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A watershed moment for municipalites

Consequence begins in the voting booth



OPINION

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Municipal Eye

The stories of next week's local government elections have yet to be written, but, like every South African election, the results will undoubtedly mark a watershed moment for municipalities across the country.

For the first time since the advent of democracy, some municipalities could find themselves governed by a party other than the ANC. That is an historic moment. It shows a willingness to change by the electorate and an acknowledgement that service delivery and outcomes matter.

But there is little doubt that the biggest stories will emerge from three metropolitan municipalities: Tshwane, Johannesburg and eThekwini. And each has the potential to produce a coalition salad.

In eThekwini, for example, we could find the DA entering into a coalition with the ANC and IFP to keep the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party out of power. Yet, in Johannesburg, the ANC could find itself working with the very same MK Party to retain control of the city.

Or we could enter an era of full-scale political horse-trading. The MK Party might insist on being allowed to govern eThekwini in exchange for supporting the ANC in Johannesburg. It could even demand the collapse of KwaZulu-Natal's government of provincial unity, with the ANC handing control of the province to the MK Party as a precondition for cooperation elsewhere.

Meanwhile, ActionSA will likely do everything in its power to keep the DA out of government in Johannesburg, Tshwane and potentially elsewhere.

Much of this appears to be driven by the increasingly bitter political rivalry between its leader, Herman Mashaba, and the DA's mayoral candidates, Helen Zille in Johannesburg and Cilliers Brink in Tshwane.

And somewhere in the middle of all this will be the Patriotic Alliance, doing what it does best: shopping around for the most attractive coalition deal.

What has made this election cycle so interactive and exciting is that South African political polling has also come into its own and they have provided us with some clear trend-lines. In Johannesburg, Tshwane and eThekwini, the ANC is no longer the dominant political force it once was, with polling suggesting it may not finish as the largest party in any of these metros.

DA support in Johannesburg appears to have stabilised at around 35% to 40%, while in Tshwane it is polling in the mid-to-upper thirties.

In eThekwini, the MK Party could run away with a decisive victory, potentially even securing an outright majority. That would introduce an entirely new dynamic into local government. Yet, while these elections represent an important milestone, I worry that the governments emerging from them will be incapable of meeting the moment.

A recent report by the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO), a research partnership involving the universities of Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand, the Gauteng Provincial Government and organised local government, provides a sobering assessment of what lies ahead.

The report, titled Local Government in Crisis and released earlier this month, describes the "creeping crisis" affecting municipalities and argues that reversing years of institutional decline will require sustained crisis management rather than another round of political promises.

It says what is needed to turn around our municipalities is a "sustained, adaptive and participatory approach to crisis management" where various voices can be heard. The GCRO identifies three approaches to municipal recovery: stabilisation, targeted rebuilding and transformation.

Stabilisation involves short-term provincial or national intervention to arrest deterioration in severely dysfunctional municipalities and create the conditions for reform.

Targeted rebuilding focuses on repairing critical municipal systems, including infrastructure, financial management and essential services, through specialist support and incremental improvements.

Transformation involves longer-term institutional change, stronger public participation and partnerships between government, business and civil society to build municipalities capable of responding to future challenges.

These are not quick fixes. They require competent leadership, political commitment and, perhaps most importantly, continuity beyond a single electoral cycle.

The report also makes an important observation about the opportunity presented by the current political climate. It says the present period, in which public awareness of the local government crisis is "comparatively heightened", offers an opportunity to pursue the kind of "considered institutional and structural change that is more difficult to advance in periods of relative stability".

And this is precisely where I fear we may squander the political opportunity.

If the next generation of municipal leadership is consumed by political point-scoring, the allocation of positions and the distribution of resources among coalition partners, rather than a concerted effort to repair our broken municipalities, the next five years could be awful. Perhaps even the next 10. Consider the deterioration in your own neighbourhood. Think about what it looked like a decade ago and compare it with what you see today. The roads, pavements, parks and public spaces that once made your neighbourhood an attractive place to live may now tell a very different story. One particularly revealing way to do this is through Google Maps Street View. Scroll through the historical images of familiar streets and see how they have changed over time. That is why the outcome of this election matters far beyond which political party gets to occupy the mayor's office or whose supporters get to celebrate on election night.

The real test will be whether those elected can put aside their political differences long enough to begin the difficult, unglamorous work of rebuilding local government. Coalition agreements can be negotiated in days, but restoring a municipality that has been allowed to deteriorate for decades will take years.

So, without wanting to preach, when you walk into the voting booth next week, take a long-term view of the future of your municipality. Because you will have to live with the consequences.

• Jonathan Erasmus is the director of the Community Action Network, an independent think-tank dedicated to helping the public interact with local governments.

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