

## Local Government Elections 2021

By Noor Nieftagodien

The majority of South Africans, especially black working class and poor communities, issued a resounding vote of no confidence in the ANC on November 1<sup>st</sup>: in 1994 the party won 12.2 million votes and in 2021 only 5.2 million votes. Fewer than 12 million out of an eligible 42.6 million voters went to the polls. In other words, more than 70% of the electorate either did not register to vote or stayed away. This reflected mounting dissatisfaction with the main parties and growing scepticism in electoral politics.

Although participation in local government elections has declined since reaching a highpoint in 2011 (when 13,6 million people voted, representing 57.6% of registered voters), the decline in voter turnout and the hammering meted out to the ANC in the elections signal a deepening of the country's political crisis.

All the main parties are guilty of empty promises about service delivery to the poor and dishonest rhetoric of "new dawns", "clean governance" and "anti-corruption". They have consistently failed to produce meaningful and lasting improvements in the lives of the majority. In fact, the poor have become poorer, particularly since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Underpinning this malaise is the government's dogged commitment to macro-economic policies that have strangled the local economy: growth is almost stagnant, unemployment has reached record levels of 44%, inequality has continued to widen, and more than 3 million people experience hunger every day. Gender based violence continues to ravage our society, with the latest crime statistics reporting nearly 10,000 rapes in only three months between July and September. The socio-economic crisis is particularly pronounced at the local level, where the twin injustices of austerity and corruption have caused load-shedding, growing disruption of water supplies and housing shortages.

Faced with multiple assaults on their lives, the majority have declared: *enough is enough!*

### Historic elections

These elections were historic because for the first time the ANC's share of the vote dipped below 50%: it won only 45% of the votes cast, compared to 54% in 2016 and 61% in 2011. This confirmed the continuous decline and loss of authority of the ruling party. It haemorrhaged votes in the metropolitan areas and lost ground in every province, including a drop in support of 16% and 10% respectively in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

Importantly, the ANC enjoys only a minority of support in the country's three major economic and most populous provinces (Gauteng, KZN and Western Cape). A closer look at the election results in Johannesburg reveals a particularly gloomy picture for the party. Its support in the city dropped by 26% and in Soweto by 18%. In Alexandra, the ANC lost between 2,000 and 4,000 votes in almost every ward but managed to hold onto most of the seats. Similar results were evident across the country, as people who were once loyal to the ANC blame it for shattering their hope that democracy would mean a better life.

The calamitous results for the ANC were confirmed when it lost power in Gauteng's metros (Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Tshwane), now in the hands of DA-led coalitions. It barely held on to eThekweni and Nelson Mandela Bay. But despite these major losses, the ANC remains a dominant player in our politics. It won more votes nationally than the combined tally of the next four major national parties (DA, EFF, IFP, FF+), all of which have their own crises and limitations. It is also the

main party of the ruling elite, who depend on the ANC's historical authority among black people to implement unpopular policies.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) also suffered a bloody nose in the elections but was able to avoid close scrutiny because of the focus on the ANC's setbacks. Its support dropped from 27% in 2016 to 22% in 2021, despite desperate efforts to win back conservative white voters who had moved to the FF+. Losses in the Cape to parties such as the Patriotic Alliance and the Cape Coloured Congress, as well as independents, suggest a growing number of coloured communities are becoming *gatvol* with a party that has been consistently anti-poor. The DA will attempt to extend to other parts of the country the repressive laws against homeless people and violence against informal land dwellers it has practiced in Cape Town. Its fragile control of key metros thus spells disaster for the poor.

There was some expectation that the EFF would be the main beneficiary of the ANC's decline. Its share of the vote increased from 8% to 10%, thus garnering more council seats. However, the number of votes it received declined marginally from 1,217,805 to 1,194,295, despite having run a robust election campaign. The party lost ground in strongholds such as Limpopo and was overtaken by ActionSA in Johannesburg. Even in Alexandra, where it had ambitions of unseating the ANC, the EFF lost several thousand votes. Its inability to make significant inroads into the ANC's support base suggests the party's spectacular growth since its founding has ground to a halt. Complicity in corruption, misogyny and a penchant for populist nationalism have contributed to this stagnation.

Notwithstanding this reality, it still has a reputation as being to the left of the ANC and seems to have consolidated a loyal base of around 1 million voters. It will therefore remain a complicating factor in efforts to build an alternative Left movement. The EFF struck significant body blows against the ANC, often in collusion with ActionSA, with an eye on weakening the Ramaphosa faction in the internal dispute with the Zuma-ites. Its rapprochement with the venal RET faction has little to do with a radical, pro-poor programme. Rather it is to gain control over the state in order to accumulate power and wealth.

### **Political instability**

A primary outcome of the elections is the entrenchment of political instability, which will have an adverse effect on local government administration and service delivery. An unprecedented number of hung councils (66), including in the major metropolitan municipalities, led to frenetic activity among parties to stitch together coalitions. The usual grand-standing by politicians of only entering coalitions on supposedly unmovable principles very quickly dissipated, to expose a desperate scramble for power. Local government has become an important source of elite patronage and accumulation. Its allocation is central to coalition politics. The DA-EFF coalition in Johannesburg after 2016 was instructive in this regard.

The focus on coalitions has tended to obscure at least two other important features of the elections. First, the massive proliferation of parties (as well as independents) did not generate fundamentally new political choices for the electorate. Ideologically shackled to the status quo, the manifestos of the main parties were characterised by an absence of alternative visions, least of all a path out of the current C-19 crisis. Their broad support for Gondongwana's mid-term budget, which reinforced the government's commitment to an austerity programme that will further diminish the state's capacity to deliver public goods to the poor, reflects convergence on fundamental policy matters. None of them takes seriously the climate catastrophe facing humanity, which would require a robust critique of capitalism. In reality, anti-poor policies will remain a cornerstone of the policies of the various coalitions in power over the next five years.

Second, there has been a worrying increase in electoral support for conservative and ethno-nationalist politics. The proudly xenophobic ActionSA (led by the Trumpian Mashaba) and the Patriotic Alliance, together with the IFP, were among the winners in the elections. The IFP benefited from the ANC's slump in KZN but only won control over three more councils compared to 2016. The FF+ continued its steady improvement at the expense of the DA, nearly trebling its number of seats. The reactionary ideas of these parties have found an echo among a cross section of the population and represent a danger to society. In a context of social decay, right-wing populists and opportunists will continue to stoke the fires of xenophobia, racism, homophobia and ethnic nationalism to divide the poor majority and turn it against itself.

### **Age of crises**

From the point of view of the ruling class, the last 27 years have been a period of relative electoral stability. Between them, the ANC and DA have quite successfully represented the general interests of capital, including the historically white-dominated monopoly capital, as well as the new black capitalist and middle classes. This collection of the economic and political elites has driven the implementation of privatisation, corporatisation of municipal services, unbundling of public entities and austerity, which have had dire consequences for the poor.

The internecine factional disputes in both parties and their poor performance in the elections have cast a shadow over this arrangement. If there is a repeat of the outcome of these elections in the 2024 national elections, the country could face the prospect of the ANC losing power. Therefore, the new coalitions of minority parties, especially in the Metros, are harbingers of possible configurations of power after 2024.

The ruling class may not prefer a dominant ANC, but it does not yet have a legitimate alternative that can play the same role as the current ruling party on its behalf. The DA's shift more openly to embrace neo-conservatism seems to have solidified its role as the unifying force of right-wing politics in the country. Interestingly, Mashaba's success in the elections, albeit modest nationally, suggests a section of the ruling class is prepared to support a home-grown Trump to bolster free-market and xenophobic politics.

What is clear is that the certainties of the last 27 years are gone.

Undoubtedly, the 2024 elections have now assumed major significance. The ANC in particular will be desperate to reverse its decline and regain control of the national government and the provinces currently under its rule. The ruling class will want to avert protracted instability in the different spheres of government. But the dilemma is how to achieve this when the ANC's authority is unravelling. Option one is to maintain the ANC's rule under Ramaphosa as the proven custodian of pro-business policies. That will certainly depend on the outcome of the factional war in the ANC. Option two would be to nurture the coalition of minority parties to prepare for a transfer of power, at least in Gauteng and possibly nationally. Neither will guarantee stability. The main conundrum facing the ruling elite is the politics of the majority who did not vote.

### **What about the 70%?**

A similar question confronts the Left. More precisely, do the 70% of the electorate who did not vote represent a constituency from which to build an alternative left movement or party?

Clearly, large numbers of people don't identify with the politics of the main parties, mistrust formal politics and have become apathetic towards elections. There is huge disappointment in the ANC, but

many of its former supporters are not yet ready to give their vote to one of the current opposition parties. What we do not know with certainty are the voting patterns of, for example, trade unionists, black women, youth and the unemployed, and the particular reasons why they may have decided not to vote. It cannot be assumed that the 70% are ready for recruitment to a Left, or socialist, project.

The broad Left, represented by a handful of local movements, had a negligible impact in these elections, which reflects existing weaknesses and fragmentation. Routine protests against poor service delivery again were not translated into effective organisation that could attract the millions of disenchanted voters. The absence of a cohesive national movement of the working class and poor remains a major stumbling block, not only to participation in elections but especially to executing effective struggles.

However, there were several examples of local movements producing radical programmes and fielding proven left-wing and socialist candidates, often with success. In some instances, these were community organisations with histories of campaigning for improved service delivery. Movements that campaigned under the banner of the Cry of the Excluded (such as affiliates of the Assembly of the Unemployed and the Active United Front) registered important victories in a few localities. So too did a few branches of the SRWP, which defied the national leadership by standing in the elections.

With only limited resources, these groups entered the elections as one tactic to advance the struggles of their communities. However modest their achievements, they show that it is possible to win support for a radical programme that challenges the failed policies of the elites. In contrast to the main parties who covet institutional power, these organisations offered more mobilisation and building of movements.

Over the next two years, the ruling elite and their political representatives will make a gargantuan effort to persuade the 70% to support the status quo. They will be asking people to vote for the same parties and policies that were rejected in these elections. The situation demands a Left alternative. An historic opportunity exists to connect various local movements, including those that participated in the elections, to establish a foundation. And on this foundation to build a national movement that can challenge the status quo, principally through mass struggles and campaigns, and possibly also by mounting a challenge in elections.

Noor Nieftagodien is the Head of the History Workshop at Wits University.