANC and EFF, and potentially local, small, particularist parties. There is decreased and declining voter turnout in this cohort which is frequently engaged in protest and is susceptible to being manipulated by local political strongmen and political brokers. Civil organisation is through local civic or community-based organisations and/or burgeoning highly ideological social movements (anti-privatisation campaigns or movements whose activities border on illegality, for example conducting illegal electricity and water connections, and so on). This group often engages in protest action which is sporadic and violent.

4. The urban marginalised, which find themselves wholly in the informal sector or very lowly paid formal jobs, with no social protections lives almost

exclusively in informal settlements and frequently experience metros as transient spaces. This group is exclusively African, with political support split between the ANC and EFF, and is organised through localised structures or shack dweller movements. It forms clientelist relationships with local politicians and is highly susceptible to local criminal strongmen.

The difficulty for formal political organisation and mobilisation for such a wide variety of urban voters with such widely differing racial cleavages, different densities of social relationships and networks and narrowly defined, limited social capital, is to mediate such divergent needs and interests and craft them into a coherent political programme that would appeal to the needs and interests of each. Inevitably, while class location plays a part, much political expression, equally, occurs on racial terms, especially in formal political processes as characterised by party support patterns in electoral results.

In a semi-proportional electoral system such as the one used at the municipal level in South Africa the staying away of potential voters of a specific party will show up the proportion of other contesting parties as larger – by virtue of proportionality – and consequently reducing the overall number of votes cast, thus increasing the margin for the party whose voters do turn up to vote for it, irrespective of whether it is the current incumbent or not. This does not necessarily require a shift of votes to other parties. This was the situation in the 2016 municipal elections in the Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela Bay metros, which was consolidated in the 2021 local government elections, with the ANC's loss of further metros and losses in other secondary cities and in councils across the board. The 2021 local government election was the sixth consecutive overall election in which the ANC lost support.

This is significant for a national governing party; losing support and influence weakens its influence and credibility – and is now becoming more reflective of the Labour Party in the 1979 British election where Margret Thatcher (Conservative Party) ousted James Callaghan (Labour Party) in the House of Commons winning with a majority of 43 seats. The Labour Party lost support and influence in the economic regions during the “Winter of Discontent” when several industrial disputes took place which led to a vote of no confidence against the sitting Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan.

The ANC, by losing support in areas that are drivers for economic growth, has followed the same trajectory. Historically, it would appear that losing influence in industrially rich, growth-driving areas will lead to a loss for the party at the polls.

THE PROBLEM OF ‘POLITICS’

In an era of schizophrenic parties pursuing self-referential policies in detached public institutions unresponsive to societal and citizen needs, it is unsurprising that citizens withdraw from political and public life and leave these parties to pursue policies that are aligned either with solely shoring up their support or aligning with others to shore up their mutual interests.

These approaches to politics have little to do with being responsive to social or citizen needs. This leaves a vacuum in which politicians are left to pursue narrow self-serving agendas unrestrained by citizen demands for responsiveness and accountability.

Institutional performance, oversight, accountability and responsiveness, in this case, is reduced to petty point-scoring, and “gotcha” exercises which are exclusively punitive in nature rather than a constructive exercise that seeks answers, assigns responsibilities, provides guidance and leads to rectification of error in government.



Political parties frequently need to tread the fine line between principle and expediency – often having to sacrifice an absolute commitment to principle in the interests of accommodating and expanding its support base. But rarely has the choice been as stark as it now is for parties to change their orientation to being competitive but co-operative, rather than combative and conflictual.

Given the precarious hold minority governments have in their councils, especially in the 66 hung municipalities, capricious parties and even individuals who may whimsically change allegiances could see local governments remain tenuous. In many instances the formation of minority local governments has distorted the democratic logic of representation in that parties with the largest proportion of votes have been left out of the formation of governments and where the law allows for supra national levels of government to impose a fair representational formation of local governments through collective executive government systems, rather than executive systems requiring coalitions or the formation of minority governments (Evans, 2021), there has been a reluctance to do so. In favour of the composition of local governments on the basis of a “majority take all approach”, which defies the logic of the proportional nature of the system.

Overlaid on this system, South Africa’s complex inter-governmental relations systems may find that provincial executive and treasuries controlled by one party may work against metro councils and municipalities controlled by other parties. This makes for both politicised uncertainty and institutional ambiguity.

Politically and socially, durable alliances for minority governments and sustainable coalition politics may require a restructuring of political and policy relationships based on the changed and changing social and class

structure and the shifts in the social formation in society. When societal interests and claims are channelled on a class ideological basis, rather than an exclusively “race” or identity cleavage, which parties in any event resurface, even latent and residual social antagonisms based on identity cleavages, allow them to assume political primacy in perpetuating social antagonisms instead of solving and extinguishing them (Fakir, 2021).

Societal fault-lines and social cleavages – race, inequality, unemployment and poverty – are currently being used by parties to justify capricious policy and procedural process, and ultimately institutional manipulation and debasement that benefits a predatory elite and a seemingly retributive justice, rather than a redistributive or developmental agenda.

This serves to perpetuate the politics of victimhood and vengeance characterised by hysteria, scapegoating, conspiracy and paranoia that allows for institutional and process manipulation, institutional delegitimation, destabilisation and debasement and leaving a societal legacy of impunity in the exercise of power and authority, informality in decision making and governance without accountability and responsiveness and gaping underdevelopment and inequality in the economy.

This may engender an institutional crisis of credibility, and if prolonged may raise the spectre of a legitimisation crisis at the local level, leading to politicised uncertainty and institutionalised ambiguity.

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ENDNOTES

1. I distinguish between the concepts of “democracy” and “democratic governance”. Democracy here refers to a normative form of politics in society and includes the conduct and free unencumbered contestation of free and fair elections, the ability to exercise fundamental political rights and freedoms and the liberties afforded to individuals as well as the ability to freely participate in public affairs and the agency to exercise voice and choice. Democratic governance includes all of the aspects of democracy and encompasses these in the manner in which power and authority are used in institutions of government, and focuses on the dimensions of the separation of powers, limits on authority, separation of functions, oversight, accountability, transparency in decision making and responsiveness to citizens and groups in society.
2. Though significant differentiation and cleavage will be evident in each social strata, these categories are suggested for ease of reference in relation to political practices and social mobilisation patterns. **NA**