Preview of the local government elections

Every voter has two votes next Wednesday – one for a ward councillor, where one chooses between individuals, and one on a proportional list where one casts a vote for a political party. A ratepayers' or residents' organisation can be registered as a political party and contest the proportional list.

The numbers

- Total SA **population**: about 50 million.
- 23.6 million registered **voters**, about 500 000 more than in 2009.
- Nearly 53 000 **candidates:** 29 570 ward candidates; 23 278 proportional list candidates.
- 10 055 councillors to be elected in 278 municipalities.
- 748 **independent candidates** in the ward races – an increase of 12% on the 667 who ran in 2006, but still only a fraction of the total. Political parties dominate the process.
- 121 **parties** in the race, but only four that really count – the ANC, DA, IFP and ID (Independent Democrats, now merged with the DA).   Results in 2006: ANC 66.35%, DA 14.8%, IFP 8.1%, ID 2%. All other parties less than 1.5%, some nil.
- ANC contesting all 278 municipalities, DA 272.
- **Cost** of the election: R1.2 billion. After inflation roughly half the cost of the R963 million of the 1994 elections. (The IEC has done a good job of increasing productivity and containing costs.)
- **Previous elections** referred to in this analysis**:** national 2004 and 2009, local 2000 and 2006.

Below 60% and above 20%?

For the ANC the issue will be not to lose too much.

The ANC steadily increased its percentage of the vote from 1994 to 2004, peaking in the national elections in that year at close to 70% of the vote. Since then they have lost some ground (66.35% in 2006, 65.9% in 2009), but not nearly as much as predicted by pundits.

This time round, pundits are again predicting a loss of support for the ANC, primarily caused by its supporters not coming out to vote. This may very well be a case of 'the wish is the father of the thought'. The idea is driven mainly by service delivery protest in ANC controlled municipalities and corruption. On the other hand, the party will get a boost in KwaZulu-Natal from the expected demise of the IFP. It may also gain from the expected collapse of COPE. Should these two parties not implode as expected, it will limit the ANC's benefit.

Failure to keep the ANC share of the vote above 60% could lead to considerable political pressure on Pres Zuma. It is clear that there are candidates in the ANC who would like to make a run for the Presidency if given the opportunity. They may use a poor election result as a stick to try and hit Mr Zuma and force a contest. Should the ANC come well out of the elections it will strengthen Mr Zuma's hand.

For the DA the issue will be to break through the 20% mark.

The party started life with a bang: in the 2000 local elections the newly formed DA, made up of the DP, NNP and others, captured 22.1% of the vote on the proportional lists. That was the high point, however. Soon thereafter the NNP broke away, officially joining the ANC but unofficially scattering its supporters all over the political landscape. In the 2006 local elections its support declined to 14.8%. In 2009 the DA captured 15.1% of the votes at the provincial level. At the national level they got a bit more – 16.7%.

This time round the DA should benefit from its merger with the Independent Democrats (although that was only a 2% party at the previous election). The DA should also gain if COPE implodes as is generally expected.

What else to watch out for

An important issue for all parties will be the **percentage poll**. In 2000 it was 48%, in 2006 48.4%. So half the voters did not bother to go and vote in the last two local elections.

A higher percentage poll will benefit the party whose supporters come out and vote. Pundits are predicting that ANC supporters will stay away on Wednesday. They will clearly have to stay away in much bigger numbers than before to cause meaningful change.

Critical for both the ANC and the DA will be the **Northern Cape**. It is the smallest province by population, but even so a significant change would be momentous. The ANC had an overwhelming lead in the last local and provincial elections. Can the DA roll it back and make a breakthrough?

Another critical issue particularly for the DA, will be **how many municipalities** it will control outright. Data released by the national government clearly indicates that the DA performs well in the municipalities it controls outright. The more such DA-controlled municipalities there are, the more competition will be introduced in the performance race between municipalities, which must be good.

The possible downside in the election results could be a division along **racial lines**. If White, Coloured and Indian voters largely vote DA and Black (as in African) voters choose the ANC, it will perpetuate a trend witnessed in 1999 and will undermine social cohesion. It will also mean the DA will remain a largely Western Cape party.

Lastly it is noteworthy that **political violence** (as in political murders) has been minimal in this election. One murder is of course too much, but SA has now seen a consistent decline in political violence since 1994. New parties were formed (like COPE and the National Freedom Party) which challenged the ANC and the IFP in their respective heartlands; and parties have been canvassing in strong holds of other parties, yet violence has still declined. Let's hope it stays like that for the last ten days before the election.

So What?
- The magical numbers would be 20% for the DA and 60% for the ANC. Less than 20% would be a severe disappointment for the DA, less than 60% will cause severe political pressures in the ANC, particularly on Mr Zuma.

- The expected demise of smaller parties like the IFP and COPE will help both the DA and ANC; but will also serve to solidify support in two broad blocks.
- If that solidifying takes place along racial lines, it would be a regressive development.
- The decline in political violence is healthy and indicative of political tolerance, despite the loud mouth rhetoric of some.