

Experts agree that South African local government sphere has failed, politicians wield too much power



Voters casting their ballots during last year's local government elections. Picture: Leon Lestrade/African News Agency (ANA)

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Durban - Some prominent local government experts agree that the South African local government sphere is in trouble and it appears that the system has reached a point of no return.

The experts from the University of North West's school of government studies also agree that citizens have the right to demand services but do so within the ambit of the law.

This was said on Wednesday during an online media event titled: Are our municipal ships sinking?

Three experts from the university in Tlokwe, Professor Kedibone Phago, Dr Christa de Wet and Dr Frank Lekaba made input.

Taking the floor first, De Wet said citizens have a right to demand quality services from municipalities but that must be done with respect and in compliance with the law.

Lekaba said the future of South African municipalities is bleak and with unstable coalition governments taking over everywhere, the future looks even bleaker.

According to Lekaba, the failure of the local government structure reflects on the national government since all policies are made from Pretoria and rammed through to municipalities for implementation.

“That is why in some of the municipalities the national government will revoke sections that will take the administration of those particular municipalities and provinces. It is within that context that I argue that the future of our municipalities is tied to the future of the provincial and national government spheres of provincial and national governments.

“The lack of service delivery at local government reflects also the competency of the provincial and national (governments) and that is my argument. The municipality for me is just an implementing agency both for the provincial and national government policy directives, thus the failures reflect upon both.

“With the state of service delivery, unaccounted waste(ful) expenditure paints a bleak future of us as a country. This could be worsened, among other things, I argue, by seemingly unstable governments.

“It appears that in the future of governments, and coalitions could be the future, it is something we cannot avoid ... It appears that service delivery has reached a point of no return. Of course, this could be exacerbated by coalitions, as I have said, in both the provincial and national spheres of governments,” Lekaba said.

Lekaba lamented that in all the mess in the local government sphere, politicians are wielding immense powers to the extent that they can determine the future of municipal officials with the stroke of a pen.

Echoing Lekaba's sentiments, Phago said most municipalities in South Africa have failed in their constitutional mandates and it was surprising that officials were still getting bonuses.

“Municipalities over the years, if the reports from the AG ... are anything to go by, can we agree, colleagues, that many of these municipalities in South Africa have violated their constitutional mandates. There have not been sufficient consequences from the citizens or from the government system overall.

“And of course, we have experienced poor performance across the board and with this poor performance, at the same time we have seen or find municipal managers and senior municipal managers receiving bonuses, performance bonuses,” he said.

He said the Auditor General's reports were giving a clear picture of the country's municipalities and that the office should be equipped with teeth to bite.

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