

YACOOB ABBA OMAR: Big events in next two years will affect coalition politics

The GNU's future could be determined before the ANC policy formulating its national general council is drawn up in December

04 September 2025 - 05:00

The next two years will see big developments in SA that citizens could either watch passively or take an active role in shaping, especially in ensuring that the political centre holds. This becomes ever more urgent as internal political tensions affect coalitions, and especially the government of national unity (GNU).

The key milestones include:

- The December 16 policy formulating national general council of the ANC, which will consolidate its thinking on a range of issues, from the economy to coalition politics. The future of the GNU could be determined by then, with the ANC leaders now considering various options, including tightening the rules of engagement within the present arrangements to prevent a repeat of the theatrics around the passing of the 2025 budget. Choices include an expansion of the GNU to include Build One SA, ActionSA and the National Coloured Congress — parties that supported the passing of the 2025 budget. Also on the cards is ditching the GNU configuration in favour of an alliance with MK party and the EFF, which some, seduced by their left-sounding rhetoric, regard as the ANC's natural bedfellows.
- The DA will hold its triennial elective conference around April 10 2026, with media speculation that its leaders, John Steenhuisen and Helen Zille, will not survive the assault from more right-wing elements of the party because of the role they played in getting the DA into the GNU. The party's significant Cape base prefers following the examples of the Western Cape and Cape Town governments, which the DA has managed to run largely without any alliances. This could mean that the DA consolidates its links with the African Christian Democratic Party and the Freedom Front Plus, with the latter usually voting with the DA to avoid being isolated from its white Afrikaans, right-wing base.
- Between November 2026 and February 2027 SA is due to hold its seventh local government elections since the 1994 general elections. If the GNU survives till then, the election results could well be another moment of deep reflection. The ANC would have to assess whether it has stemmed the tide of vote losses, especially to MK, and whether the SACP's decision to contest the elections independent of the ANC, with the backing of some of the trade union federations, has had any effect. On the DA's side it would have to assess whether the avowedly pro-coloured campaigning of the Patriotic Alliance, which has seen it notch up several successes in previously DA-controlled areas, has seen the "blue machine" haemorrhaging more support. The DA and ANC could be tempted to push for general elections to be held earlier than the scheduled 2029, to determine the makeup of the national and provincial governments.

- The ANC's elective conference is set to occur in December 2027. With its leader, Cyril Ramaphosa, indicating that he will not be available for re-election, this will be an open but hotly contested race. And will the ANC survive what could turn out to be a fratricidal battle?

Calculations based on the outcome of the 2026 local government elections and who emerges as the ANC president may tempt the party to consider calling an early election in 2028. If the DA smells the blood of a wounded ANC, it may itself push for early elections.

Researchers at the Mapungubwe Institute suggest a preferred scenario of “effective consensus”, in which cohesive party leadership combined with improvement in the economy create a virtuous cycle of positive repeated interactions and greater levels of trust, allowing some gains for all party constituents.

However, the more probable “managed conflict” scenario sees party leaders remaining committed to the GNU and responding collectively to various crises to avoid being blamed for governance failures.

As an enthusiast of a citizen-led national dialogue I would like to see the citizenry playing a decisive role in how these configurations help restore confidence in the economy, raise employment and eradicate corruption. The social compact that emerges should be a way to force the parties to commit to holding the centre together.

- *Abba Omar is director of operations at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection.*