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Country Report

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Between Collapse and a New Beginning: The State of South Africa's Municipalities

Gregor Jaecke, Head of the KAS South Africa Office
Nina Krasel, Trainee at the KAS South Africa Office

South Africa's municipalities face major challenges. Ahead of the Local Government Elections in November 2026, the situation is shaped by performance shortcomings, political fragmentation and declining trust in state institutions.

Background: The Crisis in Local Government as a Major Election Campaign Issue

The condition of many South African municipalities has for years been marked by serious structural deficiencies. These are evident in the inadequate provision of basic services, dilapidated infrastructure, recurring problems with water and electricity supply, and the deterioration of public facilities. Alongside financial constraints and a shortage of qualified personnel, the main causes are mismanagement, corruption and a lack of accountability. Financially weak municipalities, where necessary investment and maintenance have been neglected for years, are particularly affected.¹

The persistent deficiencies have caused lasting damage to citizens' trust in municipal administrations and regularly lead to local protests over poor service delivery. According to a Standard Bank survey, 229 major "service delivery protests" were recorded nationwide in 2025 alone², bringing protest levels back to their pre-Covid level. The quality of municipal services is one of the key issues in the Local Government Elections on 4 November 2026.

The African National Congress (ANC), in particular, is held responsible for the deterioration of many municipalities. The former liberation movement faces accusations that its inadequate oversight, weak administrative leadership and repeated cases of corruption have contributed to the decline of municipal structures. Polls accordingly point to further losses for the ANC in the forthcoming local elections.³

¹ The financial capacity of many South African municipalities is severely constrained by rising personnel costs, high levels of unpaid municipal charges, growing debt owed to state-owned utilities, administrative shortcomings and structurally weak revenue bases. This increasingly impairs the provision and maintenance of municipal infrastructure and services.

² [Shaun Jacobs 2026, Daily Investor](#); see chart.

³ Johannesburg is emblematic of the nationwide loss of confidence in the ANC. While around 62 per cent of voters supported the party in 2006, current polls put its share at only around 18 per cent—less than one-third of its former level. See [The Common Sense 2026; Figure 1](#).

By contrast, the Democratic Alliance (DA) is forecast to make gains. The economically liberal party benefits from its reputation as a proponent of efficient administration, sound financial management and performance-oriented municipal policy. It has received further attention through its new party leader, Geordin Hill-Lewis, the Mayor of Cape Town, whose city is regularly cited by the DA as an example of comparatively good municipal governance.

With 674 parties currently registered⁴, South Africa is heading into the Local Government Elections with an unprecedented number of electoral contestants. This illustrates the shift towards an increasingly fragmented party landscape in which numerous small, regional and interest-based groups compete for votes alongside established parties.⁵ While this broadens political choice and representation at the municipal level, it is also likely to complicate the formation of governments and coalitions. Various reform proposals are therefore under discussion that seek to improve the stability of coalition governments and the governability of municipalities. These proposals are examined later in this report.

The elections are also taking place in a dynamic political environment. Unlike in 2021, the ANC, DA, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and other parties now cooperate at the national level through the established Government of National Unity (GNU). The reform course adopted by the GNU places an increasing emphasis on strengthening municipal administrative capacity, consolidating municipal finances and combating corruption and mismanagement. The local elections are therefore seen as both a verdict on municipalities' performance to date and the first major test of the GNU's reform agenda (see the second part of this report).

Metros in Focus: DA on the Offensive, ANC under Pressure, MK a Risk Factor

The DA is concentrating its election campaign on the economically important metropolitan municipalities of Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni, where it expects to make substantial gains as support for the ANC declines. The party sees the Local Government Elections as an important step towards its goal of establishing itself as South Africa's leading political force. Its election manifesto places particular emphasis on improving municipal service delivery through strengthened local administrative capacity and by combating corruption. Observers regard this approach as a strategic attempt by the DA to demonstrate its competence in government and administration and present itself as a credible alternative to the ANC.

One example is the candidacy of former DA leader, Helen Zille, for Mayor of Johannesburg. In her campaign, the 75-year-old presents herself as an experienced reform politician and crisis manager. She can point to a positive record as Mayor of Cape Town and Premier of the Western Cape, as well as her success in managing coalitions. In Johannesburg, she intends to tackle corruption, mismanagement and dysfunctional procurement structures in particular. An alternative outcome to a victory for Helen Zille would be a coalition between the ANC and its two left-wing populist breakaways: the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), led by former

⁴ [Electoral Commission of South Africa](#)

⁵ The ANC's continuing loss of votes and the increasing fragmentation of the party system also encourage the growth of populist forces at the political fringes. Polarising platforms shaped by ethnic identity politics weaken the political centre. Stable, consensus-oriented governance consequently becomes increasingly difficult. See [South Africa's Fragile Political Centre – International Reports – Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung](#).

president Jacob Zuma, and the Marxist-oriented Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).⁶ Such a partnership would have substantial political repercussions beyond the municipal sphere. In the “City of Gold” in particular, an alliance between these parties would serve as a trial run for possible cooperation at national level. An ANC-EFF-MKP coalition in Johannesburg would fuel speculation about such a coalition following the 2029 national election and raise questions about South Africa’s future direction in economic, fiscal and institutional policy.⁷

The ANC now publicly concedes that numerous municipalities fall well short of expectations in administrative performance and provision of public services. With the reform programme presented in August, the party wants to demonstrate its determination to address structural deficiencies in service delivery, good governance and the fight against corruption. The greatest challenge for the party, which has governed for decades, however, is to regain the trust it has lost among citizens and prove that it can remedy the problems in municipalities. But while the party could once point to the achievements of the liberation struggle, democratisation and social progress, it now cannot convincingly answer why voters should place their trust in it again despite its persistent failures in many municipalities. Put differently: as long as many voters see no tangible improvements in their daily lives, the ANC risks failing because of the contradiction between its reform promises and its record in municipal government. This is the core of the ANC’s credibility problem.

The greatest political risk for South Africa’s democratic order ahead of the Local Government Elections remains the radical left-wing populist MK Party, although it is unlikely to repeat its strong showing in the 2024 national elections. The party is nevertheless likely to gain influence, particularly in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), and could assume governing responsibility in several municipalities there. It may also play a decisive role in coalition formation in parts of Gauteng. The MK Party’s strategy includes mobilising voters with ethnonationalist and anti-immigration views, as evidenced by support of recent xenophobic protest movements.⁸ Particularly in KZN, the party could therefore substantially influence the balance of political power at the municipal level and, if election results disappoint, once again allege electoral fraud to fuel political tension. This is particularly relevant given that KZN has traditionally been a hotbed of political violence in South Africa and has again seen a rise in politically motivated killings and violent confrontations ahead of the 2026 Local Government Elections.⁹ Political uncertainty and contested election results therefore carry the risk of further tensions in an already conflict-prone province.

⁶ The EFF was founded in 2013 as a breakaway from the ANC. Under its leader Julius Malema, who had previously headed the ANC Youth League, the party established itself as a radical-left and Marxist-populist force whose programme appeals primarily to young and disadvantaged voters. The MK Party, which is led by Jacob Zuma, was founded in 2023. It combines left-wing economic policies with a populist and identity-oriented political style. See [South Africa’s Fragile Political Centre – International Reports – Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung](#).

⁷ The widespread view that Johannesburg’s future will determine South Africa’s future points to the city’s role as the country’s economic heart.

⁸ The partly violent “March and March” movement, which targets predominantly African migrants, now receives open support from parties such as MK. Observers regard this as an attempt to mobilise xenophobic resentment for the Local Government Elections. This strategy could appeal to protest voters, although its actual electoral effect remains unclear. See [Charged Climate Ahead of the Local Government Elections: Xenophobic Violence in South Africa Is on the Rise – Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung](#).

⁹ According to the provincial government, 18 councillors have been murdered in KwaZulu-Natal since the 2021 Local Government Elections, meaning that the province remains a focal point of political violence in South Africa. See [Political Killings in KZN – News24](#).

Local Government and State Modernisation: Reforms for a More Capable Country

The 1998 *White Paper on Local Government* remains the principal policy foundation of South African local government. Its guiding principles of developmental, capable and citizen-centred local government continue to shape important reform proposals, including the stabilisation of municipal coalitions and the professionalisation of the administration. Against this background, CoGTA Minister Velenkosini Hlabisa (IFP)¹⁰ has initiated a review of the *White Paper* after almost 30 years of policy stasis. The aim is to adapt the policy and regulatory framework to the current challenges facing local government and strengthen the capacity of cities and municipalities over the long term. The initiative demonstrates the minister's political commitment to reform and should therefore be welcomed in principle. Whether it produces a tangible improvement in municipal performance will, however, depend largely on its implementation. The persistent problems affecting many municipalities stem less from shortcomings in the existing regulatory framework than from weak implementation capacity, political interference and insufficient accountability. The success of the reform will ultimately be judged by whether it effectively addresses these structural weaknesses and delivers lasting improvements in the quality of municipal services.

As part of the wider reform of local government, the *Local Government: Municipal Structures Amendment Bill*, also known as the *Coalition Bill*, is being advanced in parallel. The Bill gives legislative effect to individual reform proposals. These include the proposed introduction of a one per cent threshold for parties in local government elections. At present, there is no electoral threshold at the municipal level, allowing even very small parties to gain seats in municipal councils. The increasing fragmentation of the local party landscape has made the formation of stable majorities and functional coalitions considerably more difficult.¹¹ Despite their small shares of the vote, minor parties also currently exercise disproportionate influence over the formation of governments at the municipal level because they often provide the decisive votes needed to secure a majority, the *kingmaker role*. However, enactment of this reform before the next Local Government Elections on 4 November 2026 appears increasingly unlikely. This assessment is now also shared by parliamentary legal advisers, who point out that the legislative process is unlikely to be completed in time. The delay does not alter the underlying controversy. While supporters regard an electoral threshold as a means of strengthening municipalities' ability to govern, critics point to the constitutionally entrenched principle of proportional representation and the possible disadvantages for smaller parties. The debate illustrates the tension between governance stability and representative diversity.

¹⁰ The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) coordinates cooperation among the national, provincial and local spheres of government.

¹¹ The political instability affecting many South African municipalities is illustrated by Johannesburg. The city has had ten different mayors over the past nine years, only four of whom remained in office for longer than one year. Since 2016, no mayor has completed a full term. See [Our City News](#). At the same time, the city council is highly fragmented: half of the 18 parties represented received less than one per cent of the vote in the 2021 Local Government Elections. See [IEC](#).

Finally, it should be noted that the ongoing efforts to professionalise and depoliticise the public service have so far focused primarily on the national and provincial spheres. In the medium term, however, enhanced separation between politics and administration is likely to be extended to the municipal sphere. This would place greater weight on professional competence in personnel decisions and curb party-politically motivated appointments.

Conclusion

Opinion polls point to a further weakening of the ANC and increasing fragmentation of South Africa's party system. This reflects the ANC's deeper crisis: the party is caught in a vicious circle of deeply entrenched patronage networks, paralysing internal power struggles and declining support among its traditional electorate. These factors reinforce one another and contribute to continued electoral losses, further deepening the party's crisis of legitimacy. Against this background, the contest for major metros, including Johannesburg, assumes particular importance as a barometer of the balance of power between the ANC and DA in the country's urban centres. At the same time, the elections could lay the foundation for more stable majorities and more effective municipal administrations, provided the parties succeed in forming viable coalitions. In municipalities and metros where the DA is involved in such alliances in particular, there are hopes of greater political stability and better governance. Nevertheless, despite the likelihood that it will receive less support than in the 2024 elections, the MK Party remains a central source of uncertainty and destabilisation. Given the continuing fragmentation of the political landscape, it is likely to continue to hold significant influence, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and in the formation of metro governments.

The reform initiatives outlined above address major structural weaknesses in the state. Their success will, however, be judged by whether they lead to a more professional administration and tangible improvements in municipal services. In many cases, South Africa already recognises the problems and has viable solutions. The challenges facing municipalities have been known for years, and numerous plans and reform proposals for addressing them exist at both the national and local levels. The main obstacle is implementation. Inadequate administrative capacity, weak project management, political interference, and shortcomings in oversight and accountability frequently prevent existing plans from being implemented consistently. The true test of the current reform agenda will therefore be whether it succeeds in closing this implementation gap and puts existing solutions into practice.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Henri Bohnet
Policy Advisor for Media / Political Parties / Digital Affairs and Southern Africa
European and International Cooperation Department
www.kas.de

Henri-Giscard.Bohne@kas.de



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