

*A single election in South Africa:
Whose interests does it serve?*

*Discussion Paper and Roundtable Report
prepared by Isandla Institute*

September 2011





Project Description

The Politics of Local Governance Project, an initiative of Isandla Institute, seeks to explore the interface between three domains: the local state, political society (more especially political parties) and civil society/communities/citizens. More particularly, the project seeks to critically engage the four, inter-related, key problems identified as:

1. The reductionist approach that conflates institutionalised participation in the form of 'invited spaces' with meaningful expression of active citizenry (thereby showing intolerance to any other form of community engagement or 'invented spaces' by communities);
2. The dominant political culture across political parties that considers these parties as the 'rightful', if not sole, custodians of citizen's aspirations and interests (feeding into the intolerance mentioned above);
3. Relatively weak and fragmented community organisations, with implications for their ability to claim rights and act as checks and balances to political power and bureaucratic reductionism; and,
4. A general retreat by civil society organisations/ the non-profit local governance sector from what is considered 'political society', in particular the space taken up by political parties.

This project was supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA)



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Discussion Paper*



1. Background

On the back of the third municipal elections in South Africa, members of the government and party leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) have been discussing the introduction of a single election in South Africa. Sicelo Shiceka, the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), is widely quoted in the media claiming that a single election would curb election fatigue, cut spending and would advance service delivery as opposed to the government being distracted by preparing for an election every two-and-a-half years.¹ The Minister projected 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. In 2010 the Secretary General of the ANC confirmed that the party was considering the possibility of a single election date.² This matter was subsequently discussed at the ANC's summit on Provincial and Local Government held in December 2010.³

In the wake of the first municipal elections in which the ANC struggled to maintain its electoral strength while the opposition consolidated its grip in its stronghold and gained momentum in previously ANC controlled wards, President Jacob Zuma reiterated this perspective. In his address at the national assembly budget vote he announced that the government is exploring the need to have a single voting day for national, provincial and local government elections.⁴ In his argumentation, the President purported that a single election would result in the country having one financial year, a single public service, a

common five year medium term planning as well as aligned human resource and budgeting frameworks.

While the ANC and leading government representatives seem to favour a single election (also referred to as 'coupling' of elections), this issue has not received much public attention, nor have the implications been fully explored to inform a meaningful decision. Yet, it is arguably a matter of national interest, particularly as there is an observable decline of trust in public institutions and elected leadership.⁵

This paper seeks to critically review the (embryonic) arguments in favour of the coupling of elections. More importantly, it makes the case for a thorough assessment of arguments and factors in favour/against the coupling of elections and of relevant electoral and election management, political, service delivery and governance implications thereof. In doing this, it draws on select international examples from countries that have experience with (de)coupling of elections namely, Sweden, United States of America, Scotland and the Democratic Republic of Congo. While no evidence could be found that Brazil has considered coupling/decoupling of elections in the recent past, reference is also made to its current electoral system to illustrate certain points. This paper concludes with a call for further investigation and broad-based stakeholder and public dialogue to arrive at an informed national consensus on this issue. In Isandla Institute's perspective, the critical issue informing any such assessment or dialogue is whether a single election will be in the interest of participatory local democracy and accelerated, inclusive development.

At the outset, however, it is important to clarify a number of key starting points that ought to frame further discussions on coupling or decoupling of elections in South Africa.

2. Key starting points

The Constitution of South Africa is the result of a process of transformation which is inherently linked to the demise of the apartheid regime. As a starting point, the 1996 Constitution states that the government is constituted as national, provincial and local spheres of government which are distinctive, interdependent and interrelated.⁶ Therefore, we need to be cautious as a country that discussions about changing the electoral business do not (appear to) tamper with this important characteristic and more especially the independence of the sphere of local government.

The Constitution further crystallises elections as an empowering tool for previously disadvantaged communities. For this reason, voting in South Africa is more than the exercise of political prerogatives. The founding provisions of the 1996 Constitution consider that “regular elections” are a means to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness in the non-racial and non-sexist South Africa. Of course, the Constitution does not detail the number of elections the country should have in any given period. But the correlation between regular elections on the one hand and accountability, responsiveness and openness on the other hand is an important issue to keep in mind.

Thirdly, local government is the only sphere of government that has directly elected constituency-based representation. The electoral

system used for local elections has two features, namely, an element of representivity (the proportional matching of Council seats with votes cast), and an element of accountability (the identification of individual councillors to particular wards).⁷ The advantage of the ward component in this system is that it enhances accountability at the local level which in turn strengthens the role of ward councillors. This invariably benefits all groups within the community. The White Paper on Local Government advised that both features of this electoral system be retained in any future system of local government in the country; therefore arguments in favour/against coupling of elections should equally consider this issue.

None of what has been presented before pre-emptes the validity of or need for a review of electoral processes in South Africa. However, and this is the fourth point, as this is an issue of national interest any proposed revision emanating from such a review would necessitate broad-based public consensus as was the case with the passing of the Constitution.

Fifthly, the Constitution stipulates that the state must encourage public participation processes in order to solicit views of those it governs. It also compels the state to ensure representative and participatory democracy in the internal arrangements, proceedings and procedures of the legislatures and municipal councils.⁸ The principle of people’s involvement in planning and decision making processes that directly affect them is reiterated in the Municipal Systems Act, amongst others, and is a critical corner stone of the current system of local governance.

Finally, the Van Zyl Slabbert Report of 2003 identified fairness, accountability, inclusiveness and simplicity as key principles and defining characteristics of the country's electoral system. These are highly valued principles and characteristics that should not be watered down or discarded.

3. A single election: Issues to consider

The President and the Minister have invoked a number of arguments and concerns to justify the advent of a single election. These include:-

- ♦ Economic argument (i.e. cut spending)
- ♦ Administrative and bureaucratic concerns (i.e. state consolidation through aligned human resources and a single public service)
- ♦ Fiscal and planning concerns (aligned budgetary frameworks; one financial year across all three spheres of government; common five year medium term planning)
- ♦ Efficiency argument (i.e. advance service delivery)
- ♦ Political argument (i.e. to curb election fatigue)

This paper will review these and other considerations in an attempt to present a more comprehensive perspective on relevant factors and views that may – and in some instances, ought to – inform a national perspective on this issue. This section will focus in turn on economic, administrative/managerial, electoral and election management, political and governance considerations and implications.

Economic considerations and implications

Cost to the state

Economic arguments have been advanced as one of the concerns to justify the advent of a single election. The minister claimed that each election currently costs the country R3.7bn to administer and suggested therefore that a single election would reduce the burden of electoral costs on the state.⁹ We appreciate that running elections is a costly exercise especially for a middle income country like ours; however as a country we need to reflect on whether we can put a price tag on democracy. Furthermore, references to the cost of current elections are not particularly helpful without an assessment of the envisaged costs associated with coupling of elections, or even an investigation into other cost reduction measures, such as the possibility of electronic voting, for example.

Cost to political parties

Political parties, particularly the smaller parties, often cite limited access to funds as a reason for poor performance in elections.¹⁰ Public campaigns such as buying “visibility” materials e.g. T-shirts and caps, providing transport to shuttle people into rallies amongst others, is a costly exercise. The state provides for public funding of political parties represented in any legislature in the country through public funds. This Fund is administered by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC).¹¹ Currently political parties do not have to disclose their source of income other than the one received through the state as private funding of political parties in South Africa is

unregulated. The Public Funding of Represented Political Parties Act, 103 of 1997 governs the eligibility of parties and the allocations they receive from the Represented Political Parties' Fund. The funding is distributed on an equitable and proportional basis.¹² This therefore means that the ruling party receives an enormous portion of this money due to its massive electoral support. For example, in the 2008/9 financial year, the ANC received R61 million for obtaining 619 seats in Parliament and provincial legislatures, the DA received R10.5 million for 91 seats whereas the United Democratic Movement (UDM) received a mere R1.6 million for 11 representatives.¹³

While these funds assist political parties in running their business, most parties often indicate that monies received through the Fund are by no means sufficient and inhibit their ability to organise successful political campaigns and to also assure their sustainability. The significance of access to more financial resources in order to run successful political campaigns is a matter all political parties agree with. For example, the ruling party alone spent no less than R200 million to run the 2009 general election related campaign; this is an amount 3 times more than the party's allocated funding from the IEC for the 2008/9 financial year. Nomvula Mokonyane, a National Executive Committee (NEC) claimed that the money used in the campaign had been raised by the party through other means like selling paraphernalia for example.¹⁴ While it is almost impossible to know how much the ruling party spent on the 2011 local government election, the party is said to have used considerably less money in running these elections, an indication perhaps

that the party's finances are not as close to what they were in 2009.¹⁵

Political party funding scandals have cropped up recently, further putting strains on attempts by parties to raise funds through private donations. The revelations of multiple political party funding related scandals have repeatedly placed political parties, especially the ruling party and the ANC-led government's integrity into question. These include amongst others, the infamous Arms Deal, Oilgate and Chancellor House Holdings scandals. The recent example being that of KwaZulu Natal MEC Mike Mabuyakhulu and the speaker of the legislature, Peggy Nkonyeni who are currently on bail in a case relating to a 1-million "donation" to the ANC allegedly paid by a South American businessman Gaston Savoi in 2007 in exchange for a R44million government tender in that province.¹⁶ Opposition parties have equally had their share of funding scandals notably the New National Party's Count Riccardo Agusta/Peter Marais and the Democratic Alliance's Jurgen Harksen scandals. In common, these scandals have a thread that binds them together, that is, the obvious lack of clear boundaries between the political party and the state.

Currently, the ANC is the only political party that has indicated that it is considering the possibility of a single election date, although this appears to be in resonance with other political parties. From a political party's financial perspective, it seems rational to rally behind the prospects of a single election as campaigning requires access to enormous amount of financial as well as human resources. It reduces the need

for parties to pursue additional funds to campaign for another election to take place two-and-a-half years later.

While there are seemingly compelling economic arguments in favour of pursuing a single election, bearing in mind that a proper cost-benefit analysis is still outstanding, the question is whether such a far-reaching decision should be made on the basis of economic arguments and how much weight should be attached to such arguments.

Administrative and managerial considerations and implications

The President in particular has articulated administrative and managerial concerns as good reasons for a single election. These include, 'a single public service, with aligned financial years, budgeting frameworks and planning cycles'.

An investigation has to be made on whether a single election is the correct prescription to address these concerns, i.e. does the country need a single election in order to consolidate the public service, for example? It is also imperative to note that instituting one financial year and aligning budgetary frameworks across the three spheres of government attempts to conflate national, provincial and local government whereas for reasons stipulated in the Constitution these different spheres of government have autonomy and independence from each other. The Minister could have perhaps been motivated by the reality that everything stops when the election "fever" kicks in the country. Councils and legislatures throughout the country somehow get affected by the election period of a different sphere of government as the political machinery gears itself

up for the campaigning mode. However, as already stated above, this should not be the case. In theory, the business of municipal councils should not be hindered by an election for national and provincial legislatures and vice versa.

As local government has a mandate to ensure service delivery in communities, discussion should reflect on ways to help strengthen this sphere of government in order to ensure that it delivers speedy and quality service delivery, a matter that does not require a conflation of the spheres of government. Isandla Institute cautions therefore that, administrative and managerial concerns alone can never be justifiable grounds to warrant a revision of the spirit and the letter of the Constitution and that of the electoral business.

4. Electoral and election management considerations and implications

Complication of multiple ballot papers

In a general election, voters receive two ballot papers. One is to vote for a political party representative at national level (Parliament) and the other for a political party representative at provincial level (provincial legislature). The results of these elections are determined through the Proportional Representation (PR) closed list electoral system as prescribed by the country's Constitution. In municipal elections, there is a slight difference. The country uses a mixed system in local government elections where half of the Councillors are elected through a PR list process while the other half is elected through local representation at ward level (constituency system).¹⁷ South Africa has 3 types of municipal councils:

- (a) **Category A:** A municipality that has exclusive municipal executive and legislative authority in its area- (Metropolitan Council)
- (b) **Category B:** A municipality that shares municipal executive and legislative authority in its area with a category C municipality within whose area it falls- (Local Council)
- (c) **Category C:** A municipality that has municipal executive and legislative authority in an area that includes more than one municipality- (District Council).¹⁸

In a municipal election, a voter registered in a metropolitan council will receive two ballot papers: one to elect a metropolitan PR candidate (political party), and the other ballot to vote for a metropolitan council ward (ward councillor). However, voters from Category B and C municipal councils will receive 3 ballot papers on voting day as there are 3 types of elections in each ward. One ballot paper is to elect a local council PR (political party), the other for a local council ward (ward councillor) and another for a district council PR representative (a political party which, through its candidate list, will appoint a percentage of councillors who will represent them in 44 district councils that will be responsible for providing bulk services to these municipalities).¹⁹ Therefore, should the country hold a single election in future using the current electoral system, this would imply that voters from metropolitan councils will complete four different ballots while those from non-metropolitan councils will complete five ballots.

The practicality of managing these ballots is inconceivable and the planning of such an election would be highly complex administratively. The potential increase in the average voting time spent in a voting station and, as a result, the impact on queues suggests that voting in a single election would be a tedious experience. Ultimately, this may even deter voters from participating in elections.

Also, there is no doubt that this would have a negative impact on members of society who have low levels of literacy. While dealing with the issue of drafting electoral legislation required by the Constitution, members of the Electoral Task Team (ETT) noted that “given the South African situation, a complex electoral system presupposing a high degree of literacy would violate the principles of fairness and inclusiveness. The system has to be accessible to practically every voter, easy to understand and easy to participate in. It is not simply the act of voting that is important; voters must also understand the results”.²⁰ Simplicity therefore is one of the principles or core values identified by the ETT to judge the adequacy of an (alternative) electoral system that is appropriate to salient and relevant aspects of the South African context. The eventuality of using four or five ballots in a single election violates this core principle of the electoral system and by extension, violates the spirit of the Constitution.

Evidence on how a combination of voting systems on a single election can cause significant confusion and lead to an increase in spoilt or inadmissible votes was produced in the Scottish example. When Single Transferable Vote (SVT) and

Additional Member System (AMS) were used in elections to the Belfast City Council and Northern Ireland Assembly in 2001, 3.3% of the people who voted for candidates in Belfast City Council elections failed to exercise their votes correctly. That approximated to 62,388 spoiled ballots in the 2003 Scottish council elections, which would be 5 times the actual 2003 spoilt ballot number (12,803).²¹ Another example was given, that of London where at the May 2004 elections, 56,862 (2.9%) votes for mayor and 167,071 (6.7% constituency member and 2.53% London-wide party choice) assembly ballot papers were ruled inadmissible.²²

The multiple ballot papers as explained above also have a direct bearing on the work of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). For one, the IEC would have to run a nationwide voter education campaign which would have a direct bearing on the resource intensity and cost of running elections. Moreover, the IEC is guided by the Constitution and the electoral law on how it should conduct the business of elections. S.47 of the Electoral Act details procedures for the counting of votes and the determination of provisional results while S.57 stipulates the conditions to be followed for the determination and declaration of final results of the election.²³ The important point to note in this regard is that the management of the multi-ballots by the IEC will have a direct bearing on the timeframes stipulated in the Act. For example, currently the electoral law stipulates that there is a single day of voting in South Africa, the results ballots must be counted at the voting station (although there are clauses for exception to this), and that the IEC must determine and declare the result of an

election within 7 days after the voting day factoring time for objections by political parties. The foreseeable practical difficulties to be presented by a single election are likely to compel the country to allocate more than one day for voting and more than 7 days for the determination and declaration of final results of an election, which would require an amendment of the electoral act. A single election for South Africa may actually prove not only to be expensive to organise but may be an administrative nightmare to manage.

Risk of 'hidden' electoral reforms

In seeking to overcome the added complexity of multiple ballots for voting and election management as outlined above, it may be tempting to consider additional electoral reforms that advance simplicity in the context of a single election. Put differently, there may be a consideration to hold a single election that only uses 3 ballot papers to vote for national, provincial and local representatives. This would not be possible without fundamentally changing the current electoral system. Two scenarios seem possible.

The first scenario is to reduce the municipal ballot to one vote, as opposed to two currently. This would make it impossible to vote for both ward Councillors and PR councillors through a single ballot. The question then becomes, would such an electoral change be in favour of a PR list or a constituency system? If the former, what does this mean for multiparty democracy in that smaller parties and independent Councillors are the most likely victims of such a scenario (see also section on threats to multiparty democracy).

The second scenario is to revisit the debate about the future of provinces and scrap provincial government in future. A single election in this context would involve voting for national representation through a PR closed list system and voting for local representation through a mixed (PR and constituency) electoral system. The debate on the future of provinces has been on the agenda of the ANC for a considerable time and the matter became more pertinent with the establishment of the new system of local government in 2000.²⁴ The 2007 ANC conference deferred the decision on the future of provinces but resolved that the Department of Provincial and Local Government conduct a review process and that the party holds a summit on provincial government expeditiously.²⁵ The party's 2010 National General Council (NGC) equally deferred a decision on this issue and recommended that a provincial and local government summit be held before the end of 2010. The summit was held in December 2010 and resolved that the ANC consider and debate four broad issues pertaining to the future of provinces. They are:

1. "To retain the three-sphere system of government as it is.
2. To remove the regional sphere of government altogether, leaving a two-sphere system of government consisting of national and local government.
3. To retain the three-sphere system but reduce the number of provinces.
4. To move away from geographically-based system but rather look at functional attributes of provincial government".²⁶

These discussions may be resuscitated at the forthcoming 2012 ANC conferences. Isandla Institute reiterates that any change to the electoral system to institute a single election would be a fundamental change for the system of local government. Revising the system of local democracy requires broader consultation, a precedent set by the intensive 18-month period of consultation and research that culminated in the White Paper on Local Government in 1998. The idea should be to strengthen the system of local governance in its entirety in order to ensure better service delivery. Choosing a PR list system for example would have major implications for municipal elections in that only political parties contest elections under this system and therefore independent candidates would not be able to stand for elections in this election. This electoral system has two excellent features, namely, an element of representivity (the proportional matching of Council seats with votes cast), and an element of accountability (the identification of individual councillors to particular wards). The White Paper on Local Government advised that both these valuable features should be retained in any future system of local government in the country.

Any change in the electoral system of the country also stands in contravention to ANC resolutions. At its 52nd National Conference in 2007, the party resolved:

1. The current electoral system should be maintained and be strengthened, further to enhance the links between the people and their public representatives.
2. The formula used to calculate the allocation of seats in local government elections should

be reviewed to ensure that it does not disadvantage parties that get more ward votes.

3. Appropriate requirements should be set for persons wishing to contest elections as independent candidates

5. Political considerations and implications

Voter participation

The Minister of COGTA, Sicelo Shiceka advanced that a single election in South Africa would curb election fatigue. In making this statement, the Minister may have been concerned with seemingly declining trends in voter participation in general elections, from 89% in 1999 to 76% and 77% in 2004 and 2009 respectively.²⁷ Alternatively, he may have compared voter turnout at municipal elections to voter turnout at general elections. In 2000 and 2006, voter turnout at municipal elections was 48%. This, however, increased dramatically to 58% in the most recent municipal elections. Voter fatigue therefore may not be a relevant motivation for coupling elections in the case of South Africa.

The 2011 municipal elections recorded the highest voter turnout for the country despite pre-election fears that it would decline as is the trend internationally, signalling perhaps that the South African electorate has matured to a point where they understand the real meaning and importance of voting. Voter turnout equally increased across all nine provinces, notably in Gauteng and the Western Cape provinces where over 12% increase in turnout was recorded signalling a widespread growth in participation. The increase can be attributed to the following factors:

- ♦ Fierce competition for votes by bigger political parties, with the DA transcending its boundaries by campaigning in ANC and IFP strongholds.
- ♦ Effective campaigning as political parties reached even the most remote parts of the country.
- ♦ Local issues took centre stage and the electorate voted based on their experience with service delivery rather than on party loyalty only, effectively rejecting national politics and rhetoric in favour of bread and butter issues.

Internationally, the coupling (or decoupling) of elections has been subject to public discussions in a number of countries, and the issue of voter participation has been central to these discussions. In Sweden, national elections and local elections are arranged simultaneously since the constitutional reforms of the 1970s.²⁸ Here coupling is one of the factors credited for the high turnout in Swedish elections, where the average turnout hovers above 80% (without compulsory voting).²⁹ Although voter turnout in Sweden still ranks high in the world, since 1998 there has been a decline in voter participation with the lack of confidence in politicians or politics advanced as possible explanations.³⁰

In the United States (US) however, discussions on the voter participation framed the question adversely in favour of "moving local elections to coincide with the dates of national elections".³¹ In an assessment conducted on voter's practices in the cities of California, it was concluded that national elections (i.e. Presidential and

Congressional) tend to supplant federal elections (state and local elections) which is detrimental to local business; “[...] at the local level where policies are most likely to be implemented and where a majority of the nation’s civic leaders are being elected; important public policy decisions are being made without the input of most of the affected residents”.³² The arguments of the proponents of decoupling in the US were weighted around institutional arrangements, including election timing, service delivery arrangements, direct democracy, term limits and mayoral authority. Empirical findings demonstrated that to solve the “election concurrency” equation, timing is almost everything. The proponents of coupling however sustained that “by scheduling local elections that have traditionally had low turnout on the same date with state-wide primaries or general elections with their much higher voter turnout, there is reason to believe that the number of local ballots cast could be almost immediately increased to levels nearly on par with national elections”.³³ However, the arguments for coupling elections were not successful; national and local elections continue to be held separately in the US.

A similar experience can be drawn from Scotland, which recently introduced an Act of Parliament separating local government and parliament elections.³⁴ The arguments in favour of abandoning a single election stem from the necessity to increase local government accountability and to facilitate the introduction of a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system which would have meant that Scottish voters would be required to vote for two different bodies with two

different electoral systems using three ballots in 2007.³⁵ The proponents of combined elections in Scotland argued that keeping local government elections together with high profile elections maintains a higher voter turnout.³⁶ However, it was pointed out that a higher voter turnout does not necessarily equal an engaged local electorate; that a higher turnout is not a democratic mandate for local government and local elections and politics should not be held under the shadow of parliamentary elections usually dominated by national issues.³⁷

In Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been grappling with the idea of coupling elections. As the country is preparing for the November 2011 elections, discussions about coupling of elections have resurfaced. During the first democratic elections of 2006, an unwritten agreement emerged for the decoupling of local elections to allow a smooth running of presidential, legislative and provincial elections. Owing to circumstances true to the DRC, local elections have not taken place to date. Now that the DRC is preparing for the second democratic elections, there have been unsuccessful attempts by the Executive – backed by the national electoral body – to decouple presidential and legislative elections. The DRC will hold presidential, national legislative elections and provincial elections in November 2011.³⁸

As the above examples show, the evidence with regards to voter turnout is not straightforward, particularly if one takes into account the specificities of systems of governance and electoral systems in each country. It is, however, important to draw on international

lessons and discussions as South Africa pursues the issue of a single election. Internationally, the discussions around coupling/decoupling of national and local elections revolve around two schematic issues: operational and substantive challenges. The chart below summarises the main challenges related to coupling or decoupling elections.

expression of an identity vote as opposed to issue-based. This means that the majority of voters cast their ballots for political parties on the basis of historical allegiances instead of the track record of a party. For example, to many supporters, the ANC is the only liberation movement that successfully toppled the Apartheid government with its alliance with the United Democratic Front

Table 1: Main challenges related to coupling/decoupling elections.

TYPE OF ELECTION	OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES	SUBSTANTIVE CHALLENGES
COUPLING (COMBINED/ SINGLE) ELECTIONS	Cost and administration	Diminished focus on local government issues
	Campaign hurdles	Mindset of the electorate: Confusion of the electorate – higher number of spoilt ballots (re: different voting systems)
	Voter turnout (increase)	Greater responsibility placed on voters: decrypting messages of local and national candidates' messages
DECOUPLING (SEPARATE) ELECTIONS	Cost and administration	Increased focus on local government issues
	Frequency of elections/ timing of elections	Mindset of the electorate: Potential to minimise voters' confusion –less number of spoilt ballots (underscoring the need for voters' information and awareness-raising)
	Voter turnout	Rational and manageable responsibility placed on voters

National election (identity vote) vs. Local election (service delivery vote)

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, which is still considered a young democracy; this distinction is clearly not as neat as one may hope.

It is widely acknowledged that general elections in South Africa are by and large an

(UDF) and other alliance partners. The party therefore is credited with establishing the first non-racial democracy (1994) in the history of the country and on this basis it currently enjoys massive support from the electorate.

A national election in essence encapsulates the interest of the nation. The political space is usually dominated by succession debates within political parties; some of these spiral into the public arena as we witnessed with the ANC "succession battle" leading up to the 2007 Polokwane Conference

and the subsequent 2009 general election. At such times, citizens are generally less concerned about local politics and candidates as that matter requires local attention as opposed to the bigger succession debates. Questions on who is going to be the next president of the country prove to be very interesting, as that reflects (to some extent) the core identity of the nation. In fact, the “Presidential Factor” as some call it, has proven to be a useful campaigning tool for the ruling party, especially during national elections. Arguably, the 2009 election was the electorate’s endorsement of the ruling party’s Presidential candidate while the emergence of the Congress of the People (COPE) was partly a rejection of that candidate.

Similarly, in South Africa’s still maturing democracy local elections are more often than not fought over national development priorities, by the national leadership of political parties. The 2011 local elections are a case in point, although it also suggests that local issues are slowly but surely taking centre stage in municipal elections. In the 2011 local government elections political parties like the ANC and the DA ran national campaigns raising national issues as opposed to the ones that resounded to the each party’s service delivery record at the local level. The service delivery record of political parties, especially that of the ANC, was often juxtaposed with potholes, open toilets, tender-linked irregularities, while the party merely reacted to these factors. National leaders could not escape the tough debates that emanated out of this election, showing for the first time promising signs that service delivery record is at the centre of local government elections.

The ANC opted to run a “presidential type” campaign evidenced in part by the party choosing to put up President Zuma’s posters instead of local candidates in strategic spots in major cities and the President “criss-crossing” the country in defence of the party’s delivery record. The DA equally used this strategy while campaigning as posters of their national leaders were placed in strategic spots in the cities. A key risk of a single election is that it will reinforce accountability upwards, as opposed to (and at the expense of) outwards accountability, i.e. to local communities and constituencies. It will make local candidates invisible, and therefore less accountable to the electorate. It is also unlikely that political parties will spend money on posters of local candidates in a single election as parties will focus on running a national political campaign.

The concept of a single election therefore threatens to subsume local elections and politics into the national elections and ‘bigger’ politics as it may compel people to vote on identity issues vs. service delivery record. During local elections, there is at least some expectation from the public that local issues and service delivery will take centre stage – even if it will take some time for this to become institutionalised. In a single election, however, with attention divided, local issues are more likely to be marginalised which will make political parties to be far removed from the realities and challenges of service delivery and local democracy. In essence, the country would be doing some disservice to the local government candidates by placing them in direct competition with macro issue and effectively devaluing the role of local government. As argued in the Local Government (Scotland) consultation bill,

separating local elections from national ones would increase local accountability by increasing the focus on the real issues of local government which tend to be overshadowed by the policies of the Scottish parliament.³⁹

Voting as a ticking exercise: hegemony of dominant political parties

A single election in the format of multiple ballot papers mentioned above has a potential of reducing a voter's experience into a 'quick ticking exercise' whereas conventionally, it is more than that. Ticking and juggling through multiple ballots will hinder one's ability to review and assess who to vote for, with which ballot paper, leading to increasing the risk of potential mistakes and spoilt ballots.

This stands to frustrate voters who normally split their vote in any election for various reasons. For example, in general elections, a voter in the Western Cape Province may through the provincial ballot vote for the ANC while s/he may votes for the DA through the national ballot paper. The voter's motivation could simply be that s/he wants to reduce each party's prospects of attaining a two-thirds majority in any legislatures where it already has a huge electoral support. The inference of this exercise on the same voter should s/he want to use the same model in deciding which candidate or political party to vote in municipal elections further complicates the matter. Due to the complication of this exercise, voters may be tempted to vote for one political party through all ballots. The 'trickling voting effect' therefore will benefit the dominant political parties, thereby further entrenching their hegemony in the political system.

Threats to multiparty democracy

South Africa's transition through the National Peace Accord 1993, which paved the way for the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) forum, was negotiated with the principles of establishing a multi-party democracy in the country. The different forums that sat between 1990 and 1993 ensured that the stakeholders agreed on certain principles or rather codes of conduct while the political groups shared a vision to establish a multiparty democracy in a non-violent, peaceful manner.⁴⁰ The founding provisions in the Constitution state that South Africa is founded on the values of "universal adult suffrage, a national common voters roll, regular elections and a multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness".⁴¹ The absence of an electoral threshold in the country's electoral system indicates commitments to multi-party democracy, as essentially all votes are equal and each vote counts. Currently, there are 13 political parties represented in the National Assembly (NA), with the smallest parties having as little as 1 member in the NA.⁴² The diversity of these political parties personifies the demographics of the country which translates into an assortment of opinions and views that then transmit this character into the legislation making process.

Similarly, the characteristics of the various municipal councils throughout the country are remarkable as smaller parties and independent councillors use their positions in these councils in creative ways. Smaller parties generally do well in local elections and they hold the balance of power in many municipalities where bigger parties fail to win an absolute majority. For example, in the

Kannaland Local Municipality, the Independent Civic Organisation of South Africa won three seats while the ANC and the DA won two each.⁴³ In the Prince Albert Local Municipality, the Karoo Gemeenskaps Party won three seats and the ANC and the DA won two each.⁴⁴ In KwaZulu-Natal a relatively new party, the National Freedom Party (NFP) led by Zanele Magwaza-Msibi won major seats in many wards and municipalities in the 2011 municipal elections.⁴⁵ The NFP is currently co-ruling some municipalities with the ANC where the party failed to win an outright majority. In essence, smaller parties are power brokers in quite a number of municipalities in the country.

The principle of multiparty democracy is probably more attainable at local level, where the electoral system facilitates the participation of smaller parties and independent candidates. The question is what the potential impact of a single election is on small parties and independent candidates. As noted previously, where the introduction of a single election is coupled with electoral reform that does away with constituency-based representation at local level, this will have devastating implications for independent candidates. Even if such electoral reforms are not pursued, it is not unlikely that smaller parties and independent candidates become casualties of a higher level of complexity associated with voting. Essentially, this may unwittingly undermine multiparty democracy in South Africa.

Potential for political party complacency

Elections bring a specific vibrancy in the political life of this country. Politicians become more accountable and visible while disgruntled citizens

showcase their dissatisfaction through protests and of course, the media is there to capture all of this drama. Currently elections take place every two-and-a-half years, and although these are focused at different spheres of government, they serve as important 'accountability moments' and barometers for political parties. Even though it concerns elections for different spheres of government, Members of Parliament (MPs) are expected to campaign for their party in the time leading up to municipal elections, which compels them and their party to be more closely engaged with local constituencies. A single election poses the danger of extinguishing this vibrancy as politicians may become complacent and wait for 5 years to interact and account to the electorate, failing to live to the connotation that democracy is the governance of the people by the people. A single election every 5 years may further reduce the (already insufficient) contact citizens have with their public representatives. As already argued earlier, there is a correlation between regular elections on the one hand and accountability, responsiveness and openness on the other hand and it is an important issue to keep in mind when discussing the prospects of a single election. Brazil for example also holds regular elections since the demise of the country's military regime. The country holds national elections every four years, while municipal elections take place two years after state and national elections.⁴⁶

While deliberating on the electoral system design for South Africa, many participants involved in the discussions of the Electoral Task Team (ETT) repeatedly raised the lack of accountability between elections by public representatives as a key concern.⁴⁷ Recently there

have been reports in the media that Parliament is going to impose fines for or even expel MPs who go absent without leave for more than the prescribed term in parliament regulations.⁴⁸ Further reports were made about the difficulty of tracking MPs during constituency period, a time where they are meant to be available to the public to help solve problems and report to their constituents.⁴⁹ Despite these reports, no political party has acted against the culprits thus far. The question is what, if any, additional measures political parties will impose on their representatives to ensure that an introduction of a single election will not result in political complacency? Will a single election enhance or diminish accountability of public representatives?

Taking power away from the electorate

Municipal elections have creatively been used by the electorate as a 'mid-term review' of government's performance and most importantly, a lobbying opportunity as these are held mid-way after a general election. The electorate's 'bargaining power' usually increases at the prospect of this election. For example, disgruntled voters in many parts of the country usually threaten to boycott elections unless their demands are met by the government. This tactic is perhaps one of the few creative methods at voters' disposal to attract government's attention to their plight. This also explains why 'election fever' is generally exciting for the electorate, as it is perhaps one of the rare occasions where the electorate can exert direct influence over its elected leadership. In some instances this tactic

works perfectly. Where it fails, disgruntled voters may register their dissatisfaction with the state by boycotting elections, as we saw with the Khutsong cross-boundary dispute.

Khutsong, a township in the Merafong Municipality boycotted the March 2006 municipal elections in protest over the unilateral decision by the government to incorporate their municipality into the North West province. The ANC's 51st National Conference held in 2002 resolved to abolish cross-boundary areas in the country as they posed organizational difficulties for the party's branches. The party preferred that all branches and regions in a municipality fall under one province.⁵⁰ To effect the ANC resolution, Parliament passed the Constitution Twelfth Amendment Act of 2005 and the Cross-Boundary Municipalities Laws Repeal and Related Matters Act of 2005, effectively re-determining geographical areas of provinces and abolishing cross-boundary municipalities. Khutsong was one of the communities affected by this legislation as the Merafong Municipality straddled provincial boundaries; the municipality was therefore moved from Gauteng to North West province. Khutsong residents objected to this move sighting a number of reasons including the fact that North West was a poorly resourced and less developed province compared to Gauteng and that they had better chances of access to speedy, quality service delivery in Gauteng than in North West province.⁵¹ Their opposition against this proposal culminated in a number of activities including presentations in public hearings jointly organised by the North West and Gauteng legislatures, lobbied political parties (the South African

Communist Party being a key ally), held community meetings, peaceful protest marches, etc.⁵² When all failed, the Merafong Demarcation Forum and some community members applied to the Constitutional Court to declare the Constitution Twelfth Amendment Act of 2005 invalid as they believed that the Gauteng Provincial Legislature failed to comply with its constitutional obligation to facilitate public involvement in its processes leading up to the approval of the Act by the National Council of Provinces (NCOP).⁵³ The court dismissed their application.

The people of Khutsong decided to boycott the March 2006 municipal elections. Of the 29 540 registered voters in that community, only 232 people voted while 12 of those ballots were spoilt.⁵⁴ Community members continued to protest even beyond the 2006 municipal elections with the protest turning more violent as residents had vowed to make the area ungovernable. Houses of ANC Councillors were torched along with government property including schools and the library, streets were blockaded with burning tyres, schooling was disrupted, community leaders were arrested, etc.⁵⁵

In March 2009, a month before the April 2009 general election, the Cross-Boundary Municipalities Laws Repeal and Related Matters Act of 2005 was amended as a sign perhaps that the state conceded to the people's demands. This resulted in the Merafong Municipality being re-demarcated back into Gauteng province, effectively placing the voting districts of this municipality into the Gauteng provincial segment of the Voters roll. Interestingly, to register their satisfaction with this move, the ruling party was

voted for by an overwhelming 74.58% of the Khutsong residents in the 2009 general election.⁵⁶

This case study is a unique example of how the electorate used its power through municipal elections to voice their dissatisfaction and register their demands with the government. After utilising most avenues available to citizens in a democracy, the people of Khutsong were left with one last resort, that is, to use the collective power of their vote to re-register their opposition to the unilateral decision by the government to incorporate their municipality into the North West province. After institutional forms of representation in a democracy failed them, they collectively used their constitutional right not to vote in order to punish their representatives. Their actions spoke louder than words; even the public representatives elected by the mere 232 voters would have to consider resigning from their posts as a vote by a mere 232 out of 29 540 potential voters was more a 'vote of no confidence'. The people of Khutsong successfully ridiculed their representatives. These people not only used protest action, which is the commonly used vehicle for communities to voice their concerns; they used the power of their vote to realise their wishes. This remains one of the few, creative methods used by the electorate in South Africa to embarrass public representatives who seek to ignore peoples' demands; the community effectively used direct democracy where representative democracy completely failed them.

Voters across South Africa may well be using their vote in the same manner, albeit not at the same scale as Khutsong. They may want to use their local vote to signal satisfaction or

dissatisfaction with their elected national and/or provincial representatives, or vice versa. The unprecedented voter turnout in the 2011 municipal elections has in part been attributed to this, with voters using their vote to express their dissatisfaction with the state and quality of delivery by voting for other parties, effectively switching party loyalty as opposed to boycotting elections.⁵⁷ As a result, the electorate used the opportunity to change local political leadership in many municipalities. The ANC for example saw both its number and share of the vote cut; the party won 63.65% of the vote suffering a 2.7% loss compared to the 2006 municipal election.⁵⁸ This reduced the number of municipalities controlled by the ruling party from 238 in 2006 to 198 in 2011.

6. Governance considerations and implications

Constitutional amendments

The next municipal elections are due in 2016; the introduction of a single election in 2014 would therefore cut the term of office of locally elected leadership by two years. Such a change would necessitate constitutional and legal amendments. A logical consequence of doing so, if the interest of the people is to be the central motivation, is for Parliament to initiate public participation forums to solicit the views of relevant stakeholders and the electorate. A key question here is whether Parliament has the capacity and resources to ensure due diligence processes in consultation and participation *and* process the relevant amendments within the set timeframe.

Even if it were practically feasible, another issue to consider relates to the legality and fairness

of such far-reaching amendments. The Constitution currently states that if a Municipal Council is dissolved in terms of national legislation, or when its term expires, an election must be held within 90 days of the date that Council was dissolved or its term expired.⁵⁹ The Municipal Structures Act (1998) S. 34 stipulates conditions for which municipal councils can be dissolved. Would it be fair to abruptly shorten municipal councillors' tenure, both to them and their constituency? What is the likelihood of legal disputes from either affected Councillors, who will effectively be dismissed and become unemployed, or from local constituencies, who may argue that their political rights are adversely affected by the forced resignation of their elected representatives?

Alternatively, a decision may be taken to extend the term of office for national and provincial legislatures by two years from 2014 to 2016, to coincide with the 2016 local government elections should it prove to be too tedious or politically impossible to reduce the term of office for municipal councils. Even in this regard, the extension of the term of office for legislatures requires constitutional and legal amendments. Again, this would have to be subjected to an inclusive and fair process of public and stakeholder consultation.

7. A single election for South Africa: Whose interests does it serve?

It is a common opinion among political parties that securing funds is an increasingly daunting challenge. From a political party's financial perspective therefore, it seems rational to rally behind the prospects of a single election as campaigning requires access to enormous amount

of financial as well as human resources. A single election reduces the need for parties to pursue additional funds to campaign for another election to take place two-and-a-half years later. Over and above funding issues, the 'trickling voting effect' which may occur through the use of multiple ballots in a single election will benefit dominant political parties, thereby further entrenching their hegemony in the political system. Thus, it is apparent that a single election would be particularly advantageous to political parties, especially large parties, and more especially the ruling party.

From the perspective of the state, a single election for the country would seemingly reduce the burden of electoral costs on the state. References to the cost of current elections however are not particularly helpful without an assessment of the envisaged costs associated with coupling of elections, or even an investigation into other cost reduction measures, such as the possibility of electronic voting, for example. The other mooted advantage as articulated by the President, namely to consolidate the state through alignment of financial, planning and human resource frameworks, does not necessarily warrant a single election. It also holds the potential danger of undermining the independence of the sphere of local government, of reinforcing the tendency to drive top-down (as opposed to locally initiated and driven) planning and service delivery, and of further conflation of state-party interests, as is

arguably in any governing party's interests to consolidate power through state structures and processes.

Of critical concern is whether a single election will be in the interest of local government as an autonomous sphere of government. As suggested in this paper, a single election could have the unintended effect of undermining the independence, accountability and responsiveness of the sphere of local government, particularly as elected local representatives feel more beholden to their political leadership than to the electorate. A single election is likely to reinforce accountability upward, as opposed to outward to local constituencies. It is also likely to negatively affect multiparty local democracy and the successful candidacy of independent candidates.

Last, but by no means least, any discussion on a single election would have to consider how it is likely to impact on citizens and whether it would ultimately be in the interest of the electorate, more especially those excluded from South Africa's wealth and socio-economic opportunities. Critical questions to explore in this regard are: Will a single election enhance accountability of public representatives to local communities? Will a single election result in improved service delivery at local government level? Will it bolster the system of local government in South Africa? Is a single election in the interest of advancing inclusive participatory local governance?

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