Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference
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Seeking Political Maturity

More than one commentator, and indeed the party's own chairperson, Gwede Mantashe, has observed that the steady decline of the ANC's electoral strength over the last few cycles represents a maturing of our democracy. The 'liberation dividend' is wearing off and people are gradually – in some places, quickly – casting aside their old loyalties. In most of the large cities and some of the bigger regional centres, voters are making increasingly hard-headed assessments about which parties are more and less likely to look after their interests. Actual track records are beginning to count for more than mere promises or appeals to former achievements.

But if the voters are maturing in their approach, can the same be said of the politicians? They now have under two weeks to reach governance agreements in seven metropolitan municipalities where no party received an outright majority (Cape Town being the single exception), and in over a hundred local councils where some form of coalition will be needed.

Given that local government is about day-to-day issues – sewage, clean water, proper roads, reliable electricity – and not about major ideological or national policy questions, it should be easy for well-intentioned political leaders to reach agreement on what is in effect power-sharing. To put it another way, they should be looking for the most effective means of honouring the wishes of the voters.

One example of how this could be achieved presents itself in Gauteng. Between them, the DA, the ANC and ActionSA won a fraction under 75 per cent of the vote in the province's three metros. No other party won more than 7 per cent in any of the three. If, therefore, these three parties were each to take the mayoralty of one metro and share out the mayoral committee positions in proportion to their share of the vote, they would be sending a message of co-operation and willingness to compromise, all in the interests of serving the needs of the electorate.

Instead, though, the first utterances of most of the politicians concerned have been about what they won't do – this one won't consider joining a coalition if that one doesn't get rid of a particular leader. The next one has a set of 'red lines' which, it haughtily declares, cannot be crossed. And the next one talks about how best to 'keep the XYZ party out' of any agreement.

The deadline for the parties to reach an agreement is Sunday 22 November. Even with goodwill and a constructive spirit, it would be a challenge to manage coalition negotiations in such a tight time period. But when the starting point is one of implacability and exclusion, it renders the process far more difficult, and calls into question the maturity of those on whom its successful conclusion depends.

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