



The Municipal Elections – 100 Days On

1. Introduction¹

As we approach the 100-day mark since most municipal councils were sworn in after the August 3rd local government elections, it is worth taking a quick look at how some of the major questions thrown up by the election results are being answered.

Four important questions can be identified. Firstly, would the new coalition governments in the big metropolitan municipalities like Johannesburg and Tshwane hold together? Secondly, having made the big breakthrough to win in these cities, as well as Nelson Mandela Bay (Port Elizabeth) and various smaller towns and districts, how well would the DA and its opposition allies govern? Thirdly, assuming that the relatively poor electoral performance by the ANC was a 'lesson' from its traditional supporters, how well was the lesson being learnt? And fourthly, how would the ANC adjust to being in opposition in some of the country's most important cities?

Full answers to these questions will emerge only over the next few years, but there are already some interesting indications. Before considering them, however, a quick recap of the results would be useful.

2. The Big Shift

2.1. The overall vote

After 22 years of democracy, the pattern of South Africa's electoral politics has been broken. Although the ANC's share of the vote in both local government and general elections has been gradually declining over the last 10 to 12 years, the drop this time was far more significant. From 63% in 2011 to 54% now represents a fall of 14% in support, which is far greater than the fall of 5%

it experienced between the general elections of 2009 and 2014.

Such a decline suggests that the ANC can no longer rely on its status as the party of liberation, and that the historical loyalties that in the past gave it up to 70% of the vote, are no longer decisive. All indications are that more and more traditional ANC voters, especially in the urban centres, are judging the party on its ability to deliver services and benefits in the future, and not on the great achievements of more than 20 years ago.

Another, slightly different, interpretation is that up to now almost all African voters, both urban and rural, believed that the ANC was the party most likely to satisfy their needs – to provide land, houses, jobs, social security, and generally improved material conditions. They continued to support it for as long as that belief seemed reasonable, but in the last few years their patience has begun to run out and they are increasingly prepared to see whether other parties might offer a better option.

The figures strongly suggest that significant numbers of the ANC's support-base switched their votes to the two largest opposition parties, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The DA received just over four million votes and, given the country's racial demographics, probably no more than 1.5 million of these can have come from whites. Even allowing for strong DA support among the 'Coloured' and 'Asian' sectors of the population, the implication is that at least 1.5 million DA votes came from African voters.

The EFF polled 1.2 million votes and, again, the vast majority of these would have come from people who previously supported the ANC. So, the party that has governed South Africa virtually

unchallenged since 1994 now finds itself under serious threat from two sides; and nowhere was that threat more apparent than in the major cities.

2.2. The Metros

The metropolitan municipalities are the eight biggest cities together with their industrial and residential surrounding areas. They metros attract the most attention and are considered the biggest prizes in a local government election.

Until this election, the ANC controlled all the metros except Cape Town, just as it controlled all nine provinces except the Western Cape. In order to demonstrate real growth beyond its stronghold in the south west corner of the country, the DA needed to win at least one other metro, and to make a good showing in the economic and administrative heartland of the country, Gauteng province, where three important metros are located: Johannesburg; Tshwane (which includes Pretoria); and Ekurhuleni.

In the end, while the DA did not win a majority in any of the metros (except Cape Town, which it held easily), it did emerge as the biggest party in Nelson Mandela Bay ('NMB') and in Tshwane; and although it came second to the ANC in Johannesburg, it was able to reach an arrangement with the EFF that has left it in charge of SA's biggest city. The ANC retained outright control of three other metros: Ethekwini (Durban), Buffalo City (East London) and Mangaung (Bloemfontein), in all cases with significantly reduced majorities; and even though it dropped below 50 % in Ekurhuleni, it was able to form a coalition government there with the help of the African Independent Congress.

3. The Coalitions

Unlike many European countries, South Africa is not used to the politics of coalition. As already noted, the ANC has governed nationally, and in almost all provinces and most municipalities, since 1994. A few smaller councils in rural areas have been run by two- or three-party coalitions, but up to now this has only happened once before in a metro, when the DA governed Cape Town after the 2006 municipal election with the help of various smaller parties.

It is usual in a coalition for the participating parties to share out the available posts between them and thus to govern together. This implies a

degree of compromise, as none of the parties can expect the others to accept 100% of its views and policies. But, not for the first time, we are witnessing an interesting variation on the usual. In both Johannesburg and Tshwane, the EFF has pledged to support a minority DA administration, without entering into a formal coalition. This has great advantages for the smaller party: it gets to influence policy without having to take responsibility for it; and if at any stage the DA heads in a direction that is unacceptable to the EFF, it can simply withdraw its support and leave the bigger party vulnerable to a vote of no confidence.

The downside of such an arrangement is that it inherently more unstable than a formal coalition, but so far it seems to be holding together in the two big cities concerned, even though it is early days yet. Part of the EFF's reasoning is also that this is a way of harming the ANC, its main political enemy. As possible that, at some point within the next five years, the EFF will seek to weaken the DA as well; and it now has a perfect weapon at its disposal.

In Ekurhuleni and NMB (and in a number of local and district municipalities) there are formal coalitions, which may prove to be more stable in the long run. In NMB in particular, the EFF is not in the coalition, and nor has the DA had to rely on its support, since it needed only the odd few seats won by the UDM, COPE and some smaller parties to get it past 50%.

It is worth watching these coalitions, both the formal ones and the informal 'support' arrangements, as much for how well they work at local government level as for what they may foreshadow for the future at national level. With the ANC seemingly at war with itself, and unable to deal decisively with its leadership crisis, opposition parties will be waiting impatiently for the 2019 general election. While none of them can expect to gain an outright majority then, it seems very likely that the ANC will slip below 50% of the overall vote. If the DA and the EFF, especially, but without disregarding the UDM, COPE, etc., can forge good working relationships in the metros over the next couple of years, they may well decide to make a bid for national power (and perhaps in some of the provinces) using the same model.

4. From Opposition to Government

It is a truism that it is easy for a party to criticise while in opposition, but far more difficult for it to rule properly once it achieves power. It has to put its policies into practice, find the money for them, often deal with staff who may have been appointed partly, even largely, on the basis of their loyalty to the old regime, and it may have made promises to the electorate that it cannot fulfil.

The new DA mayor in NMB, Athol Trollip, announced soon after his election that his administration would save R100 million in its first 100 days in office.² Hopefully there will soon be a report-back on this, but Mr Trollip at least made a start by banning his officials from flying in business or first class. This step goes way beyond the actual money saved; it is intended to engender a sense of service, rather than entitlement, in officials. There are also moves to recoup money allegedly lost due to corruption or 'dubious contracts'.³

In Tshwane, new mayor Solly Msimanga quickly made headlines by diverting R5 million-worth of new BMWs to the metro police force. The cars had been ordered by the outgoing ANC council for the use of members of the mayoral council.⁴ Again, it is easy to dismiss such moves as superficial, but they do send a message. Time will tell if Mr Msimanga's pledge that "No more luxury cars will be bought or leased under my government" will be honoured, but he has started well.

There is often a temptation for an incoming administration to purge senior officials and replace them with more 'dependable' appointees of its own choosing. So far, this seems not to have happened in the metros that changed hands. Perhaps the most high-profile official in the firing line was Linda Mti, the NMB head of safety and security. Mr Trollip insisted during his election campaign that Mr Mti was unfit for such office and that he would dismiss him if the DA won the municipality. Three months later, Mr Mti is still at work and, indeed, none of the rumoured purges appear to have taken place.

One possible reason for this is the coalition nature of the DA administrations, as discussed above. The junior partners may be acting as a brake when it comes to the apparent desire of some DA mayors to get rid of officials whose political alignments they mistrust.

This may also explain why, so far, there seems not to have been much tension between the new city administrations and the ANC-aligned municipal unions. According to the Deputy-Mayor of NMB, the UDM's Mongameli Bobani, "Samwu has welcomed the new leadership. There is not even a toyi-toyi since we came to power. Not a single worker is out of office. Instead, the workers are so happy they are in this new environment. There will be no purge of any staff members."⁵

Certainly, the first 100 days in a new administration's office is but a small fraction of a five-year term, and there is room for all sorts of mistakes to happen. But so far the DA and its junior partners seem to have handled the take-over of power well enough.

5. Learning Lessons

It is generally accepted that one of the main reasons for the ANC's poor showing in these elections, and its loss of three metros, was that it had become distanced from, and unresponsive to, the concerns of the electorate. A case in point was the way in which the party imposed Thoko Didiza as its mayoral candidate in Tshwane, ignoring the three names put forward by local branches. It is also clear from the number and regularity of service delivery protests that many communities had lost patience with poor performance by their councils. In survey after survey a common sentiment was that there was too little, if any, contact and accountability from ward councillors, other than at election time when votes were being sought.

In addition, some senior ANC figures pointed to corruption and scandals of various kinds as having turned away voters. Former Mpumalanga premier and treasurer-general of the party, Matthews Phosa, for example: "*The masses are not fools. They pass judgment on all of us. They can never be indifferent to corruption and they will repeatedly punish us for it. They don't need diplomas to call us to order. We have a duty to listen, learn from them and lead properly. We can't hop from one scandal to another week-in-week out.*"⁶

But if this lesson was taken to heart in some parts of the ANC, it seems to have been ignored in others. In the Capricorn district municipality, the mayor is spending R150 000 every month to hire a Range Rover because the existing mayoral Jeep has reached 120 000kms.⁷ In October it was

reported that the Emalahleni local municipality in Mpumalanga was in the process of buying a new mayoral car for R1.5 million, the money coming from unspent service delivery funds.⁸ To its credit, the provincial ANC spoke out against the plan, but it seems to no avail. The purchase of a new luxury car was also high on the agenda in Mkhambathini local municipality near Durban soon after the elections.⁹

It might be argued that, in the greater scheme of things, with municipal budgets running into hundreds of millions of rands, even billions, such expenditures are not a major issue. However, they are indicative of a certain mind-set, one which tends to put the desires of public representatives above the needs of the public themselves. The councillor or mayor who travels around his or her municipality cocooned in a million rands' worth of vehicle is perhaps unlikely to identify with the daily grind experienced by the majority of the voters. A sharper sense of the importance of symbolic measures in the eyes of an increasingly disillusioned electorate would surely have led the ANC, nationwide, to require its elected representatives to adopt more modest attitudes.

6. Life in Opposition

It has become something of a mantra for President Zuma to claim that the ANC will rule "until Jesus comes again" or words to that effect. And over the years quite a number of the party's public figures have suggested that it is destined to rule indefinitely by virtue of having liberated the country. There is nothing unusual about such sentiments among liberation movements, but they do have the potential to send a message of entitlement to govern, and this can make it difficult for such a party to adapt to life in the opposition benches when it eventually loses power.

In fact, though, the ANC in the Western Cape has been in opposition since 2009 and has accepted its

position without demur. The same attitude was expressed by the outgoing mayor of Johannesburg, Parks Tau, who committed the ANC to being a constructive opposition: "We're not going to contribute in a manner that's destructive but we're not going to support at all cost, so if the budget and all programmes are moving in a direction that we believe reverses the gains that have been made we will not necessarily support it."¹⁰ ANC Secretary-General Gwede Mantashe said much the same in his reaction to the results.

It has been reported that the ANC is sending members to the UK to pick up tips from the Labour Party on how to serve as an opposition party.¹¹ This is an encouraging sign, as is the statement in the same report that the ANC plans to talk to other opposition parties in order to form a stronger opposition to the DA. This is exactly how it should be in a multi-party democracy where changes of governing party are regular and unremarkable, and it bodes well for possible changes of government provincially and nationally in 2019 and beyond.

7. Conclusion

At times of political uncertainty and instability, such as the present period in SA, it is easy to lose sight of the strength of our democratic institutions and processes. The August elections are a reminder that, whatever we may think about the quality of our political leadership, and despite numerous scandals and questionable practices at the highest levels, the country's citizens still have political power through the ballot box. It is a power that they are increasingly appreciating and exercising and, with some obvious exceptions, the politicians appear to be accepting what the voters are telling them, and sticking to the rules of a modern multi-party democracy.

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² <http://www.heraldlive.co.za/news/2016/09/01/trollip-spells-priorities-first-100-days-office/>

³ <http://www.nelsonmandelabay.gov.za/NewsView.aspx?ID=2404>

⁴ <http://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2016/09/06/Tshwane-mayor-gives-new-BMWs-to-anti-hijack-police%E2%80%9A-says-politicians-can-drive-Hyundai>

⁵ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/linda-mti-co-operating-well-with-trollips-nmb-government-20160902>

The same report does go on to confuse the issue a bit, quoting Mr Bobani as saying “Unfortunately the ANC deployees have a contract of five years and the municipal manager wrote a letter saying they must vacate the city offices.”

⁶ <http://www.news24.com/elections/news/the-clever-blacks-have-spoken-phosa-20160805>

⁷ <http://city-press.news24.com/News/limpopo-mayors-rented-range-rover-costs-r150k-per-month-20161120>

⁸ <http://city-press.news24.com/News/emalahleni-manager-pushes-on-faces-charges-over-mayors-new-r15m-car-20161005>

⁹ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/da-vows-to-fight-plan-to-buy-r700-000-ride-for-kzn-mayor-20160913>

¹⁰ <http://ewn.co.za/2016/08/23/ANC-will-be-a-constructive-opposition-in-JHB>

¹¹ <http://ewn.co.za/2016/11/24/anc-to-send-cadres-to-uk-for-tips-from-labour-party>

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