

The state no one can own: Why coalitions may be SA's best safeguard

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Behind every service delivery failure lies a system of appointments, and South Africa's local government elections turn that into a concrete test. Two reform laws aim to take administration out of political hands. Coalition politics may be what makes it possible – not because parties agree on good government, but because none can safely allow another to own the state, writes Rafael Leite.

On 4 November, South Africans vote in local government elections, applying a test more concrete than any campaign slogan. Can their municipalities make the basics work?

In Johannesburg, the question has a shape everyone recognises. The city has spent the year in a water crisis that is the visible end of a longer collapse in its ability, to name only a few, to maintain pipes, collect revenue, keep engineers, and run a billing system that residents trust. Service delivery, the dullest phrase in South African politics, has become the sharpest one.

Pipes do not maintain themselves. Behind every visible service delivery failure is an administrative system that decides who manages the utility, whether the engineers stay or leave, who controls procurement, and whether an official can refuse an instruction that should be refused.

South Africa has been forced to confront that system in public, through the Zondo Commission and everything that has followed. It does not offer a model to copy. It offers an unusually clear view of how control over appointments becomes control over the state, and of how difficult that control is to unwind.

The global debate on state capacity, which has grown loud in the past two years in Washington, Berlin, and elsewhere, is only now catching up with the question South Africa has been living with. Who gets to run the state, how are they chosen, and what protects them when politics turns predatory?

State capture was not a story about a few corrupt officials. It was a story about how the state is staffed. Boards of state-owned companies were filled based on loyalty rather than competence. Directors-general and municipal managers were chosen, moved, and removed for reasons unrelated to their ability to do the job.

Officials who said no were sidelined, suspended, or removed, and everyone else learned the cost of resistance. The rules differ by level, and precision matters here. National and provincial departments fall under the Public Service Act, municipalities under their own legislation, and state-owned companies under company and public finance law. But the political problem ran through all of them, because the same logic of the post as a reward had reached each of them.

Devolving powers

That is why the two laws President Cyril Ramaphosa signed in March 2026 matter more than the attention they received.

The Public Service Amendment Act and the Public Administration Management Amendment Act devolve personnel powers from ministers to heads of department, clarify the authority of the president and the premiers over those heads, give the director-general in the Presidency a stronger coordinating role, and tighten the rules that stop public servants from doing business with the state.

These amendments will not fix Johannesburg, whose administration is governed by different laws. But they test the same proposition: whether political leaders can surrender control over administration without surrendering the right to govern. Neither is in force yet. Both wait for regulations and for a proclamation. They represent promising intentions, but they remain only promises until they are implemented.

South Africa has been here before. The professionalisation framework the Cabinet adopted in 2022 was announced in the same language, and its implementation since has been limited and uneven. The local debate has therefore moved, or should have moved, from why reform is necessary to how it will be implemented, and to the harder question of whether a government of national unity can carry through what has been legislated. That is exactly the stage at which most reforms of this kind fail, and it deserves more public argument than it is getting.

South Africa is not alone in asking these questions. Wealthy democracies are rediscovering a problem this country has lived with for years.

In the US, pandemic-era failures pushed an existing argument about housing, infrastructure, and administrative bottlenecks into the political mainstream under the name of abundance. Then came the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which placed administrative reform at the centre of a new government, handed it to the richest man in the world, and failed by its own criteria. The Government Accountability Office found that DOGE's published savings rested on undisclosed methods and claims that could not be verified, and the agencies it cut are still counting what they lost.

The lasting consequence is that figures on both the left and the right in the US now treat state capacity as their own problem, with New York's new mayor, Zohran Mamdani, convening a Commission on Government Efficiency this year.

In Germany, the coalition that took office in 2025 created a Ministry for Digital Affairs and State Modernisation. German foundations, business associations, civic initiatives, and the parties themselves have come to treat the modernisation of the state as a priority among the multitude of changes required to address populism rather than merely denounce it.

None of this is new. The link between administrative reform and democracy was a recognised branch of statecraft after World War II, when newly independent countries established civil service commissions and schools of administration, and again in the 1980s, when Latin

American governments emerging from dictatorship treated the professionalisation of their bureaucracies as part of the return to democracy.

By the late 1990s, even the international financial institutions, chastened by the adjustment programmes of the previous decade, had come round to the view set out in the World Bank's 1997 World Development Report.

A state that cannot collect taxes, enforce contracts or run a school cannot keep the promises that make democracy worth having.

In the new Anglo-American debate, that history is largely forgotten, and African countries still appear more often as subjects of capacity building than as sources of institutional knowledge. In my own work across Brazil, Germany and South Africa, I am struck by how rarely these debates read each other, even when they describe the same problem.

The more useful comparisons for South Africa, then, are not in Washington or Berlin. They are in places that attempted reform under pressure, without waiting for stable politics or ideal conditions.

The importance of continuity

Medellín, in Colombia, in the early 2000s was a city in deeper crisis than Johannesburg is today, with a homicide rate that made it a byword for urban collapse. Its transformation across successive administrations depended on a degree of continuity in professional management, a durable public utility with real autonomy, and long-term plans that survived changes in political leadership. The mayors who ran the city during that period say the continuity mattered more than any single decision.

Peru is a closer case. In 2013, it passed a civil service law, with SERVIR, its civil service authority, responsible for the transition. It moved fast for two or three years, then slowed to a crawl as the country went through president after president, and the reform is still incomplete more than a decade on. That is not a story of failure. It is what reform looks like in an unequal democracy with weak parties, frequent political crises, and a state that must keep working while it is being rebuilt.

It is a country that resembles South Africa far more than the wealthy democracies now rediscovering the subject, and far more than China, whose administrative capacity operates without civil rights, open political contestation, or a separation of powers, making it a poor guide for anyone who wants all three. If South Africa is looking for a realistic picture of what its own amendments will demand over the next 10 years, Lima is a better mirror than Washington.

Changing the terms of the conflict

The lesson from these cases is that reform does not begin when conflict ends. It changes the terms of the conflict. Administrative reform is often discussed as if the right evidence, the right design and enough dialogue will eventually produce consensus. But a reform that changes nothing for those who already hold power is usually not much of a reform.

Moving appointment powers away from ministers, taking shortlists out of party networks, or protecting a municipal manager from an incoming council means that somebody loses discretion, positions to distribute, and, sometimes, access to contracts. Those actors will not necessarily be persuaded by a better policy paper. If reform waits until they agree, it may wait forever. Consensus is sometimes the result of new rules, not the condition for adopting them.

This is why South Africa's transition to multiparty government, noisy as it is, may be more promising than it first appears.

Coalition politics is what most democracies actually look like, and the country is now closer to that world than it has been since 1994. The change matters for the state, not only for Parliament. A party that expects to govern indefinitely has little reason to accept rules that limit its control over the administration. It expects to make today's and tomorrow's appointments. In a system in which governments depend on coalitions and the office may pass between parties, the calculation changes. No party can be certain that it will control the next appointment. A rule that constrains it in government may protect it when a rival takes office. Impersonal institutions begin to look less like an obstacle and more like insurance.

Medellín and Peru show the two directions political competition can take.

In one, governments changed while institutions accumulated capacity. In the other, each change of government reopened the contest over the administration, with every new president treating the posts as their turn at the table, and the reform initiated in 2013 has been slowed as much by that as by anything else. Greater competition does not guarantee a professional state. It can turn appointments into bargaining chips and spread patronage across a larger number of parties. But it creates an opening that did not exist in the same way when one party expected to govern forever.

South Africa's parties may come to support common rules not because they have reached an abstract consensus on good government, but because none of them can safely allow another to own the state.

The opportunity is not that political conflict has disappeared. It is that no party can safely assume it will own the state forever, which may be the best moment to build a state that none of them can own.

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