

The South African political scene has displayed a number of developments that herald the need for better local governance. Service delivery protests are signalling that the institutional forms of representation and public participation in local democracy are failing to meet the expectations of the people.

It was in this atmosphere of dissatisfaction that the 2011 municipal elections recorded the highest voter turnout for the country despite pre-election fears that voter numbers would follow the international trend and decrease. What happened was that the electorate effectively used this opportunity to change local political leadership in many municipalities and to express dissatisfaction with local conditions and leadership.

In June 2011, before the new Councillors could warm up their seats in the 278 municipal councils across the country, President Zuma announced that the government is exploring the need to have a single voting day for national, provincial and local government elections.

Zuma framed the reason for the potential change as a way to cut costs and better administer finances. This was not the first time that this idea had been mooted: In 2009, Sicelo Shiceka, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs predicted that the single election would take place as early as 2014, subsequent to the discussion and endorsement of the matter in the ruling party's Policy and National Conferences to be held in 2012. Although it is by no means certain that the ANC will bring these seminal reflections into policy, what is clear is that the issue has not received much public attention, nor have the implications been fully explored to inform a meaningful decision. Yet it is a matter of national interest that should not leave other political actors and the general public indifferent.

Opening the debate on a single election equates, without a doubt, to deliberating on the substantive issues around the role and quality of elections in a new democratic dispensation like ours.

Elections bring a specific vibrancy in the political life of this country. Politicians become more accountable and visible while the constituents engage politicians through protests, brandishing the potential of ballot sanctions, and the media reverberates all these interactions to the nation.

A single election poses a threat to this vibrancy as politicians may become complacent and wait for five years to interact and account to the electorate. This would reduce the (already insufficient) contact citizens have with their public representatives. In addition, it is the letter and the spirit of founding provisions of the Constitution that "regular elections" are a means to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness in South Africa. Although the Constitution does not detail the number of elections the country should have in any given period, the correlation between frequent elections on the one hand and accountability, responsiveness and openness on the other hand is an important principle to preserve.

The deliverable and focus of the elections could also be in jeopardy.

Arguably, a national election is contested on the basis of national priorities and macro level considerations, whereas local elections are contested on the basis of local concerns and priorities. In South Africa, this distinction is clearly not as neat as one may hope.

It is widely acknowledged that general elections in the country are an expression of an identity vote as opposed to issue-based (service delivery record). This means that the majority of voters cast their ballots for political parties because of historical allegiances instead of the track record of a party's deliverables at local level.

There is a very real fear that a single election will subsume local elections and politics into the national elections and 'bigger' politics. In a single election, with attention divided, local issues are more likely to be marginalised. This will allow political parties to be far removed from the realities and challenges of service delivery and local democracy. This in turn will reinforce accountability upwards (to the party leadership), instead of (and at the expense of) outwards accountability to local communities and constituencies.

The preservation of the role and the quality of elections in South Africa should be central and paramount considerations. This would uphold key constitutional assumptions and foundations that stipulate that the government is constituted as national, provincial and local spheres of government, which are distinctive, interdependent and interrelated.

We need to be cautious as a country that discussions about changing the electoral processes do not tamper with this important characteristic and more especially the independence of the sphere of local government.

In addition, local government is the only sphere of government that has elected, constituency-based representation. The advantage of the ward component in this system is that it enhances accountability at the local level. This in turn strengthens the role of ward councillors and invariably benefits all groups within the community. Also, the highly valued principles and characteristics of the country's electoral system identified as fairness, accountability, inclusiveness and simplicity in the Van Zyl Slabbert Report (2003) should never be watered down or discarded in any attempt to revise the electoral business in the country.

Isandla Institute recently hosted a Roundtable dialogue to discuss whose interests are served by the introduction of a single election.

The outcome of the Roundtable underscored the imperative for a broad-based, multi-stakeholder and public dialogue to entrench democratic deliberation on single election matters, elicit collective interest and eventually reach a national consensus on this issue.

The most important consideration should be whether a single election will be in the interest of participatory local democracy and whether it will induce accelerated and inclusive development. The focus should be on the impact a single election would have on citizens, especially those excluded from South Africa's wealth and socio-economic opportunities, rather than mooted technical changes, which in the end will only yield benefits to the state and to key political players and groupings.

Ultimately, the matter should be gauged at the realm of intrinsic gains to public representatives' accountability, local service delivery improvement, the entrenchment of participatory democracy and the rule and advantages of multiparty democracy. - Pamela Masiko-Kambala is the Policy Researcher in the Politics of Local Governance Project at Isandla Institute.