

GGLN Position on the Introduction of a Single Election for South Africa



OCTOBER 2011



Introduction

Few political actors would dispute the need for improved local governance in South Africa. Recurring community based protests across the country serve as a constant reminder that the institutional forms of representation and public participation in local democracy are inadequate in providing accountable, responsive leadership and in meeting the expectations of the people. In its 2011 publication *Recognising Community Voice and Dissatisfaction*, the GGLN notes that community discontent is the outcome of inadequate and uneven service delivery, lack of communication to explain delays in responding to local needs, and partisan and divisive local politics. A key conclusion of the GGLN publication is that the current edifice of public participation provided for by local government legislation is inadequate in facilitating meaningful and inclusive expression of voice, particularly for the poor and marginalised of South Africa.¹

This view echoes the government's own assessment of local government in the 2009 *State of Local Government* and *Local Government Turnaround Strategy*, respectively. The analysis presented in both documents paints a picture of a system of local government that is not responsive and accountable, that fails to involve communities in their own development, and that is characterised by poor governance, amongst others. This clearly suggests that local government is failing to live up to its developmental mandate as articulated in the 1998 White Paper on Local Government, that is, 'to work together with local communities to find sustainable ways to meet their needs and improve the quality of

their lives', and therefore 'democratise development'. Yet, there are positive signs as well. One of these is the significant increase in voter turnout, from 48% in 2000 and 2006 to 58% in the 2011 municipal elections, despite pre-election fears that it would decline as is the trend internationally. The electorate effectively used its power to express its voice, which in many instances was an expression of dissatisfaction (and hope/aspirations) and a preference for a change in local leadership. Undeniably, though, the 2011 local government elections were still largely overshadowed by national priorities and personalities, as opposed to local concerns, priorities and candidates. Political parties like the ANC and the DA ran national campaigns raising national issues as opposed to campaigns that resounded to the each party's service delivery record at the local level. Yet, despite efforts at making the elections a platform for national priorities and personalities, political parties often found themselves on the back foot as they were compelled to engage with local realities of potholes, open toilets and tender-linked irregularities. It was encouraging that national leaders could not escape the tough debates that emanated out of this election, showing for the first time perhaps promising signs that service delivery record is at the centre of municipal elections and suggesting that local issues are slowly but surely taking centre stage in municipal elections.

In sum, while local government in South Africa is a distinctive, interdependent and interrelated sphere of government, with its own elected leadership, in many respects the consolidation of local government as 'developmental local government' is still in its

infancy and, with the right type of government-wide interventions and support programmes, needs time to come to maturity. Given that this is a critical moment for local government, it is crucial that any decision made in this regard serves to strengthen rather than weaken local government accountability. It is against this view that the GGLN has formulated its perspective on the mooted single election for South Africa.

Introducing a Single Election?

The GGLN believes that a reflection on the value, desirability and feasibility of a single election needs to take account of the slow, but steady, advances towards developmental local government. The GGLN further notes that opening the debate on a single election in South Africa equates, without a doubt, to deliberating on the substantive issues around the role and quality of elections in a relatively new democratic dispensation like ours.

The idea of a single voting day for national, provincial and local government elections has been put forward by senior government representatives, including President Jacob Zuma and the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), Sicelo Shiceka.² Gwede Mantashe, the Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC) has confirmed that the ruling party was considering the possibility of a single election date.³ The ANC's summit on Provincial and Local Government discussed the matter in December 2010 and it is envisaged that the issue will be tabled at the ANC's Policy and National Conferences in 2012. While the position of the ANC on the introduction of a single election is not a foregone conclusion, the issue itself is of national interest and warrants careful consideration from other political actors and the general public. The GGLN therefore believes that the issue of a single election should be debated upon in the spirit of democratic consultation and participation and that the state, rather than the ruling party, should initiate this process as stipulated in the Constitution.

Key Principles and Considerations

The GGLN's position on the introduction of a single election is informed by a number of key principles and considerations.

First, the GGLN regards elections as a defining instance of political participation. It is a political moment that becomes an intersection of the personal and the political, the private and the public, the citizens and the state, the individual and the system. Regular elections therefore provide citizens with 'voice' and 'choice'. This is in line with the founding provisions of the 1996 Constitution that consider that "regular elections" are a means to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness in a non-racial and non-sexist South Africa. Although the Constitution does not detail the number of elections the country should have in any given period, the correlation between regular elections on the one hand and accountability, responsiveness and openness on the other hand is an important principle to preserve.

Currently elections take place every 2.5 years, albeit for different spheres of government. The introduction of a single election would reduce the regularity of voting to once every five years. This may seem appealing as a means to ensure higher voter turnout in elections, particularly in municipal elections. Yet, a higher turnout as a result of a single election does not necessarily equate an engaged local electorate. Moreover, it will do this at the expense of reducing 'voice' and 'choice' of citizens. The electorate's 'bargaining power' usually increases at the prospect of an election. For example, disgruntled voters may threaten to boycott elections unless their demands are met or unless they are given an audience to express their concerns. This tactic is perhaps one of the few creative methods at the disposal of voters to attract government's attention to their plight. A single election will dissipate the bargaining power of constituencies.

A single election will also be detrimental to accountability on the part of political parties. 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. Members of Parliament (MPs) and Provincial Legislatures (MPLs) are expected to campaign for their party in the time leading up to municipal elections, which compels them and their political 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 five years to interact with and account to the electorate, failing to live up to the connotation that democracy is the governance of the people by the people. A single election every five years may further reduce the (already insufficient) contact citizens have with their public representatives.

In light of these considerations, the GGLN believes that frequency of elections is much more important than the level of voter participation in a particular election.

Secondly, the GGLN strongly supports decentralisation of decision making and service delivery as a prerequisite for accountable, participatory and responsive government. This includes a firm belief in the value of representative local democracy. In a single election, national priorities and 'bigger' politics (including national personalities) are likely to eclipse local elections and politics. In a single election therefore, 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 a great disservice to local government candidates by placing them in direct competition with macro issues, thereby effectively devaluing the role of local government. A further concern is that this will reinforce accountability upwards, to the party leadership, instead of – and at the expense of – outwards accountability to local communities and constituencies.

Therefore, as a single election is likely to subsume local issues under national priorities and politics, reduce accountability to local constituencies and reinforce centralising tendencies in government and the political realm, we fail to see how the introduction of a single election will be in the interest of local government or representative local democracy. Intended or not, a single election will create the impression that the distinctive nature of local government in relation to other spheres of government is being eroded. It is exactly these considerations that recently led Scotland to decouple municipal and parliamentary elections by an Act of Parliament.⁴

Furthermore, local government is the only sphere of government in South Africa that has directly elected constituency-based representation. The advantage of the ward component in the local electoral system is

that it enhances accountability at the local level which in turn strengthens the role of ward councillors. This system invariably benefits local communities. A single election is likely to make ward candidates less visible to the electorate as political parties are likely to canvass on the basis of national manifestos as opposed to locally driven campaigns. This undermines the role of directly elected constituency based representatives.

Of further concern is the possibility that the electoral system may be altered to overcome the reality that a single election will make it more complicated and time-consuming for voters to cast their multiple ballots, as much as it will make it more challenging for the Independent Electoral Commission to manage elections and avoid electoral fraud. Thus, in the interest of simplicity, the municipal ballot could be reduced from two votes to one vote, with the likely casualty the constituency-based system. While there are no indications that a revision of the local electoral system is at this stage being considered as part of a move towards single elections, it is clear that, should this occur, this would not be in the interest of multiparty democracy or enhanced local accountability.

In Sum

The GGLN's view is that a single election is likely to undermine the vibrancy, importance and centrality of local participatory democracy, make local leadership less accountable and approachable to local communities (which in turn will impact on spaces for meaningful and inclusive community participation), and will fail to make local service delivery and governance the centre piece of local government. It will negatively impact on citizens' rights to express 'voice and 'choice' and will most certainly thwart the ambition and intention of making local government 'developmental' in orientation and praxis.

The GGLN is not persuaded by reasons in favour of a single election mooted by senior government and ruling party representatives, which are primarily administrative and financial in nature. While some of these reasons have yet to be substantiated, others (such as the introduction of a single public service or alignment of budgetary frameworks) do not require a single election to be effected. Ultimately, however,

the GGLN believes that these are the wrong starting points for a debate on a single election.

As the debate about the introduction of a single election gains momentum, the GGLN strongly urges the South African government and the ruling party to avoid a conflation of roles and interests. For one, what may be in the interest of a ruling party and political elite (e.g. to consolidate power through state structures and processes) may not be in the interest of citizens, multiparty democracy or local government. Furthermore, and in particular when the ruling party proposes the introduction of a single election, the state has a responsibility to canvas public opinion on matters of national interest, such as the introduction of a single election.

The GGLN therefore calls upon the state to initiate a broad-based, multi-stakeholder and public dialogue to entrench democratic deliberation on the issue of a single election. The purpose of such a national dialogue would be to elicit collective interest and eventually reach a national consensus on this issue, as was the case with passing the Constitution. The national dialogue should make a thorough assessment of arguments and factors in favour/against a single election and the implications such an election would have on participatory local governance, multiparty democracy and the reduction of poverty and inequality. The GGLN believes that this matter is of great national significance and as such warrants a national referendum.

Notes

The GGLN is grateful to Isandla Institute, one of its members, for taking the initiative and creating the basis for a GGLN position on this issue. The GGLN endorses the Isandla Institute Discussion Paper *A single election in South Africa: Whose interests does it serve?* (available on www.isandla.org.za) which further unpacks some of the arguments underpinning the GGLN position. This publication was made possible by a grant from the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA).

- 1 Ramjee, M and Van Donk, M (2011). "Introduction: Recognising Community Voice and Dissatisfaction", in GGLN *Recognising Community Voice and Dissatisfaction*, 10-27, Cape Town: GGLN.
- 2 Address by President Jacob Zuma on the occasion of the Budget Vote Debate of The Presidency, National Assembly, Cape Town, 14 June 2011. <http://www.presidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=4318>, and, Shiceka: Single election to be discussed, Mail & Guardian online, 21 October 2009. Accessed, 11 July 2011. <http://mg.co.za/article/2009-10-21-shiceka-single-election-to-be-discussed>.
- 3 ANC mulls single election, News24, 01 December 2010. Accessed, 11 July 2011 <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/ANC-mulls-single-election-20101201>.
- 4 Scottish Local Government Elections Act, 2009.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:



The Good Governance Learning Network (GGLN) is a national network of civil society organisations with an interest in advancing participatory local governance in South Africa.

Ronald Mukanya
GGLN Coordinator
Tel: 021 683 7903
Fax: 021 683 7956
Email: ggln@isandla.org.za
www.ggln.org.za



Isandla Institute's "The Politics of Local Governance" project aims to deepen and enhance current perspectives and debates on local governance in South Africa.

Pamela Masiko-Kambala
Policy Researcher
Tel: 021 683 7903
Fax: 021 683 7956
Email: pamela@isandla.org.za
www.isandla.org.za