



+27 21 202 4071

info@ijr.org.za

www.ijr.org.za

Stay updated and follow us on social media



THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

25 August 2026

By Stephen Ndoma

SERVICE DELIVERY IS THE BUZZWORD: WHAT PUBLIC OPINION DATA SAYS ABOUT SOUTH AFRICA'S NOVEMBER 2026 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

On 4 November 2026, South Africans will go to the polls for municipal elections to elect all councilors for eight metropolitan municipalities, 205 local municipalities, and 40% of councilors for all 44 district municipalities. Neither presidential nor premiership candidates will be on the ballot paper, but just ward councilors and the parties that run the country's cities, towns and villages.

A glance at the state of affairs in local government portrays a dire state: no jobs, lack of supply of water, unresponsive councilors and thin trust. The election will decide whether cities become engines of growth or hotspots of failed governance and unemployment. Data from Afrobarometer[i] (AB) Round 10 (conducted in June-July 2025) shows: dearth of trust in local government and frustrated electorate due to poor service delivery.

The message to political parties is clear: win on delivery or lose in an election where stakes are enormous.

The coalition test

Since 2021, coalition government has become the norm in major metros. Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Nelson Mandela Bay - all have been run by fragile multi-party arrangements. AB data shows discontentment with coalition governance as roughly two-thirds (65%) indicated that they would prefer a single party to govern instead of multiple party arrangements. Thus, parties are targeting full control again. The ANC is aiming for 1.2 million votes in eThekweni to govern without smaller parties while Johannesburg's mayoral race will be the one most watched - DA's Helen Zille.



Action SA's Herman Mashaba, Rise Mzansi's Lukhona Munguni, PA's Kenny Kunene and IFP's Mlungisi Mabaso are all in. No single opposition party currently has enough support to dominate metros independently so coalition negotiations will be decisive.

Post-GNU test for national parties

The election will serve as the first municipal election since the Government of National Unity (GNU) formed after 2024. For the ANC, it's a chance to regain ground after dropping to 40% nationally in 2024. MK will contest the elections for the first time. How do South Africans rate the GNU's overall performance as well as the working relationship? Almost four in 10 (39%) say the GNU is performing 'fairly' or 'very badly' while 42% describe the political parties working relationship as bad. The GNU's poor ratings and frayed party relations set the stage for a volatile municipal election and voters will decide whether to reward parties that deliver – or punish those that don't.

Crisis of trust at the local level

After years of collapsing coalitions and broken promises, South Africans are running out of patience with local government and trust in local councillors is at rock bottom: just one in four (26%) of adult South Africans say they have faith at least somewhat trust in their local government councillors meaning about 75% go into this election with skepticism about the very institutions asking for their vote.

With trust at rock bottom, the municipal elections are likely to be about punishment: councillors and parties that failed to deliver water, lights and basic services should expect voters to vote them out and parties assuming 2021 voting patterns will repeat are likely to be in for a shock. Worrisome from the data is that 67% perceive 'most' or 'all' of local government councillors as being involved in corruption: a key sign of a clamor for clean governance. In addition, seven in 10 (70%) disapproved of the performance of local government councillors while only 17% view them as responsive. Thus, November 2026 will be a referendum on garbage collection, water quality, streetlights, and building plan approvals.

Citizens' development agenda

AB data shows that unemployment tops the list at 57%, followed by crime and security (37%), water supply (35%), infrastructure/roads (31%), and corruption (22%). The message is blunt: South Africans are not asking for grand ideology but jobs, safety, water, roads and corruption-free governance. When 57% cite unemployment and 35% name water as top problems and those problems persist year after year, faith in local government collapses. November will test whether that trust can be rebuilt or replaced. Jobs, crime, water, roads and corruption.

That is the ballot paper in voters' heads and everything else doesn't matter. Parties campaigning on national issues alone are likely to miss the point as voters are likely to ask what these parties have fixed at ward level in the last five years.

What this means for November 2026

If parties read AB data correctly, here are three things they must do: campaign on a delivery record, not a promise list – citizens have been able to cite their priorities and the winning parties will be those who can point to five things they fixed in each ward. Specifics beat slogans.

VOTERS ARE SIGNALLING THAT THEY EXPECT RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP, ETHICAL ADMINISTRATION AND VISIBLE IMPROVEMENTS IN SERVICE DELIVERY.

The second important thing is for them to rebuild the councilor - voter relationship as only 17% of survey respondents describe their local government councillors as 'often' or 'always' listening. The responsiveness crisis is evident: and this compels parties to deploy councilors who are visible, accountable and reachable. Monthly ward meetings cannot just be a box to tick; they must solve problems.

There will also be clarion calls for corruption to be tackled as a service delivery issue - Citizens don't separate corruption from potholes given that 'stolen money is a road not built'. Parties that run on clean governance, transparent budgets and consequences for failure will have an edge especially with voters regardless of age.

Conclusion

Afrobarometer Round 10 data paints a picture of a public that is not interested in rhetoric, political theatre, or abstract promises. South Africans are demanding tangible improvements in their daily lives: taps that run, roads that are maintained, refuse that is collected, streetlights that work, and leaders who are accessible and accountable. At the heart of the 2026 municipal elections is a simple but powerful question: Can local government restore public trust by delivering the basic services that citizens have long been promised?

The findings suggest that voters are approaching these elections with a clear hierarchy of priorities. Unemployment, crime, water security, infrastructure and corruption dominate the public agenda, while trust in councillors and local institutions remains alarmingly low. This means that political parties will be judged less on ideology and more on performance. In many communities, citizens are likely to ask not what parties intend to do over the next five years, but what they have already done over the last five.

The elections therefore represent more than a contest for municipal control. Voters are signalling that they expect responsive leadership, ethical administration and visible improvements in service delivery.

Parties that can demonstrate competence, integrity and a proven delivery record stand to gain. Those that continue to rely on slogans, factional battles or national political narratives risk finding themselves out of step with an electorate focused on local realities.

Ultimately, November 2026 may mark a turning point for local democracy in South Africa. Whether through rewarding effective governance or punishing poor performance, voters are likely to use the ballot box to demand a government that works. In this election, South Africans will not simply be voting for parties or councillors. They will be voting for safer neighbourhoods, reliable services, economic opportunity and dignity. Service delivery is not just another campaign issue.

[1] Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Ten survey rounds in up to 45 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys (2024/2025) cover 38 countries. Afrobarometer's National Partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice. The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult citizens between 28 June and 19 July 2025. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 10th standard Afrobarometer survey conducted in South Africa

- **Stephen Ndoma is IJR's Project Leader on Afrobarometer**

PREVIOUS ISSUES



+27 21 202 4071
info@ijr.org.za
www.ijr.org.za

THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

30 April 2026 Column

By Tamuka Chikero (PhD)

WHY THE RETURN OF THE ZIMBABWE BIRD IS MORE THAN REPATRIATION

For a long time, access to some of Africa's most significant historical objects required travel not within the continent itself, but to museums in Europe. This reality reflected a broader colonial legacy in which African cultural heritage was systematically removed, catalogued, and displayed elsewhere. However, across Southern Africa, a shift seems to be underway.

TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF REPATRIATION, ONE MUST MOVE BEYOND VIEWING THESE OBJECTS AS STATIC ARTEFACTS

The return of ancestral remains to the Xhosa and San communities (from the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, and others from 19th Museums in South Africa) and the repatriation of the Zimbabwe Bird (from neighbouring South Africa) signal an important transformation. These developments are not isolated events but part of a broader process in which history is being reoriented toward its rightful place: home.

30 April 2026 COLUMN PAGE 01

WHY THE RETURN OF THE ZIMBABWE BIRD IS MORE THAN REPATRIATION



+27 21 202 4071
info@ijr.org.za
www.ijr.org.za

THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

10 April 2026 Column

By Crystal Oderson

TIME TO RETHINK WATER DEAL, SAYS LESOTHO

Lesotho is signalling it may rethink its water deal with South Africa—an agreement long seen as mutually beneficial, but one that Maseru now says no longer reflects economic or climate realities also raising questions about fairness, pricing, and who really benefits from one of southern Africa's most critical resources.

IN 1986 AT THE HEIGHT OF APARTHEID, A WATER TREATY WAS SIGNED WITH LESOTHO. NO PUBLIC CONSULTATION HAPPENED AT THE TIME

The mountain Kingdom of Lesotho is an independent landlocked country surrounded by South Africa, bordering the Free State province. The former British protectorate had its borders protected against the Boers and achieved its independence in 1966.

The country relies on textiles and diamonds for its economy, but it has an abundance of water. And one thing that Africa's economic powerhouse, Gauteng, lacks in abundance is water. So in 1986 at the height of apartheid, a water treaty was signed with Lesotho.

No public consultation happened at the time between the apartheid state and the landlocked Lesotho. The country now receives millions of dollars in royalties from South Africa, significantly contributing to its GDP. In 2025, Lesotho's GDP was estimated at approximately \$2.4 billion.

10 April 2026 COLUMN PAGE 01

TIME TO RETHINK WATER DEAL, SAYS LESOTHO



+27 21 202 4071
info@ijr.org.za
www.ijr.org.za

THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

30 March 2026 Column

By Tamuka Chikero (PhD)

BEYOND REBURIAL: ADVANCING REPARATIVE JUSTICE FOR KHOI AND SAN COMMUNITIES

On 26 March 2026, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the enslavement of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade as the gravest crime against humanity. This decision brings hope for healing and justice, as it begins to clearly name the harm. This moment connects to what is happening in South Africa with the return of 63 Xhosa and San ancestors. Both events deal with past wrongs that were long ignored. The reburial is moving because it restores a dignity that was taken away, but it is also troubling because it shows how deep the harm of colonialism still is. In the same way that the slave trade is now being recognised, the return of these ancestors asks us to face the past with honesty. This brings us back to one question: is this enough, or is it only a small step towards real justice?

REBURIAL IS NOT JUST ABOUT PLACING BODIES IN THE GROUND. IT IS ABOUT RECOGNISING THAT THESE WERE PEOPLE WITH FAMILIES, HISTORIES AND DIGNITY

Restoring Dignity through Reburial

The return of the remains matters. For many years, the bodies of the Xhosa and San people were treated as objects. They were taken from graves without consent.

30 March 2026 COLUMN PAGE 01

BEYOND REBURIAL: ADVANCING REPARATIVE JUSTICE FOR KHOI AND SAN COMMUNITIES

The opinions or recommendations expressed in this news column are strictly those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.