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Viable opposition is good for democracy

Political affiliations aside, the results of the recent municipal by-elections are an encouraging sign that South Africa's democracy is maturing. The official opposition, which remains in power in the metropole of Cape Town and is now in direct control of 18 councils in three provinces, managed to garner almost 24% of the vote in a remarkably high turnout for a local government election. This affords the electorate the opportunity to compare the track records of different parties at local government level before the next election.

Coalition governments will serve in several municipalities, affording different, but no less significant, possibilities. In historically polarised societies such as South Africa, taking joint responsibility could not only contribute to nation building, but also improve the governance performance of all participants.

Perhaps most significant is that South Africans no longer appear to be voting solely on racial lines. By abandoning the negative 'fight back' agenda of her immediate predecessor, opposition leader Helen Zille has enabled Black South Africans to embrace support of the Democratic Alliance. In doing so, she is enabling it to become perceived as a viable alternative to government. For too long (ever since 1948), South African politics has been dominated by a single party – first the National Party, and then the African National Congress. Single-party domination is generically bad for democracy, as it breeds cronyism.

In mature democracies, most governments are assessed by their electorates on the basis of 'delivery' issues. But in South Africa in the past, issues of race and loyalty have prevailed. The presentation of viable alternatives – whatever form they may take – at local government level across the country should convince the electorate that democracy is about making choices related to performance.

Rest in peace Pebble Bed Modular Reactor

One of the few decisive actions of the Zuma government was last year's brave decision by then Minister of Public Enterprises Barbara Hogan to withdraw from the Pebble Bed Modular Reactor (PBMR) project, which had consumed R8.8 billion of government funds since its commencement in 1999. Of these, R6 billion had been allocated over the three-year period between 2007 and 2010 in terms of the government's medium-term expenditure framework, specifically for the construction of a demonstration plant. The rationale for this was that once the technology was proven to be functional, foreign investment would be forthcoming.

The main reason for government's withdrawal was that at the completion of this period in February 2010, the demonstration plant had not been constructed. So it was unsurprising that neither of the two conditions set by parliament for continued support were met: that by February 2010, the project needed to have attracted both additional private investment and an international customer to whom they would sell plants. The remaining (crucial) question is why parliament approved the second and third installments of R2 billion each, in the face of no tangible evidence of progress in the construction of the plant. In particular, R2.7 billion in direct costs associated with the demonstration plant (i.e. not including salaries or corporate costs) remains unaccounted for. Alistair Ruiters, chairman of PBMR and former Director-General in the Department of Trade and Industry during the tenure of Alec Erwin as minister there, declined to elaborate to this journal on how this money was spent (<http://www.sajs.co.za/index.php/SAJS/article/view/287/337>).

Never one to miss an opportunity, in the wake of the recent Japanese nuclear disaster, Erwin, who as Minister of Public Enterprises between 2006 and 2008 was the driving force behind this expenditure, has remarked that he is 'very disappointed' and 'angry' at the decision to close down the PBMR. He believes that the country has foregone its opportunity to contribute to the safer nuclear technology that the world requires (<http://www.businesslive.co.za/Feeds/businessimes/2011/04/02/bye-to-cabinet-hello-to-business>). While the jury is still out on the merits of small-scale nuclear reactors – of which pebble bed reactors are one option – it was clear that South Africa's PBMR company was not going to provide a timely solution. Disappointed Mr Erwin may well be, but it is the South African taxpayers whose prerogative it is to be angry.

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