

WHY

A single election for all three spheres

WOULD BE A BAD MOVE

The ANC is debating whether to introduce a single election cycle for all three spheres of government. If this idea goes ahead, it means that in 2014 voters will elect representatives for national, provincial and local governments on the same day. The main arguments for this move are that a single election would reduce the costs of elections, facilitate the deployment of senior politicians to municipalities (which is necessary to boost municipal performance), and improve the alignment of planning and budgeting across the three spheres. None of these arguments has merit. On the contrary, this reform would disrupt municipal governance and service delivery. More importantly, it would reduce local elections to the status of mini-national elections, spelling the end of any prospect of real local democracy in South Africa.

At present, national and provincial governments are elected together every five years, and local councils in a separate five-year cycle. In 2010, the Ministry for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs mooted the idea of a single election for all three spheres. A case for a single election was made to the

last National General Council of the ANC, which resolved that further discussion within the organisation was necessary. It is not clear whether that discussion took place at the ANC's recent Summit on Provincial and Local Government, because the report is silent on the matter. Curiously, however, the

summit did adopt a timeline for a review of provinces, which includes the milestone of single national, provincial and local elections in 2014.

There are three reasons why a single election cycle is the wrong idea if we genuinely want to build true local democracy in this country. First, quite apart from the fact that the price tag of local elections is not a good reason for tampering with local democracy, the cost of local elections is already built into the medium-term expenditure framework. There are no additional costs to the fiscus involved here. Rather than reducing government expenditure, a single cycle would very likely result in significant increases in an already high public wage bill. If one of the motives is to deploy senior politicians to local government, then inevitably the pay scale for local politicians would start to converge with the pay scales for national and provincial politicians, because local remuneration would have to increase to compensate senior politicians (ministers or premiers) who are deployed to municipalities.

Secondly, the deployment of politicians onto election lists is an internal party matter that has nothing to do with the local government election cycle. Nothing stops the ANC from deploying its cadres where it wants them to serve. As we are so often told, ANC cadres do not have careers, but serve at the pleasure of the party. To change the election cycle to improve internal party organisation is to conflate party and state. International experience shows that there are often advantages to retaining a political hierarchy in decentralised systems of government. It creates incentives for good local politicians to prove themselves as councillors and then move up the ladder into higher office, bringing their practical experience into policymaking. This is already an established practice at provincial level, where some premiers have been rewarded with Cabinet posts.

Thirdly, the idea that we need better alignment of planning and budgeting across the three spheres has been knocking around for more than a decade. But what exactly does better alignment mean? As things stand, the provincial and local spheres are highly regulated by national legislation, and both are subject to national government's power of supervision. So why isn't the current system of intergovernmental planning and budgeting producing better alignment? And how will improving alignment address the chronic problems which are crippling local government – namely, bad management appointments, maladministration, corruption and weak accountability to citizens?

Neither the ANC nor the government has offered any credible evidence in support of a single election. If anything, there is good reason to think that a single election cycle will

weaken municipal planning, budgeting and accountability even further. The three-month overlap between the local fiscal year and the national/provincial fiscal year actually favours municipal planning because it gives local government certainty about budget allocations. It also allows the Auditor-General to stagger the auditing process pragmatically. The single election cycle would change all this and lead to major changes to legislation, the budget process and public auditing practices.

But the real cost will be to our effort to deepen local democracy in our cities, towns and rural areas. Local elections should be about the local citizens calling local political representatives to account for their performance. Ideally, voters should reward and punish politicians for what they have done or not done. The importance we attach to this direct kind of local accountability is reflected in the fact that local government is the only sphere of government that has direct elections for ward councillors.

Instead, the 2011 local elections will line up as a battle between two national parties for control over the country's municipalities: the ANC fighting the election on a reform agenda, called the turnaround strategy, and the DA out to prove that it is a cleaner, better government than the ANC. The ANC's election manifesto reads like a mini state of the nation, including many promises about many things that have nothing to do with local government.

The local content in these elections will struggle to find a way through the noise of national party messaging. We will get caught up in the ritual warring between the big parties – the rhetoric, code language, insults and slogans – because these are what will dominate the media. How many of us will take the time to look over the commitments that our local representatives made to us in the integrated development plan and check whether those things were done, using the annual report and the Auditor-General's report on the municipality?

There is certainly enough public information out there for voters and the media to put local politicians on terms, if we choose to do so. But a separate round of municipal elections at least allows voters the opportunity every five years to call politicians to account on the issues that most directly affect our neighbourhoods, settlements and lives. A single election would close that space and local affairs would be drowned out altogether by an even noisier national politics.



Derek Powell
Senior researcher