Are the November 2026 municipal elections leading us towards chaos?

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South Africa stands on the threshold of one of the most consequential local government elections since the advent of democracy. As voters prepare to choose representatives for municipalities across the country, they will be confronted not only by the failures of the past, but also by an unprecedented political landscape shaped by more than 500 registered parties, fragile coalition politics, growing public frustration, and escalating political violence. While many hope the elections will usher in a new era of accountability and effective governance, others fear they may instead deepen instability, administrative paralysis and social unrest. This analysis examines the forces driving South Africa toward this political crossroads and assesses whether the 2026 municipal elections are likely to strengthen local democracy—or accelerate the country's descent into governance chaos.

In South Africa, this year, 4 November 2026 to be exact, South Africa goes to the polls in nationwide municipal elections. A total of 508 political parties are registered with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to participate in the metropolitan (8), district (44) and local (205) municipalities (257). This political behaviour is called political fragmentation or party proliferation. The sheer number of registered political parties shows that there is widespread disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the African National Congress (ANC).

Political fragmentation is creating unstable coalition governments that threaten effective local governance. Political Fragmentation happens when a big p political arty breaks apart into a number of small, separate political parties. The most significant of this breakup is the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by Julius Malema, who was expelled from the ANC, and the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP) led by Jacob Zuma, who was recalled as president of South Africa and then expelled from the ANC.

The Patriotic Alliance (PA) was founded in November 2013 by former convicts and businessmen Gayton McKenzie and Kenny Kunene. The party was formed to combat severe issues like gang violence, crime, and poor service delivery, initially focusing on the disenfranchised coloured communities on the Cape Flats. While the founders and early members had various political histories or sympathies prior to 2013, the party itself was formed independently as a new political movement rather than a factional split from another party

Action4SA was formed by Herman Mashaba, who split from the Democratic Alliance (DA) in 2019. Mashaba, the former Mayor of Johannesburg, officially launched the party in August 2020 following his departure from the DA.

Registered Voters & Wards



Number of wards in South Africa per province	
KwaZulu-Natal	921
Eastern Cape	703
Limpopo	568
Gauteng	526
Western Cape	416
North West	402
Mpumalanga	408
Free State	311
Northern Cape	233

Credit: Independent Electoral Commission

Primary causes of political fragmentation

The primary motivations for the staggering number of 508 political parties being registered are due to the rise of coalition politics, the broadening of electoral laws, hyper-localism and disillusionment as well as ideological fragmentation and splintering.

Following the 2021 municipal elections and the subsequent 2024 national elections, South Africa firmly entered an era of coalition governance. Because the dominant African National Congress (ANC) lost its outright majority, small and micro-parties realized they no longer needed millions of votes to hold significant power. Even winning a single council seat can turn a tiny party into a "kingmaker" capable of bargaining for mayoral positions or executive committee seats in deadlocked municipalities.

The introduction of the Electoral Amendment Act legally paved the way for independent candidates to contest provincial and national elections. This structural shift fundamentally lowered the psychological barrier to entering politics, encouraging local community leaders, activists, and break-away factions to formalize their movements into registered political parties to maximize their legislative reach.

A primary driver at the municipal level is deep citizen dissatisfaction with major traditional parties over poor service delivery (such as water outages, roads, and electricity issues). This has led to the rise of community-based and civic organization parties. Rather than attempting to fix national issues, these parties register with the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) to focus strictly on the immediate needs of a specific town, ward, or metro.

The Messiah Complex

Internal friction within South Africa's largest political organizations has led to a domino effect of splinter parties. Disgruntled leaders who lose internal power struggles regularly exit established parties to form their own entities, taking loyal factions of voters with them.

In everyday terms, people often call it the "Saviour Complex" or a "Messiah Complex" when an individual or group believes they are the only ones who can step in and fix everything. This was facilitated by the relatively easy and cheap way to register a political party in South Africa, which encourages many people to try. South Africa's voting system gives smaller parties a real chance to win at least one or two seats in a council, making small parties feel viable. Often, politicians who lose power struggles inside big parties leave to start their own, believing they should be the leader.

With 508 choices on the ballot, voters face a massive "paradox of choice," making it harder to decide. Votes get split into tiny fractions among hundreds of parties, which can cause many votes to be wasted if a party doesn't get enough to win a seat. The more parties there are means that no single group wins a clear majority, leading to messy coalitions where tiny parties hold disproportionate levels of power.

What reliable social research finds

Dr Frans Cronje, CEO of the Social Research Foundation (SRF) sees the 4 November 2026 local government elections as a highly fragmented landscape marked by severe voter dissatisfaction with the ANC, a strong rise in support for the DA in key metros, and a record number of expected hung councils.

Data released by the SRF (in partnership with *The Common Sense*) reveals a highly volatile political atmosphere across South Africa's key metropolitan battleground. In Johannesburg, they find voters are deeply scathing about broken promises by the ANC. The DA leads at roughly 40% support, comfortably outpolling the ANC by nearly 10 points. However, an outright majority for any party remains unlikely. In Tshwane they say the DA holds a slim lead at 45% compared to the ANC's 42%. SRF polling on municipal performance shows that the DA retains a net positive brand for local governance competence (+42%), whereas the ANC faces deeply negative scepticism (-11%). In eThekwini, the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party dominates at 44%. The DA follows at 28%, while the ANC has utterly collapsed in the metro, polling at a historic low of just 8%.

The SRF projects that a record number of municipal councils will be hung (no single party holds a majority). This means the outcome of the elections will almost entirely depend on complex, post-election coalition-building. On a national scale, SRF data shows the gap closing significantly between South Africa's two largest parties. The DA's national baseline has risen toward 25%–28%, while the ANC has slipped to between 35%–39%. SRF's underlying data highlights that a massive chunk of the historic ANC voter base is highly alienated and uncertain. These voters act as "free agents" whose final decisions at the ballot box will ultimately shape the balance of power across the country.

From the frying pan into the fire

The incompetence and failure of the ANC is one thing. Within the context of South African local government, the influx of 508 political parties is highly likely to lead to extreme political instability, administrative paralysis, and governance gridlock rather than outright, lawless anarchy in the streets.

What South Africa is facing is a nightmare of "hyper-coalitions". The era of single-party majorities in major metros and local councils is largely over. Instead, the country is looking at the rise of hyper-coalitions—where a governing executive might rely on the cooperation of 5, 7, or even 10 micro-parties to pass a budget. Political parties that win just a fraction of a percent of the vote (sometimes representing only a few hundred people) will hold massive leverage as kingmakers. They can and will demand powerful mayoral committee seats or control over key municipal portfolios in exchange for their single vote.

When coalitions are built on fragile, transactional deals rather than shared ideologies, they collapse easily. South Africans have already seen a preview of this in Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni, and Tshwane over recent years, where

mayors were ousted every few months via motions of no confidence. This churn makes it impossible to implement long-term service delivery plans, fix infrastructure, or maintain stable municipal management.

The true "chaos" will be felt by residents. When a municipality spends 90% of its energy handling internal political squabbles and renegotiating coalition agreements, basic services collapse. We are likely to see:

- Delays in passing municipal budgets (which can lead to provinces intervening or freezing funds).
- A slowdown in fixing potholes, managing waste, and maintaining water infrastructure.
- Increased vulnerability to corruption as micro-parties demand control over localized procurement tenders as the price for keeping a coalition alive.

Frustration and the battle for the legal "floor"

While the IEC is highly capable of running a logistically sound election day without structural chaos, the aftermath inside the council chambers is bound to be incredibly messy. The IEC's rules allow virtually anyone to register a party if they meet the administrative criteria. However, managing a ballot paper with dozens of choices per ward introduces a high margin for logistical confusion among voters. Once elected, councils often devolve into shouting matches and legal battles over rules of order, rather than functioning legislative bodies.

While saying political assassinations in South Africa are "the norm", this might feel like an exaggeration to those outside the political sphere, but for people working within South African local government, political assassinations have effectively become a systemic, normalized risk.

Data from organizations like the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) confirms that while South Africa's overall national murder rate has actually shown encouraging downward trends in recent quarterly crime statistics, targeted political killings have followed a starkly different, upward trajectory over the last decade.

Political violence in South Africa is a reality

The reality of how political violence has institutionalized itself in South Africa breaks down into a few key areas. Historically, South Africa has a long legacy of political violence, but the nature of it shifted dramatically around 2016. According to GI-TOC tracking data, the country used to average fewer than 20 political hits a year. In 2016, that number jumped to 31, and it has consistently stayed at those elevated levels since, peaking at over 40 in some years. It is no longer an anomaly; it is an established pattern.

"Vast numbers of South African politicians being assassinated"

The normalization of these killings is driven by a harsh economic reality. In a country with high unemployment, securing a seat as a local municipal councillor, a procurement official, or a regional party leader is one of the few guaranteed paths to a middle-class income and control over multi-million-rand budgets. The vast majority of these hits are not rival parties attacking one another. They are internal, factional hits—politicians eliminating rivals within their own party to secure positions on candidate lists or to protect lucrative patronage networks.

The target list has expanded beyond politicians to include municipal managers, forensic auditors, and whistleblowers who try to stop the corruption of local tenders. Contract killing has become highly commercialized and disturbingly accessible. Hitmen (often referred to as izinkabi) are frequently recruited out of the violent taxi industry or local criminal gangs. Because there is a surplus of illegal firearms and a steady supply of desperate, heavily armed criminal networks, hiring a hitman to resolve a political or financial dispute has become a transactional "business solution" in certain regions.

While the threat exists nationally, it is not distributed evenly. KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) remains the undisputed epicentre, accounting for more political hits than the other eight provinces combined over the last decade. However, provinces like the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and parts of the Western Cape are increasingly seeing these criminal methods bleed into their local politics.

The ultimate reason political killings have become normalized is that they work, and perpetrators almost never get caught. While police occasionally arrest the low-level hitmen who pull the trigger, the "masterminds"—the politicians or businessmen who put out the contracts—are almost never exposed or convicted. Nationally, the detection and conviction rate for murder is incredibly low, and with specialized units like KZN's Political Killings Task Team facing restructuring and closure over the last couple of years, the state's capacity to deter these hits remains severely challenged. Killing politicians should also be prohibited in the Electoral Code of Conduct.

According to Wikipedia, since 1994, there have been 60 political assassinations in South Africa, as well as 10 assassinations of sitting government officials. There has been one conviction in response to the fourteen assassinations in Mpumalanga and four in KwaZulu-Natal for forty-two assassinations leading one researcher to

conclude that some people are starting to believe there may be a "general licence for political killings" but that "this may only be available to people in certain political positions".

What conduct is prohibited in terms of the Electoral Code of Conduct?

- Using language which provokes violence;
- Intimidation of candidates or voters;
- Publishing false information about other candidates or parties;
- Plagiarising any other party's symbols, name or acronyms;
- Offering any inducement or reward to a person to vote for a party;
- Destroying, removing or defacing posters of other parties;
- Carrying arms or weapons at political meetings, marches or rallies;
- Bribing voters to vote or not vote;
- Generally abusing a position of power, privilege or influence to influence the outcome of an election.

Who is raising red flags

So, yes, it is highly likely, and unfortunately, we are already seeing political violence happen. As South Africa prepares for the local government elections on November 4, 2026, political analysts and organizations are raising major red flags about a cyclical surge in intra-party and inter-party violence.

At the municipal level, political power translates directly into control over local budgets, job allocations, and lucrative procurement tenders. Because getting on the candidate list can mean financial survival or immense patronage power, the competition within parties—particularly during branch nomination meetings—is often fiercer than the actual race between different parties.

The warning signs are already visible. During the voter registration drive in late June 2026, a series of targeted assassinations shocked the country:

- In Cape Town, a by-election candidate and other political representatives were shot dead.
- In Gqeberha, a ward councillor was gunned down.
- On the West Rand (Gauteng), two politically affiliated individuals were murdered.
- Additionally, reports have emerged of ANC branch meetings in Buffalo City descending into chaos and physical fighting due to disputes over candidate selection, exposing raw factional friction.

The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) has formally called on law enforcement to treat these political killings as "priority crimes." SALGA noted that its Municipal Violence Incident Reporting system shows a clear historical pattern where threats, intimidation, and assassinations intensify drastically in the months immediately leading up to local polls.

With coalition politics becoming the norm and major internal shakeups happening across traditional party lines, the pressure cooker of candidate selection is expected to trigger more localized factional heat as November approaches. Security agencies (NATJOINTS) are currently being urged to deploy heightened police visibility in identified hotspot areas to prevent further escalation

For better or worse?

Whether South Africa will be better off or worse off after the 4 November 2026 local government elections depends heavily on how well local political parties manage the inevitable "coalition chaos". Because these are municipal elections, the immediate impact will not be a sudden shift in the national government, but rather a direct change in your daily service delivery, like water, lights, and road maintenance.

Political analysts, think tanks, and governance experts view the post-election landscape through two very different lenses – the glass half full types and the glass half empty types.

The "Better Off" outlook optimists believe the elections could push the country forward by breaking up failing political monopolies. With the ANC facing sharp declines and opposition parties like the DA recovering in key urban areas, no party can take voters for granted.

The Auditor-General of South Africa has explicitly urged voters to choose capable, ethical leaders to lock in clean governance gains. If, and if is a big word, voters successfully elect community-rooted, accountable leaders, it could revitalize failing municipal administrations. This could lead to a massive turnaround in infrastructure spending and local job creation.

The "Worse Off" Outlook pessimists fear that the unprecedented explosion of 508 registered parties will lead to paralysis. The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) notes that the number of hung councils has

quadrupled in recent years. When there is no outright winner, tiny "kingmaker" parties often demand powerful positions in exchange for votes. This can result in mayors being constantly removed and replaced, leaving city management at a complete standstill. If councils spend all their time playing power games and fighting over municipal resources, basic services stall. Taps could stay dry, rubbish could pile up, and infrastructure could continue to crumble while politicians argue.

How will the GNU react?

The national government will probably manage the post-election landscape using a combination of new legislative restrictions on coalitions, aggressive financial policing, and direct constitutional interventions to prevent total municipal collapse. Because the Government of National Unity (GNU) at the national level relies on stability, it is highly incentivized to stop local government "coalition chaos" from derailing the country's broader economy.

The national strategy involves several specific legal and financial mechanisms.

The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) is implementing the Municipal Structures Amendment Bill. This law introduces strict structural rules designed to end the "mayoral musical chairs" seen in previous years. Political parties that want to form a coalition after 4 November must sign legally binding coalition agreements. These agreements must detail exactly how decisions will be made and how disputes will be resolved. The law introduces strict thresholds to prevent tiny parties from constantly bringing motions of no confidence just to blackmail larger partners for political favours.

National Treasury is shifting from basic training programs to hard structural interventions. Treasury is actively using its powers to freeze equitable share allocations (national funding) to municipalities that fail to manage their budgets, have high vacancy rates for crucial jobs like Chief Financial Officers, or refuse to pay utility debts. Rather than giving cash directly to dysfunctional councils, the national government has launched programs like the Metro Trading Services Reform. National Treasury will directly oversee massive, ring-fenced infrastructure investments for critical services like water and electricity in the major metros, bypassing local political infighting.

If a hung council becomes completely deadlocked and cannot pass a budget or elect a mayor, the national government, working through provincial executives, will step in using Section 139 of the Constitution. The national government will strip local councillors of their power and send an independent administrator to run the town or city's daily business. In extreme cases of total paralysis, the government will completely dissolve the municipal council and force a fresh, localized by-election within 90 days to try and establish a working majority.

To counter the messiness of having hundreds of tiny parties across 257 municipalities, the national state is routing planning through the District Development Model. This model bundles smaller local municipalities into larger district hubs, allowing national and provincial departments to coordinate service delivery directly from above, making local political friction less disruptive

How will the economy be affected?

Based on current political and economic trends, South Africa is likely to experience a sharp divide between urban metropolitan growth and regional stagnation following the 4 November 2026 local elections. Because South Africa's eight metropolitan municipalities generate 55% of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and support over half of all jobs, the financial health of the entire country depends directly on how smoothly these key cities are run.

National Treasury and economic institutions predict the local elections will impact the economy through distinct channels.

The national government is rapidly introducing deep structural reforms, a shift toward hybrid service delivery models, to protect businesses from failing local infrastructure. Instead of letting local political coalitions control utilities, the state is moving toward "hybrid models". This means private companies will increasingly be licensed to co-manage water, electricity, and waste removal. By separating basic utility delivery from broken municipal politics, small businesses can keep operating even if a local council is locked in a political stalemate.

The National Treasury’s Cities Economic Outlook warns that the national economy will be hamstrung if major cities fail to lead in investment. Economists expect the country to split into two economic zones. Metros that quickly form stable coalitions (such as expected DA-led or stable GNU-aligned councils) will see a boost in investor confidence. Improved governance will protect property values, fix logistical bottle-necks, and stimulate local job markets. Towns where councils are frozen by political fighting will suffer heavily. Crumbling infrastructure will force factories and retail businesses to close down or relocate, worsening regional unemployment.

To avoid a massive financial fallout, National Treasury is strictly controlling the national purse through tightened fiscal policing. Treasury will continue enforcing strict budget discipline, keeping its focus on reaching a primary

budget surplus of 1.5% of GDP. National funds meant for infrastructure development will be bypass-routed directly to technical projects rather than given as cash to councils. This protects public money from being wasted on election-related promises or coalition power bribes.

While local elections cause short-term regional disruptions, South Africa's macro-economy is backed by broader stability. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), national growth is projected to steady at around 1.5% for 2026. This stability is driven by lower inflation, dropping interest rates, and national structural reforms (like Operation Vulindlela)—which help cushion the country against localized political shocks

How will citizens likely react?

Citizens are likely to react with a mix of deep political fatigue, a rapid shift toward community self-reliance, and highly localized, service-driven protests. Because voters are exhausted by years of empty political promises, they are increasingly taking matters into their own hands rather than waiting for local councils to fix things.

Data from civic tracking groups like Afrobarometer highlight how South Africans are expected to respond across different communities.

Many citizens have completely given up on local municipalities, are voting with their feet (the rise of self-reliance), and forming independent community networks. In many towns, residents and business owners are funding their own community organizations to cut grass, fix potholes, and secure public parks. Families and businesses that can afford it are rapidly disconnected from municipal services by installing solar power, drilling private boreholes, and hiring private security. In severe cases where towns completely collapse, ratepayer associations are increasingly threatening to withhold their property taxes from the municipality. Instead, they put the money into private trust accounts to pay for garbage collection and road repairs themselves.

A massive portion of the population is reacting to the chaos by simply staying away from the ballot box. Millions of eligible voters, particularly young people, feel that none of the 508 registered parties represent them. Civic research shows that trust in local government is at an all-time low. Many citizens see the explosion of small parties not as a sign of healthy democracy, but as greedy politicians fighting over salaries and government contracts.

For citizens who cannot afford private services, frustration will likely boil over into the streets with localised service delivery protests. If a hung council becomes paralyzed and water or electricity stops flowing, residents will react quickly. Analysts expect a rise in intense, hyper-local protests. These protests are usually not about national politics. Instead, they are direct demands for basic human rights like working toilets, clean drinking water, and reliable electricity.

As a reaction against messy party coalitions, voters show a growing interest in independent, community-led leaders. Many citizens prefer voting for a neighbour they know and trust to run their ward, rather than a big political party managed from a distant head office.

Province	Number of Registered Voters
Gauteng	~6.54 million
KwaZulu-Natal	~5.73 million
Eastern Cape	~3.43 million
Western Cape	~3.31 million
Limpopo	~2.77 million
Mpumalanga	~2.02 million
North West	~1.76 million
Free State	~1.45 million
Northern Cape	~0.65 million
TOTAL	~27,66 million

The Bottom Line

The real test of South Africa's democracy will not be whether voters peacefully cast their ballots on 4 November. It will be whether those elected afterwards can rise above political self-interest and build stable municipal governments capable of delivering the services citizens expect and deserve. If they fail, the greatest casualty will not be political parties, but public confidence in democratic local government itself.

And, if that happens, voter frustration and lack of confidence in local government will collapse. The five years they will have to wait to vote again will exacerbate their dissatisfaction. Five years to 2031 is a long time. And, of course, national elections are due in 2029. Given the balance of probability, it’s going to be rollercoaster ride.

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