



## In brief: South Africa's municipal elections – straws in the wind?

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On 18 May South Africa held nationwide municipal elections. This was the first significant test of electoral popularity since the 2009 national elections. The results of the main political parties, along with their performance in the previous municipal elections, are set out in the table below (accurate as at 25 May):

<i>Party</i>	<i>% of vote in 2011</i>	<i>% of vote in 2006</i>
African National Congress (ANC)	61.95	66.3
Democratic Alliance (DA)	23.94	14.8
Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)	3.57	8.1
National Freedom Party (NFP)	2.41	Not in existence
Congress of the People (COPE)	2.14	Not in existence

South Africa is set to experience a significant increase in coalition politics at the municipal level. The [results](#) confirm that the ANC remains by far the dominant party but that the DA has made significant advances. Meanwhile the KwaZulu Natal-based IFP, from which the NFP has broken away, appears to be on the wane. COPE, which was launched in the run-up to the last state and federal elections by disaffected ANC figures, has virtually imploded. Although they do not feature in the table above as a party or bloc, another important feature of the elections was the emergence of a significant number of groups and individuals at the municipal level which self-consciously define themselves as 'independents'.

Commentators were struck by the unprecedented turn-out for municipal elections at just under 57%. Many have put this down to the fact that, for the first time, the ANC was made to work relatively hard to shore up its position due the relatively strong campaigning performance of the DA. In recent years, the DA has sought to overcome its reputation for being a predominantly white and coloured party with a significant political presence only in the Western Cape. It has also tried to persuade voters that it is no longer just a party of business and is genuinely interested in the concerns of poorer South Africans. Its leader, Helen Zille, has broadened the profile of its leadership. For the first time, the party is beginning to look credibly non-racial in both policy terms and composition. The party won some black wards in Mpumalanga, North West and Limpopo Provinces for the first time. Some estimate that it took about 5% of the black vote in total. The party campaigned by

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using Cape Town and the Western Cape as a showcase of its ability to govern. However, sceptics claim that it was the weak performance of the smaller parties that helped the DA most, rather than its own campaign messages. For all its improved performance, it did not manage to capture any new cities (known as metros).

The ANC remains a formidable political machine. But some of its lustre has been tarnished by continuing failures in the delivery of improved public services in some parts of the country and heightening concerns about official corruption, some of it allegedly involving the Zuma family, and abuse of office. According to one analyst, the ANC's main problem is a growing sense on the part of many that the leadership doesn't care about ordinary people. Parts of municipal government are reportedly **barely functioning**. The president, Jacob Zuma, is viewed with disappointment by those who hoped that his eclipse of Thabo Mbeki would tilt the party leftwards. Relations between it and the largest trade union alliance, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) are once again strained. Some analysts also point to the negative impact of the sometimes inflammatory rhetoric of Julius Malema, head of the ANC Youth League. The ANC's performance in the municipal elections was arguably artificially propped up by its strong showing in KwaZulu Natal Province, where it benefitted from the growing unpopularity of the IFP. The ANC was also cheered by holding onto Port Elizabeth in Eastern Cape Province, which some thought the DA might win.

President Zuma said in a speech he gave during the election campaign: "When you vote for the ANC, you are also choosing to go to heaven. When you don't vote for the ANC you are choosing that man who carries a fork, who cooks people".



Cartoon by Zapiro in the *Sunday Times* (South Africa), 22 May 2011

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The outcome of these elections may not signify anything dramatic in the short term. One **commentator**, Nic Dawes of the *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, has claimed that "cracks" have appeared in the South African political landscape for the first time and that it is possible that these could get wider and deeper between now and the next national elections in 2014. If so, these results could be important 'straws in the wind'. The political staying power of the ANC should never be underestimated, but the party is going to have to up its game considerably if it is to safeguard its hegemony in South Africa.

Further background: Standard Note SN/IA/5224, November 2009, [South Africa: Elections and their aftermath](#); [FCO](#) and [DFID](#) Country Profiles