Local government elections: The critical second round 12 November 2026

The first round of local government elections, the elections themselves, are now behind us. The second part, forming coalitions, are now taking place. By 22 November, councils must constitute themselves. It is a tight schedule.

Four of the main parties (ANC, DA, MK and IFP) indicated that they will conduct coalition negotiations centrally. The test, particularly for the ANC, will be whether local party structures adhere to that central control. Party discipline is going to be important. We will find out over the next 10 days.

Coalition country

Of the 213 metropolitan and local councils, 139 or 65% are hung (i.e. no single political party won more than 50% of the seats; no single party can unilaterally elect a mayor, a speaker, pass local laws or adopt a municipal budget). That is almost double the 70-odd hung councils previously. Seven of the 8 metros do not have a majority party and will have to form coalitions. SA is now decisively a coalition country.

(There are also 44 district councils to make a total of 257 local governments across South Africa, but we will ignore the district councils for now, as they are partly composed of councillors nominated by the councils still to be constituted.)

But which coalition?

For most local governments, the choice is broadly between 2 very different coalitions.

1. The first is a coalition broadly following the composition of the Government of National Unity (GNU). That would be the ANC, DA, IFP and other smaller parties. Although this was a local, not a national election, it is noticeable that the GNU parties received more than 65% of the vote.
2. A second coalition would be one between what is interchangeably called a formation of ‘Black parties’, ‘liberation politics parties’ or ‘parties of the progressive left’. That would entail the ANC, MK, the EFF, the SACP and smaller parties like the ATM. In this election, those parties received about 20% of the vote.

In the 3 Gauteng metros (Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni). Action SA has garnered substantial support, making them a player in those three metros. Action SA is not part of the GNU, and in Parliament it is also not part of the ‘progressive left’ caucus. It harbours a strong dislike for the DA (particularly Helen Zille and Cilliers Brink), so where it will end up in the coalition negotiations remains to be seen.

In this election, Action SA received 5.67% of the national vote.

There is a stark difference between these 2 broad coalition groupings. The one represents the broad middle in SA, and the other is a nationalistic, radical-economic-transformation grouping that has done the country no good in the past. A coalition of GNU parties will certainly serve the country better. We will soon know which way things are going.

The special case of KwaZulu-Natal

In KZN, the issue would be whether the parties currently constituting the Provincial Government of Unity (IFP, ANC and DA) can be replicated at a local government level across KZN where there are no majority parties. This includes the 1 metro in KZN, eThekwini.

A principle adopted by both the ANC and the DA is that the biggest party in a local government should take the mayoral chain. In eThekwini, Jacob Zuma’s MK Party (MKP) emerged as the biggest party with 38.4% of the vote. The principle thus implies that the mayoral position there should go to the MKP.

There is a snag, however. The MKP is on record as wanting to change the constitution and revert from the constitutional democracy we now have to the parliamentary democracy we had before 1994. That is a radical departure from one of the key institutions of democratic South Africa. Over the last 30 years, constitutionalism has become a key foundation of the country. Abandoning that would constitute dramatic change and could tear the country apart.

It will also be a departure from one of the GNU's founding principles. Clause 8.1 of the GNU Statement of Intent states 'Respect for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, a united South Africa and the rule of law' and all parties to the GNU have accepted that.

The current 3 parties forming the provincial coalition in KZN have received 54.6% of the vote in eThekwini. Following practice elsewhere in the world, the constitution-supporting parties can decide to exclude a radical party from governance.

Again, we will soon know how things are turning out.

So What?

- Although not discussed in this note, it is abundantly clear that the election was a success and the outcome widely accepted. No losing candidates fled the country like Bolsonaro; no losers claimed the election was stolen like Netanyahu and Trump; and no mob tried to storm the election centre and force a different result. Even in litigious South Africa, nobody is going to court to challenge the results.
- The election has brought about a sharp realignment of SA politics. Coalition rule has replaced 1-party dominant rule. This is likely to remain a feature of our politics, thanks to the proportional representation system. Thank heavens we do not have a constituency system (***see brief explanation in the postscript below***).
- The ANC has declined, but no single party has emerged to fill the vacuum.
- Most voters in the country voted for parties of the middle. The combined votes of MK and EFF declined from 24% in 2024 to 16% now. To that, one can add the SACP's 2.38% and ATM's 0.98% for a total of 20%.
- What remains now is for coalitions to be formed that reflect these voter preferences.

PS: Why our proportional representation system matters

If SA used a pure-constituency system, a dominant party could still win an overwhelming majority of seats nationwide even with declining overall support, as happens in the UK.

Despite the messiness and instability of coalition negotiations, it is fairer, more democratic, and ensures that every single citizen's vote counts toward a seat in government.

*In South Africa's **proportional representation system**, the percentage of votes a party receives broadly matches the percentage of seats they get in parliament or council. If a party gets 4% of the vote, they get roughly 4% of the seats. Because the vote is split among so many distinct groups, it becomes incredibly difficult for any single party to cross the 50% threshold to govern alone. The so-called "overhang" seats undermine this principle to some extent, but it does noy outweigh the benefits.*

*In contrast, a **constituency system** (also known as 'first-past-the-post ', used in the US and UK) works entirely differently and would create a very different, potentially less representative outcome in a very diverse country. It introduces the **'winner-takes-all ' problem:** In a constituency system, a country is carved into geographic districts. Whoever wins the most votes in a district wins that seat entirely, even if they only get 35% of the vote.. All other votes for losing candidates are effectively wasted.*