The Constitutional Promise vs. Governance Reality: An Analysis of Mossel Bay’s Single-Party Dominance and Rates Increases

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Executive Summary

The South African Constitution envisions a multi-party system of democratic government designed to ensure accountability, responsiveness, and openness [1]. At the local government level, municipal councils are entrusted with the critical mandate of providing democratic, accountable governance and sustainable service delivery [2]. However, the reality of municipal governance in South Africa often diverges from this constitutional promise, particularly in municipalities characterised by single-party dominance.

This report investigates the governance dynamics in the Mossel Bay Local Municipality following the 2021/2022 local government elections. It examines the Democratic Alliance's (DA) campaign narrative—which asserted that an outright majority was necessary for effective governance—and contrasts this with the subsequent period of reduced multi-party oversight. The report analyses the financial impact on ratepayers, specifically highlighting how municipal rates and tariff increases have significantly outpaced national inflation, and explores the broader argument that multi-party or coalition governance provides essential checks and balances against single-party dominance.

1. The 2021 Mossel Bay Election and the DA's Majority Narrative

In the November 2021 South African municipal elections, the Democratic Alliance (DA) secured a decisive victory in the Mossel Bay Local Municipality. The party won 19 of the 29 available council seats, achieving a 66.32% outright majority [3] [4]. This outcome solidified Mossel Bay as a key stronghold for the DA in the Western Cape, representing the municipality with the greatest DA majority in the province at the time [5].

During the election campaign, the DA's core messaging heavily emphasised the necessity of an outright majority to govern effectively and prevent the instability often associated with coalition governments [6]. The party argued that total control of the council was required to implement their "Grow Agenda," ensure unhindered service delivery, and maintain financial stability without relying on minor parties [7].

While this narrative successfully resonated with the electorate, securing the requested mandate, it inherently reduced the capacity for robust horizontal accountability within the municipal council. With a commanding 19-seat majority against a fragmented opposition consisting of the African National Congress (ANC) with 5 seats, the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) with 2 seats, and single seats for smaller parties [3], the DA effectively neutralised the opposition's ability to challenge executive decisions, budget approvals, or major infrastructure projects through council votes.

2. The Financial Impact: Tariff Increases vs. Inflation (2022-2026)

Following the consolidation of its majority, the Mossel Bay Municipality embarked on an aggressive infrastructure expansion programme. However, the financial burden of this "Grow Agenda" has been increasingly shifted onto the existing ratepayer base through sustained, above-inflation tariff and rates increases.

2.1 National Inflation Context

To contextualise the municipal increases, it is necessary to examine South Africa's national Consumer Price Index (CPI) over the same period. According to Statistics South Africa, the annual average inflation rates were:

- **2022:** 6.9% [8]
- **2023:** 6.0% [8]
- **2024:** 4.4% [9]
- **2025:** 3.6% (Lowest in 21 years) [10]

2.2 Mossel Bay Tariff Increases

Despite the downward trend in national inflation, Mossel Bay ratepayers have faced consecutive years of substantial tariff hikes.

Financial Year	Electricity Increase	Water Increase	Property Rates Increase	Refuse/Sewerage	National CPI
2022/2023	7.0%	7.3%	N/A	N/A	6.9%
2023/2024	14.9%	14.4%	13.0%	9.0%	6.0%
2024/2025	12.7%	3.0%	13.0%	7.0% / 9.0%	4.4%

Financial Year	Electricity Increase	Water Increase	Property Rates Increase	Refuse/Sewerage	National CPI
2025/2026	8.5%	5.8%	5.8%	5.5%	3.6%

Data sourced from official Mossel Bay Municipality budget documents and mayoral newsletters [11] [12] [13] [14].

2.3 The Cumulative Burden and Fixed Charges

The compounding effect of these increases over the 5-year term has resulted in a significant financial shock to residents. For instance, the 13% property rates increases in consecutive years (23/24 and 24/25) were more than double the national inflation rate.

Furthermore, civic organisations like MossRates have highlighted the municipality's increasing reliance on high "fixed monthly charges" for basic services (water, electricity, sewerage) [15]. These compulsory fixed charges act as a regressive tax, disproportionately affecting pensioners and middle-to-lower-income households, regardless of their actual consumption or efforts to save resources (e.g., installing solar panels) [16].

Local ratepayer associations argue that the municipality is using these above-inflation hikes and fixed charges to fund massive bulk infrastructure projects (such as the R45 million Vaale Vallei Reservoir and R122 million in electrical upgrades) designed to unlock private, speculative mega-developments [17]. The assertion is that the costs of growth are being socialised onto existing ratepayers, while the profits are privatised by developers [17].

3. Constitutional Oversight and the Failure of Single-Party Dominance

The financial trajectory of Mossel Bay raises critical questions about the efficacy of municipal oversight in a single-party dominant council.

3.1 Constitutional Provisions

Section 1(d) of the South African Constitution establishes the Republic as a democratic state founded on a "multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness" [1]. Section 152 further mandates local government to provide "democratic and accountable government for local communities" [2].

To operationalise this, the Municipal Structures Act and the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) establish oversight mechanisms, primarily through the Municipal Public Accounts Committee (MPAC) and the Audit Committee [18]. The council, as the legislative authority, is ultimately responsible for holding the executive (the Mayor and Mayoral Committee) accountable [18].

3.2 The Democratic Deficit in Dominant Councils

However, academic research and governance institutes have consistently shown that in South Africa, single-party dominance severely weakens these horizontal accountability mechanisms [19] [20]. When a single party holds a supermajority (such as the DA's 66% in Mossel Bay), the distinction between the executive and the legislative oversight body blurs.

In practice:

1. **Rubber-Stamping:** Council proceedings, including the approval of controversial budgets with above-inflation hikes, risk becoming ritualistic endorsements of executive decisions rather than robust arenas of scrutiny [20].
2. **Weakened MPACs:** Because MPAC members are appointed by the council (dominated by the majority party), there is often a lack of political will to aggressively investigate or challenge the financial decisions of their own party's executive [18].
3. **Public Participation Crisis:** Ratepayers in Mossel Bay have reported that public participation processes, such as Integrated Development Plan (IDP) consultations, have become mere procedural compliance exercises. Civic groups allege that critical questions regarding infrastructure affordability and tariff justifications are frequently ignored or met with narrative control tactics by the municipality [21].

4. The Case for Multi-Party and Coalition Governance

In contrast to the DA's 2021 campaign narrative that an outright majority is essential for stability, emerging political theory and recent electoral shifts in South Africa suggest that multi-party or coalition governance may offer superior democratic safeguards.

4.1 Enhanced Checks and Balances

While coalition governments can be volatile if poorly managed, they inherently enforce the constitutional ideal of multi-party oversight [22]. In a council with no outright majority, the executive cannot unilaterally force through budgets, tariff increases, or major capital expenditure without negotiating and justifying these actions to coalition partners or the opposition [23].

This dynamic creates a structural check on executive power. As noted by the Dullah Omar Institute, coalitions can "strengthen democracy by providing multiparty oversight and reducing unilateral executive dominance" [24]. In the context of Mossel Bay, a multi-party council would likely have subjected the aggressive infrastructure spending and subsequent 13% rates hikes to far more rigorous debate and potential modification.

4.2 Electoral Pushback

There are indications that voters are beginning to push back against single-party dominance when it fails to deliver accountable governance. In a June 2025 by-election in Mossel Bay's Ward 9, the Patriotic Alliance (PA) achieved a shock victory over the DA, taking a previously safe DA seat [25]. This result, driven by a surge in voter turnout, signals growing frustration among certain demographics with the incumbent administration and a willingness to diversify political representation to enforce accountability [25].

5. Conclusion

The case of the Mossel Bay Local Municipality between 2022 and 2026 illustrates a profound tension between political stability and democratic accountability. The DA successfully campaigned on the premise that a total majority was required to govern effectively. However, the resulting single-party dominance created an environment where robust council oversight was structurally weakened.

Consequently, the municipality pursued an aggressive, developer-driven infrastructure agenda funded by the existing ratepayer base. By implementing consecutive tariff and property rates increases that vastly exceeded national inflation—coupled with inescapable fixed monthly charges—the municipality placed severe financial strain on its residents.

This scenario highlights a fundamental vulnerability in South Africa's local government architecture: when the constitutional promise of a "multi-party system" is replaced by absolute single-party control at the municipal level, internal checks and balances often fail. To protect ratepayers from unchecked fiscal policies, there is a compelling argument that multi-party governance, despite its complexities, remains a vital mechanism for enforcing the transparency, responsiveness, and accountability envisioned by the South African Constitution.

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