

# YACOOB ABBA OMAR | City governance should be a national priority

Urban politics is crucial to economic growth and stability



**The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection's Coalitions Barometer 2026 indicates that the larger, more diverse and more fragmented metros are, the more likely they are to produce councils in which very small parties can hold the balance of power. Picture: Thulani Mbele**

The Coalitions Barometer 2026 of the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (Mistra) dispels the myth that coalition government in South Africa is uniformly chaotic, pointing out that many local administrations have proved durable.

It also underlines that with more than a third of councils hung at some point since the 2021 local government elections, fragmentation is now a structural feature of the political landscape.

Despite the perception that the ANC was on the losing end in the 2021 elections, it was actually the largest party in 117 of the 175 administrations that have run the 80 hung councils. It governs in about two-thirds of coalition-governed councils.

Mistra's recently released geopolitical scenarios report noted that "cities can become cesspools of misery and poverty, or they can serve as engines of growth and opportunity". With more than half the world's population now urbanised, it argues that "cities are a crucial but often neglected level of governance where many of the coming decades' central problems will need to be resolved".

About 71% of South Africans, more than 45-million people, now live in urban areas, and the metropolitan municipalities account for about 55% of national GDP and more than half of all jobs.

International experience shows how city governments can affect economic growth as examples of the "local developmental state". To highlight but one example, Chinese economist Keyu Jin labels the approach adopted by the Chinese municipality of Hefei as the "mayor economy", in which local governments have strong incentives to help promising firms overcome barriers in their locality. It has seen its GDP more than quadruple in 2010-22, while China's doubled in the same period.

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Cities matter democratically too. Alexander Heffner, creator of the podcast *Mayors of the World*, argues in the Economist that mayors have become democracy's most reliable defenders, arguing that competence is harder to fake than outrage. He points out that populist parties surging in national contests in Germany and Portugal have struggled to win city halls.

The South African experience captured in Mistra's barometer indicates that the larger, more diverse and more fragmented metros are the more likely they are to produce councils in which small parties can hold the balance of power. Thus, municipalities with the largest budgets, most complex

infrastructure and greatest economic weight are also the most politically unstable.

King- or queenmaker parties with a handful of seats can secure mayoralalties. Thebarometer notes that the PA won nine mayoralalties without ever being the largest member of its coalition. Johannesburg's rapid turnover of mayors since 2021 is the most visible illustration of what this means in practice: each change resets political priorities, disrupts senior management and erodes the confidence of residents and investors alike.

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Proposals worth considering are building coalitions around programmes of agreed priorities, not exclusions of particular parties, which most parties resorted to against the ANC. Minority governments should have explicit confidence-and-supply agreements, covering budgets and motions of no confidence for a defined period.

There should be a minimum period between motions of no-confidence or a requirement that a motion name an alternative executive, which would curb opportunistic turnover without removing accountability.

Also, fixed-term, merit-based appointment of municipal managers and senior officials, enforced consistently, would protect the technical core of city government from political churn. Metros need predictable fiscal transfers, clearer powers over transport, housing and economic development, and the ability to use their balance sheets for long-term infrastructure.

Treating the governance of cities as a national strategic priority, rather than a local sideshow, may be the most consequential choice South Africa's political leadership makes this decade. Long after the November 4 results have been analysed that may be the most enduring legacy of this year's local government elections.

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