

2016 LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA: IS THE ANC SLOWLY LOSING ITS DOMINANCE?

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As predicted by opinion polls, the 2016 local government elections have been the most highly contested in post-apartheid South Africa. The final results, portrayed in Chart 1, shows the African National Congress (ANC) losing ground with significant symbolic defeats in Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and Nkandla, the home town of President Jacob Zuma. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA) achieved 27% of the national vote, while newcomers, the "red berets" Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) scored an honourable 8%, emerging inescapable in this new "multipartism" era in South African politics.

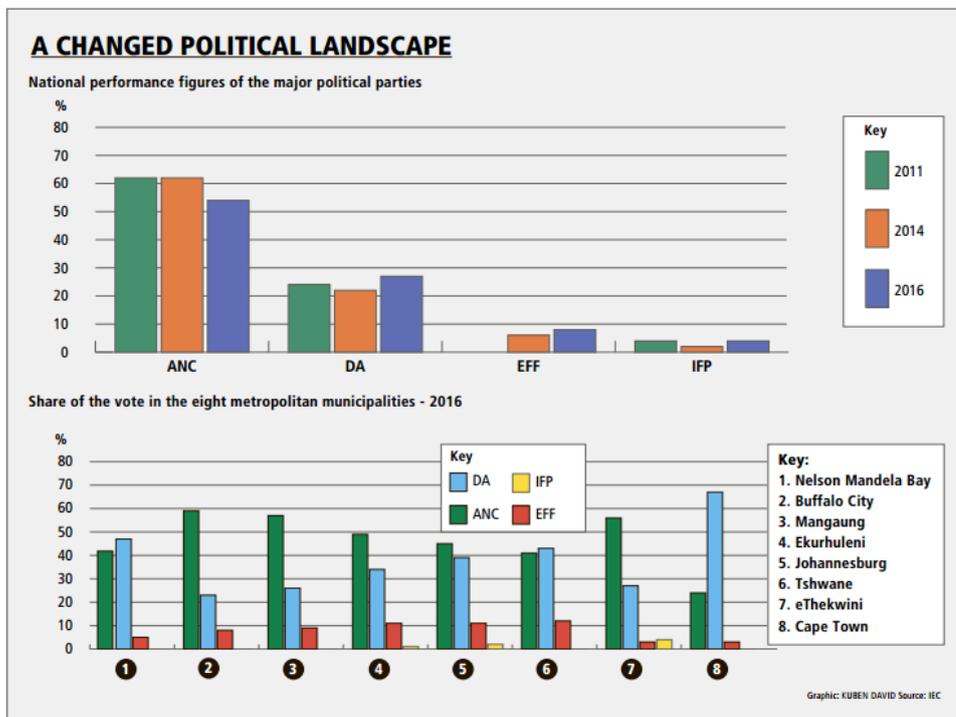


Chart 1

This election loss threatens two decades of dominance by the ANC. For the first time since South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, the ANC's support has fallen below 60%. The party's support has dramatically declined nationally from 66% in 2006, to 53% in 2016. In these 2016 local government elections, the party lost its outright majority in the three major metros Johannesburg, the capital Pretoria (Tshwane) and Port Elizabeth; representing more than eight million people. In Johannesburg, the party obtained 121 of 136 seats it required to gain a majority.

By securing 26.9% of the national vote, the DA could be seen as the real winner by becoming the biggest party in three of South Africa's largest cities, namely, Cape Town, Nelson Mandela Bay and Tshwane. It secured nearly two-thirds of the vote in Cape Town and is the largest party in Nelson Mandela Bay and Tshwane where it will likely be the major coalition partner. The three-year old EFF captured 8% of the national vote with a sterling performance in Limpopo and North-West where it won nearly 30% of the vote and emerged as the "kingmaker" in Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Ekurhuleni. However, historically South African politics has been split between urban and rural voters¹. Rural performance always being masked by the ANC's results in the urban areas. But although its national performance has deteriorated, the ANC still remains the absolute and dominant force in rural areas. KwaZulu-Natal, with 24% of the electorate opting to stay with the ANC, appears to be the party's power base, meaning that to stay in power, the KwaZulu-Natal support is imperative. But the central questions are how to interpret this result in the Gauteng metros and Nelson Mandela Bay, and whether this is the consequence of the DA winning new votes, or ANC voters just staying away from the polls?

COALITION NEGOTIATIONS: A TOSS-UP BETWEEN UNCERTAINTY AND NECESSITY

Coalitions are not foreign concepts in South Africa but are rare. Coalition discussions and upcoming meetings will be the focus for more than 27 municipalities without an outright majority such as Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Nelson Mandela Bay and Rustenburg. Councils and metros will have to elect a council speaker and an executive mayor. But overall, the swing away from the ANC will probably be the ultimate goal even if the ruling party is extremely determined to maintain its control in hung municipalities. At the same time, it appears ambiguous and uncertain how a social democratic party committed to a free market economy could successfully link with a revolutionary movement that advocates radical socialism. Furthermore, by demanding the removal of President Zuma as a prerequisite to start coalition talks with the ruling party, the EFF appears determined to reinforce its "kingmaker" role which will be hard to manage. Nevertheless, party discussions will mainly focus on "real politics" instead of ideologies wherein DA policy agreements with the EFF, but also with smaller parties, are likely to dominate. However, significant agreement could be expected between the two biggest opposition parties, the DA and EFF, on giving tenure and land rights to township and informal settlement dwellers; a key component of the EFF manifesto. Where no coalitions are formed, a council can elect to rule by executive with representatives from each party or, alternatively, the largest party can form an unstable minority government to take over municipal operations until new elections are organised². Coalition politics at local level presents a high risk of uncertainty and instability. However, if

¹ hsf.org.za/resource-centre/focus/focus-67/MdaCamara.pdf/download

² <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-08-07-what-happens-after-the-votes-are-counted-this-is-how-coalitions-work-in-south-africa>

managed well, coalitions could bring about more inclusive politics with immediate and real impact on basic service delivery.

BUT THE REAL THREAT TO THE ANC WILL COME FROM WITHIN THE PARTY

Despite slowly declining support, the ANC is still by far the dominant political party in the country. But this delicate turning point will probably see internal factional battles persisting with very serious tensions between the “reformists” from Gauteng province and the KwaZulu Natal “traditionalists” loyal to Jacob Zuma³ that is likely to fan political violence. This return of significant levels of violence is of deep concern. Turmoil within the ANC itself, with the struggle for party positions that allows access to state resources, is fuelling violence. This is further evidenced by the growing number of community or service delivery protests that are also becoming increasingly explosive. But more importantly, the Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), seems increasingly fractious following a split in COSATU and the emergence of the so-called “Premier League”, where the ANC’s current difficulties were viewed by some as a Zuma phenomenon rather than a deep crisis within the ruling party. This shaky alliance could lead to a possible campaign for Zuma’s resignation in the coming months. On one hand, an unwillingness to address issues of structural decline and trust in the party might detrimentally affect the ANC’s future. And on the other hand, the newly-founded National Metalworkers Union of South Africa (NUMSA) workers' party, the United Front, with its 400 000 members will also use this opportunity to challenge the ANC by occupying the deserted Left.

2017 ANC ELECTIVE CONFERENCE - A CRUCIAL TURNING POINT

The next ANC elective congress in 2017 will determine the way forward for the country. Predictions are that Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa and African Union Commission chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma will vie for the top position. So far, significant voices have warned that the election of any candidate from KwaZulu-Natal to succeed Jacob Zuma as the ANC’s president in 2017 could be interpreted as tribalism⁴. Other dominant ANC factions, including Mpumalanga, Free State and North West party chairpersons, have already indicated that they would support a woman candidate to succeed Zuma.

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³ <http://businesstech.co.za/news/government/128025/this-is-what-south-africa-could-look-like-in-2024/>

⁴ <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-06-16-00-the-num-wants-ramaphosa-to-lead-the-anc-saying-a-kzn-boss-would-be-tribalistic>