



LAUNCH OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS 2021

9 JUNE 2021

SANDTON CONVENTION CENTRE

ADDRESS BY CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER MR SY MAMABOLO

Introduction

Thank you Programme Director.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Let me add my voice of welcome to our all our dignitaries, honoured guests and fellow South Africans watching this event on television and digital channels.

As noted by the Chairperson, these are indeed unprecedented and challenging times. Almost no aspect of our preparations have been unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact across every aspect of our lives.

Yet despite the challenges, set-backs and obstacles which the pandemic has thrown at us over the past 18 months, I am pleased to report that the Electoral Commission remains very much on track to deliver an election of the quality envisaged in the Constitution.

The journey to this election began more than two years ago with the ward demarcation process by the Municipal Demarcation Board which determines ward boundaries for the Municipal Elections.

Despite this process being considerably affected and delayed by the pandemic during 2020, the MDB was able to provide the final ward boundaries to the Electoral Commission in two batches – on 30 September and 1 December last year. We are indebted to the Board for co-operative manner in which the undertook this responsibility.

The final ward count is 4 468 – an increase of 76 wards compared to 2016. This hand-over allowed the Electoral Commission to begin with its final preparations in earnest which included finalising the 23 151 voting districts. This is 539 more than in 2016 or an increase of 2.3 percent.

This increase, while modest, further extends accessibility to voting and registration processes to our citizens. Over the past 21 years since the 1999 elections, the number of voting stations has increased almost 60 percent.

Complexity and scale of Municipal Elections

Ladies and gentlemen

Preparing for and delivering Municipal Elections is by far the most complex and multifaceted undertaking of the Electoral Commission. Where National and Provincial Elections involve the simultaneous conducting of one national and nine provincial elections resulting in the election of 830 representatives in the national and provincial legislatures, Municipal Elections involve 4 725 unique elections and unique ballot papers comprising:

- 4 468 ward elections;
- 205 PR elections in local councils;
- 8 PR elections in metro councils; and
- 44 district council elections

The end result will be the election of almost 10 500 councillors.

Based on numbers from 2016 and the recent flurry of party registrations especially at local level which the Electoral Commission has been experiencing, we anticipate that more than 200 political parties and over 65 000 candidates will contest this year's elections. This can only attest to the vibrancy of local democracy in the country.

Voters' roll

Ladies and gentlemen

A crucial part of our preparations for any election is the maintenance and expansion of the national common voters' roll. Ensuring that every eligible citizen is properly registered in the correct ward forms the foundation for the integrity and ultimate credibility of the elections.

The Electoral Commission has spent the past five years since March 2016 engaged in a comprehensive programme to update the voters' roll with address details following the ruling of the Constitutional Court.

We are pleased to report that massive progress has been made in this regard. In March 2016 we had complete addresses for just 8.5 million or 33 percent of the voters' roll. Today this stands at 24.2 million or 92 percent.

Of course, this is an on-going endeavour and the Electoral Commission continues in its quest for the most accurate and up-to-date voters' roll possible. Despite our best efforts, there are still over 1.5 million registered voters for whom we do not have address details.

It is our fervent hope that through the voter registration mobilisation campaign being launched today – and with the continued support and assistance of political parties, the media, civil society and other stakeholders – that we can make further significant advances in this area.

That said, we are pleased to note the assenting to the Electoral Laws Amendment Bill last week by President Cyril Ramaphosa which, among others, provides a special dispensation

to allow any registered voter without address details to still participate in the elections once they have provided address particulars on Election Day (subject to integrity measures).

The integrity of the voters' roll is, however, not just about addresses. Participation in elections is another important factor in the success and credibility of the outcome.

In support of this we are today launching a nation-wide communication and mobilisation initiative to encourage every eligible voter to ensure they are ready to participate in the October elections.

To this end, the campaign will encourage existing voters to check and update their registration details and will urge new, first-time voters to register. This will culminate in a single voter registration weekend during which all 23 151 voting stations will open on Saturday 17 July and Sunday 18 July between 8am and 5pm to facilitate this process.

As always, South Africa's youth will be a key target of this campaign and other initiatives including outreach activities at school, campuses and other venues where young people gather (including online).

Based on population estimates from Statistics South Africa, we estimate that nearly 15 million eligible voters are not currently registered to vote of which almost 9 million or 60 percent are under the age of 30.

This is not necessarily a reflection of so-called "apathy" by young people. Young voters have had fewer opportunities to register than older voters – with millions only qualifying for registration over the past 24 months since the last major voter registration drive.

Secondly, the youth of today are used to operating within a digital and online environment and frequently seek a more convenient and accessible option for registration. The Electoral Commission is currently working with political parties within the National Party Liaison Committee to finalise alternative and additional modalities for registration and we hope to make announcements in this regard soon.

Innovations for Municipal Elections

Distinguished guests

Innovations form part of the Electoral Commission's broader utilisation of new technology to enhance all aspects of the electoral process.

Among the major innovations to be implemented for this year's Municipal Elections is the introduction of new Voter Management Devices to replace the aging fleet of "zip zip" scanners used over the past 15 years.

The Electoral Commission is in the process of taking delivery of 40 000 new generation devices which we believe will significantly enhance the speed, accuracy and integrity of the voter registration and participation process.

To date we have taken delivery of 10 000 devices which are being used to train election officials for use during the voter registration weekend and other registration initiatives. These devices allow for the instant electronic capture of voters' registration details including addresses and, where network coverage allows, to help check that the voter is registered in the correct ward using GPS technology.

Their use goes beyond voter registration. Crucially on election day, the devices will provide access to a real-time voters' roll which will allow election officials to detect if any voter has already presented themselves at a voting station to vote. This should put paid to any lingering concerns about possible double voting.

In addition, the devices will assist us ballot paper tracking, managing electoral staff attendance registers and other administrative requirements.

Other innovations for these elections include:

- a new more accessible public website
- the introduction of e-Learning modules for the training of election staff; and
- an e-Recruitment platform for hiring election staff

Conclusion

Distinguished guests

In his opening remarks the Chairperson highlighted some of the many uncertainties and challenges which still await us as we move towards the election.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cast a long and dark shadow over not just the elections but every aspect of our lives. In this regard safety protocols must form an integral part of our preparations and the delivery of every aspect of the electoral process.

These measures have been developed in line with global and local health protocols as well as drawing of the experience of many countries around the world and on our own continent which have successfully conducted elections under COVID conditions.

We have had the opportunity to test these in more than 150 by-elections over the past seven months and are confident that when adhered to, they provide effective protection for voters, election staff, party agents, observers and others.

We appeal to all voters, all political parties, to all observers, to the media and to all freedom-loving South Africans to work with us as we navigate these uncertain waters.

Let us once again rise up as a nation in solidarity and support for democracy to show the world that 27 years on, democracy is alive and thriving in Mzansi!

Every voice together!

Let's register!

Let's vote!

I thank you.