

Single poll threatens vibrancy of tried and tested SA election system

PAMELA MASIKO-KAMBALA

THE SOUTH African political scene underscores 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, before the new councillors could warm their seats in the 278 municipal councils across the country, President Jacob Zuma announced that the government was 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 the idea had been mooted: in 2009, the minister of co-operative 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.

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 repre-

sentatives. 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.

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.

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.

The preservation of the role and the quality of elections in South Africa should be the 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. 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 of 2003 should never be watered down or discarded in any attempt to revise the electoral business in the country.

Isandla Institute recently hosted

a round-table dialogue to discuss whose interests are served by the introduction of a single election.

The outcome 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.

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.