



Briefing Paper 662

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The 2026 Local Government Elections: A Glimpse into the Future?

1. Introduction

We are, as a nation, counting the days until the 2026 local elections in single digits. It has always promised to be a somewhat different election: the first under the national GNU with its own dynamics;¹ the experiences of coalitions at local level with very varying outcomes; predictions of bigger parties showing reductions in popularity; and small parties jousting for political leverage and hoping to be kingmakers.² All this was compounded by the Constitutional Court's ruling that candidates' lists which were not submitted on time must be accommodated, thus offering thirty two parties an unexpected second chance.³ In addition, there has been a rise in xenophobic activity, ensuring contention, exclusion and social dysfunction in the broader political, and thus electoral, space. Journalist and political analyst, Stephen Grootes, remarks that the fact that so close to the elections there is no dominant narrative is a sign of things to come.⁴ He says: "These polls will reveal whether issues like immigration, crime and violence and the economy will become more urgent, while also revealing whether individual leaders will be able to campaign effectively in the national elections."⁵

2. Local Elections: The Political Landscape

From the word go, it was clear that the issue of foreign nationals was going to be a key consideration in this election. Dr Tendai Mbanjo put it well: "Immigration is a national competence, but anger lands locally: in informal trading, housing queues and clinic waiting rooms. Parties promising tough enforcement will find receptive audiences, and some will be and are campaigning on scapegoating."⁶ Both academic studies and talk on the street strongly suggest that these elections

cannot escape the influence of this issue. The 'anti-undocumented' public face is very visible and consumes a great deal of political oxygen.⁷

An HSRC briefing paper concludes:

"The SA Social Attitudes Survey evidence appears to suggest that people in South Africa have become more antagonistic towards immigrants over the last five years. One important dimension of this change has been an attitudinal shift among poorer and working-class adults. It could be argued that these groups are scapegoating foreign nationals for the failures and inequalities of the post-pandemic economic recovery. Indeed, the national economy has struggled in the last few years, characterised by high unemployment and crime rates, a cost-of-living crisis and persistent deindustrialisation. As experts have argued again, none of these structural challenges can be attributed directly to immigrants living in South Africa. But it would appear that foreign nationals are getting blamed anyway for broader frustrations relating to economic hardship and government performance... Political parties and candidates could attempt to exploit and mobilise anti-immigrant sentiment in an effort to maintain or gain electoral advantage. Given the growth in hostility documented in this media brief and the sobering short- to medium-term global and domestic economic outlook, the potential risk of xenophobic mobilisation (and even violence) during the 2026 elections is a real concern and must be taken seriously."⁸

Wayne Sussman, another political analyst, argues that parties campaigning strongly against illegal immigration are likely to be supported by

sections of the electorate. “So, across the world, we’ve seen parties which take a strong line against migrants, against illegal immigrants... doing well at the polls.” Up until the 2024 general election, immigration had not been a decisive issue, although the Patriotic Alliance and ActionSA were noted for campaigning on illegal immigration. However, he believes that this has shifted, and this could be the first local government election where immigration becomes a significant issue for a large percentage of voters.⁹

These insights give a reasonable sense of the lie of the political land at this point of the election campaign. It is thus important to get a sense of where the parties themselves stand on this critical issue, bearing in mind that there is often a considerable gap between what party manifestos profess and the campaigning rhetoric. It is generally true that the rhetoric on stage is ramped up compared with the language of the manifesto.

3. Party Manifestos: In Plain Sight

Here are some of the policies around foreign nationals in various party manifestos.

The **ANC’s** national proposals seek to combine immigration control with changes to the documentation system. Better documentation can assist both enforcement and protection, depending on how accessible and fair the procedures are. Its emphasis on regulating foreign employment also raises questions about how employers will be monitored and how the rights of legally employed migrants will be protected. The key issue for local government is implementation: a municipality can support lawful inspections and improve service planning, but it cannot itself determine asylum claims or change national immigration status.¹⁰

The **DA’s** accessible 2026 municipal programme frames its central objectives primarily through service delivery, economic opportunity and institutional capacity rather than a specific refugee-protection programme. This distinction matters because general promises about safety and trading regulation do not by themselves establish how a DA-led municipality would handle disputes involving foreign-owned shops, migrant workers or asylum seekers.¹¹

The **EFF** municipal programme addresses several underlying economic conditions that feature in migration debates, but the available evidence does not establish a specific 2026 manifesto commitment concerning refugee documenta-

tion, asylum protection or municipal treatment of undocumented migrants. The unanswered question is how its proposals for employment, local enterprise and municipal economic participation would apply to non-citizen residents and migrant workers.¹²

ActionSA makes immigration enforcement an explicit part of its 2026 local government campaign. At its September manifesto launch, party leader Herman Mashaba promised to use lawful municipal powers to address illegal immigration and to co-operate with the Department of Home Affairs and the South African Police Service where national enforcement authority is required. The party also emphasises stronger municipal law enforcement, municipal courts, action against hijacked buildings and enforcement of by-laws.¹³

The **PA** has made undocumented immigration a central element of its municipal campaign. At its September 2026 manifesto launch, the party argued that municipalities should play a stronger role in enforcing by-laws and regulating local businesses. Its leadership also acknowledged that deportation and national immigration enforcement fall within the responsibilities of Home Affairs and other national authorities.¹⁴

The **IFP** has one of the most detailed, publicly accessible migration-related programmes in its 2026 municipal campaign. Its manifesto launch statement explicitly links what it calls unchecked illegal migration to pressure on services, health-care and local labour markets. It proposes prioritising South Africans in local economic opportunities, reserving the spaza-shop industry for South Africans, enforcing health and business registration rules, addressing unlawful fronting arrangements, and conducting co-ordinated compliance operations.¹⁵

In a Q&A document published in June, the **MK Party** distinguished lawful residents from undocumented migrants. It supported documentation requirements, immigration enforcement, and prioritisation of citizens in jobs, housing and economic participation. It also condemned xenophobic violence and stated that enforcement should be lawful and humane, recognising constitutional and humanitarian obligations.¹⁶

4. Conclusion

As South Africa approaches its 2026 local government elections, the increasingly prominent place of migration in political discourse presents

a profound test of the country's constitutional democracy, moral imagination and commitment to social justice. The central question is not whether the state has the authority to regulate migration, protect its borders, enforce legitimate laws or respond to the concerns of communities experiencing unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing and failing public services. These are the proper responsibilities of democratic

government. Rather, the question is whether political parties will exercise these responsibilities through policies grounded in evidence, constitutional principles, administrative fairness and respect for human dignity, or whether migrants and refugees will increasingly become convenient symbols through which deeper structural failures are explained and political frustrations mobilised.

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¹ <https://www.freiheit.org/liberal-workshop-south-africa/south-african-2026-local-government-election>

² <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/opinion-south-africas-local-government-elections-3-decisive-issues/>

³ <https://smilefm.co.za/local-elections-iec-gives-32-parties-a-second-chance/>

⁴ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-10-14-sas-lack-of-a-dominant-election-narrative-fractures-the-national-voice-before-polls/>

⁵ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-10-04-the-2026-local-elections-will-be-an-early-warning-for-2029/>

⁶ <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/opinion-south-africas-local-government-elections-3-decisive-issues/>

⁷ <https://hsrc.ac.za/news/research-outputs/going-from-bad-to-worse-a-rise-in-anti-immigrant-sentiment-in-south-africa/>

⁸ <https://hsrc.ac.za/news/research-outputs/going-from-bad-to-worse-a-rise-in-anti-immigrant-sentiment-in-south-africa/>

⁹ <https://www.ewn.co.za/local-government-elections-analyst-says-immigration-could-reshape-voter-behaviour/>

¹⁰ <https://www.polity.org.za/article/anc-2026-local-government-manifesto-2026-08-24>

¹¹ <https://www.da.org.za/policy/illegal-immigration>

¹² <https://effonline.org/eff-statement-on-the-defamatory-falsehoods-spread-by-anc/>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1075187028438982>

¹⁴ <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/pa-makes-illegal-immigration-property-ownership-central-to-campaign/>

¹⁵ <https://ifp.org.za/our-national-manifesto/>

¹⁶ https://static.pmg.org.za/MK-Manifesto-The-Peoples-Mandate-Paths-Final-2_compressed_1.pdf

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