

2016 LOCAL ELECTIONS: A NEW ERA IN SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS?

OUSMANE NIANG

The municipal elections on August 3 will start a new phase of local government coalitions in South African politics with the African National Congress (ANC) battling on many fronts to contain a deep political crisis. Even though the party controls an outright majority in seven of the eight metropolitan municipalities following the 2014 national and provincial elections, it is deeply divided and in its weakest state ever. It is not only struggling to contain a slowing economy with weak governance, but also faces a political crisis with very serious internal factional battles that are tragically turning into political violence. Campaigning for the elections has been marred by infighting and fraud allegations surrounding the councillor candidate selection process. In some cases this factionalism has entered a dangerous phase of political assassinations. Opinion polls¹ indicate that no single party will emerge with a clear majority in the major metropolitan areas (Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela Bay) or dominate town councils. That means that the strongest party will have to find one or more coalition partners to gain power.

THE ANC FIGHTS FOR CANDIDATES AMID POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS

In the ANC's largest provincial stronghold of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) tensions are running high. After a peculiar leadership battle in November 2015, the former premier Senzo Mchunu was recalled by the party's National Working Committee and the provincial leadership. Mchunu, said to be a close ally of Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, was replaced by Sihle Zikalala who is perceived to be close to the Zuma (Jacob and Dlamini) faction. This decision to recall Mchunu also caused notable friction between the ruling party and its alliance partner, the South African Communist Party (SACP) in the province. The SACP Provincial Secretary, Themba Mthembu, stated that the ANC will "pay the price for destabilising Kwazulu-Natal". In EThekweni (Durban), KZN, the losing faction clashed severely with police after the apparent undemocratic election of new ANC provincial leadership. Some regional councillors have exited the ANC and will be contesting the upcoming elections as independent candidates, while others have already joined Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). In the City of Tshwane (which includes Pretoria), the ANC faces mounting protest against the councillor candidate selection process in the metro. In Mamelodi, party members blocked the roads in protest against the nominated councillor. As a compromise, the ANC put forward mayoral candidate, Thoko Didiza, but it backfired leading to further

¹ Series by Ipsos (formerly Markinor) - eNCA publicly available data on the August 3 municipal elections published each week, 18 – 24 July 2016

protests in the Tshwane townships surrounding Pretoria, namely, Atteridgeville, Mamelodi and Hammanskraal. The situation is no different in Nelson Mandela Bay (which includes Port Elizabeth), where the ruling party is also facing serious revolt. At least 19 wards have vowed to protest against the outcome of the listing process. Infighting has reached serious proportions leading to political assassinations. Since April, more than 12 ANC members have been killed in the province of KwaZulu-Natal alone.²

THE RULING PARTY QUICKLY LOSING GROUND

Twenty-two years after becoming South Africa's governing party, the ANC is facing an unprecedented situation. There have been numerous crises in its history, but none have ever involved the questioning of the legitimacy of the ANC as the country's leading political party. The growing debacle of its moral authority has plunged it into its deepest ever crisis. Electorally, the ruling party has been ceding ground to its increasingly assertive opposition parties.³ Inevitably, this political chaos is shaking the economy. On the ground, uprisings in the form of "service delivery protests", are taking place at an increasing number of places. Ahead of this year's elections, the party membership dropped from 1.2 million to just above 769 000.⁴ This poor performance ahead to the elections clearly shows an uncomfortable situation for the ruling party in which it is suddenly resorting to racial attacks against opposition parties with comments such as, "When you see the DA, just know that they are our oppressors" or "They don't believe black people can lead"⁵ instead of concentrating on its economic achievements. The ANC's biggest threat, the Democratic Alliance (DA), has largely benefitted from these divisions and has gained crucial political points. The election of its first black leader in 2015, Mmusi Maimane, transformed the image of the DA from a "party of the oppressor"⁶ with black candidates featured on DA posters nationwide. At the same time, there were also other developments that completely changed the political situation in the country. The parting of ways politically and organisationally by metalworkers' union NUMSA from the ruling alliance, and the emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters had an enormous impact on the ANC. Ultimately this is the real reason for the drop in ANC membership and support. Now, where the ANC previously faced the problem of voter abstentions, it must also contend with a mass alternative in the form of the EFF.

A NEW ERA OF COALITION NEGOTIATIONS

All things considered, the 2016 local elections, further characterised by a large number of undecided voters and independent candidates, will usher in a new period in South African politics. It will probably be the most contested local elections in the past 22 years with no clear winner in many municipal districts. Therefore, as a result of a proportional electoral system, coalition building will become the order of the day; winning 30% of the vote will mean 30% of the council seats. This will require flexibility and a high degree of negotiating skills, some aspects of which the ANC, but also its two big rivals the DA and the EFF, will not find easy to master. In recent years, cooperation between opposition political parties and alliances in parliament around issues such as Nkandla and the Zuma's impeachment motion has not been

² <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-07-19-kzn-political-killings-will-go-on-if-anc-continues-to-impose-candidates-analyst>

³ Susan Booysen: Dominance and Decline: The ANC in the Time of Zuma, 2015

⁴ 2015 ANC National General Council (NGC), October 2015. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-10-09-zuma-blames-anc-kingmakers-for-membership-decline>

⁵ <http://buzzsouthafrica.com/khusela-sangoni-says-anc-wont-apologize/>

⁶ <http://www.news24.com/elections/news/da-is-the-offspring-of-the-oppressor-zuma-20160720>

very successful. However, the real significance will also be the strength of political forces to the left of the ANC, like the EFF, in the context of a general rise in labour strikes, protests, demonstrations and marches by workers, student movements and poor communities against the deterioration of living standards. As a new party, the EFF will be looking to advance beyond the 6 percent it received in 2014, perhaps reaching as high as 12 to 15 percent, in order to become a coalition partner in a number of municipalities.

All articles published on the Rosa Luxemburg Southern Africa website have been independently written. The views and opinions expressed by the author are therefore his own and do not necessarily represent those of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
JOHANNESBURG
237 Jan Smuts Avenue | Parktown North 2193
P O Box 3156 | Parklands 2121
Telephone: +27 (0) 11 447 5222/5224 | E-mail: info@rosalux.co.za | Website: www.rosalux.co.za

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG