

Coalitions and citizen centricity in South Africa: The more things change, the more they stay the same

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How to cite this article:

Nzewi, O.I., 2024, 'Coalitions and citizen centricity in South Africa: The more things change, the more they stay the same', *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 5(0), a230. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jolgr.v5i0.230>

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South African politics has moved from a dominant ruling party in 1994 to coalition governments at both local and national levels, exemplified by the Government of National Unity (GNU)-style Cabinet in 2024.

The first GNU in South Africa, led by the African National Congress (ANC) from 27 April 1994 to 03 February 1997, sought to ensure inclusive governance during the transition from apartheid to democracy (South African History Online 2024).¹ Thirty years later, the ANC has reestablished a GNU in a fragmented political landscape, but now faces an all-time low in public trust because of corruption, service delivery failures, political infighting, and the politicisation of democratic institutions (ANC 2024; Dent 2024; The Conversation 2024).

The decline in support for the ANC was evident as early as the 2016 local government elections, with significant drops in voter percentages across major municipalities, shifting from majority control to coalition governments (IEC 2024; Msenge & Nzewi 2021:6), and culminated in the 2024 presidential elections where the ANC secured only 40.2% of the vote – its lowest since 1994 – amid a notable increase in voter abstention to 41.6% (IEC 2024; The Conversation 2024), highlighting a significant challenge for citizen-focused governance in South Africa.

Unsurprisingly, this year saw a rise in article submissions on coalition local government and citizen-centred governance. Pholoma et al. (2024), in *The influence of unstable coalition governments in Gauteng metropolitan municipalities*, analyse the instability of coalition governments, offering key lessons for the GNU. Similarly, Zweni, Koma and Ndevu (2024), in *Coalition effects on financial and service delivery performance in metropolitan municipalities in Gauteng*, find that these coalitions have adversely affected budgets and service delivery, failing to meet citizens' needs.

Empirical investigations into the phenomenon of coalitions in local government in this edition, reveal a critical issue in local government: although South Africa's local government framework was initially designed with an unwavering focus on citizen upliftment (Nzewi & Sibanda 2023),² the citizen has increasingly become marginalised. Instead, political manoeuvring and political power games have taken precedence, undermining the foundational objective of prioritising citizen well-being in local governance.

Indicating a continued decline in local government political dynamics, this edition features articles addressing the rise of political violence and incivility in local government. Mongale and Venter (2024), in *The nexus between political violence, patronage networks and criminality in the administration of Glebelands hostels, Durban*, reveal that corruption in hostel administration reflects the dynamics of political violence and patronage, threatening human security. Similarly, Takalani and Lavhelani (2024), in *The administrative effects of political killings of officials in South African Municipalities*, argue that political killings signal a deeper crisis in public service dynamics affecting communities. In addition, Ngwimba, Chinyamurindi and Dywili (2024) find in their article, *The role of incivility aggression on decent work: A local government sector case*, that instigated incivility aggression significantly impacts employee performance. This editorial aligns with Takalani and Lavhelani (2024) in advocating for stringent minimum requirements for appointing local government officials, emphasising clear values, standards, and control measures to address South Africa's long-term governance challenges.

1. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/>.

2. See last year's editorial on 25th anniversary of the WPLG.

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In addition to examining South Africa's political governance upheavals, this edition features articles that highlight key administrative, operational, and control measures designed to enhance service delivery and promote citizen-centred governance. For instance, Manuel and Erasmus (2024), in *A sustainable differentiated funding model for South African district municipalities*, propose a funding model for local government that distinguishes between Category 1 and Category 2 district powers, emphasising specific historical and geo-economic contexts rather than a uniform approach. Similarly, Teti, Nzewi and Lungisa (2024) in *The district development model as a catalyst for improved integrated development planning* critique the 'one-size-fits-all' governance strategy, highlighting the need for better coordination and communication, and recommending an open-systems approach that combines agile methodologies with traditional planning methods.

Annual challenges in local government are also evident in poor audit outcomes. Rangwato, Shopola and Molepo (2024) demonstrate in *Analysis of the sustained poor audit outcomes in Mopani District Municipality* that ineffective political leadership and weak internal audit systems impair financial performance. Similarly, Yekani, Ngcamu and Pillay (2024) in *Management and leadership considerations for managing effective monitoring and evaluation systems in South African municipalities* highlight leadership failures that limit workforce capacity, undermining effective monitoring and evaluation crucial for citizen satisfaction and quality service delivery. Focusing on citizen satisfaction and service quality, Muthwa and Matsiliza (2024) in *An assessment of customer perception of water service quality at uMgungundlovu municipality* found that the municipality failed to meet customer expectations in key service quality determinants, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, revealing significant gaps in service provision.

One of the most significant factors influencing citizen satisfaction with municipal services is the level of stakeholder engagement and consideration of service expectations, which is why this journal annually publishes empirical research on re-envisioning public participation, including several articles this year focused on both urban and rural contexts. One such article is Mokoena and Molepo's (2024) research into *Participation in local economic development: Insights from Benoni, South Africa* which reveals that inadequate stakeholder engagement, insufficient action on expectations, and a lack of confidence in leadership have threatened effective public participation in this urban town. Another article titled, *Challenges of public participation in improving basic service delivery in Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo, South Africa* by Matloga, Mahole and Nekhavhambe (2024), explores rural communities' experiences of public participation. In Vhembe, sentiments about poor community engagement and failed service delivery result in a reluctance of citizens to attend service delivery meetings. These studies reveal widespread failures in public participation across rural and urban areas, recommending government investment in community capacity-building and leadership accountability to foster trust and promote active involvement in local development.

Full texts of these articles and more can be found in JOLGRI's 2024 volume. They emphasise the evolving political landscape and the shift in citizen expectations as the euphoria of liberation movements fades. In response, local governments must adopt practical change management strategies, with this year's articles offering innovative recommendations to enhance public service delivery effectiveness. Finally, coalitions reflect citizens' eroding trust in once-revered political parties, serving as a means for them to express discontent with the status quo, highlighting the urgent need for genuine change.

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