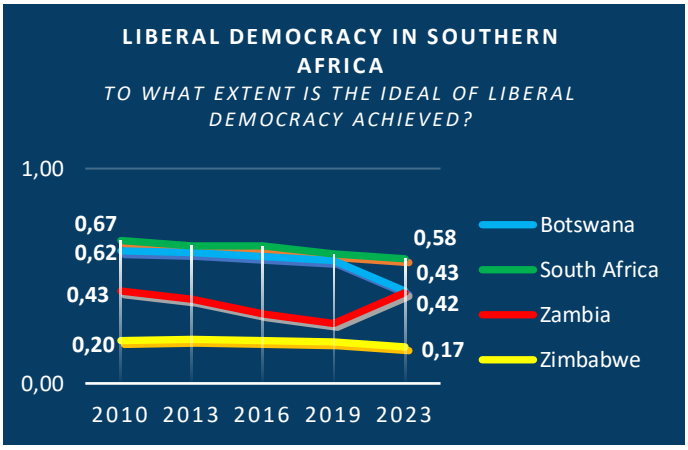
Country Brief
South Africa

Electoral democracy

COUNTRY INDICATORS

Population: 60.042 million (WB)
Urban population: 68% (WB)
Urban population growth (annual): 2% (WB)
Access to water: 94% (WHO-UNICEF)
Access to electricity: 84.4% (WB)
Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 births): 32 (WB)
GDP (current US$): 419.946 billion (WB)
GDP per capita, PPP (current Int$): 14,420 (WB)
Presence of Violence: none (UCDP)
Global Freedom Status: Free, score 79 (FH)
Corruption Perception Index: score 44, rank 70/180 (TI)
Human Development Index: High (0.713), rank 109/191 (UNDP)
Local Government Association: South African Local Government Association (SALGA)

Figure 1



Source: V-Dem Institute (2024)

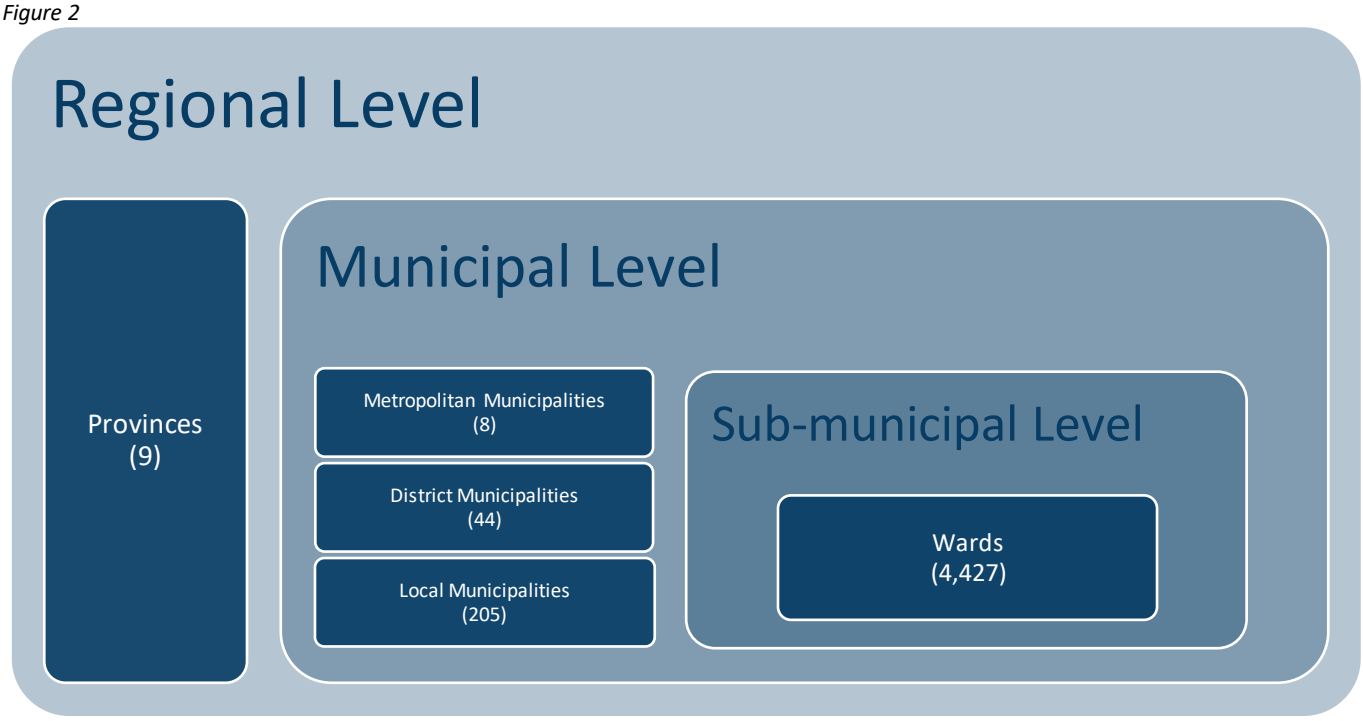
***Clarification**: The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a 'negative' view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account.*

Decentralisation

South Africa is generally regarded as a quasi-federal state with two spheres of local government: provincial and local. Local government is enshrined within the constitution, which also outlines the various functions of and resource distributions between the spheres of government (CLGF, 2018). South Africa has one of the world's most highly devolved systems of government (UCLG, 2020, p.43)

South Africa is divided in 9 provinces, which are in turn divided into a total of 257 municipalities. There are three types of municipalities: Urban Metropolitan Municipalities (8); District Municipalities (44); and Local Municipalities (205) (see Table 1). The local municipalities are second-tier authorities that work together with the district municipalities (first-tier) to deliver their functions. Local municipalities are, in turn, classified as either large urban areas (type four), small towns (type three), rural with small towns (type two), and rural with no towns (type one) (SNG-WOFI South Africa, 2019).

Figure 2



Source: SNG-WOFI South Africa (2019)

Municipalities

The South African municipality structure is divided into three categories (see Figure 2). The metropolitan municipalities are found in large metropolitan areas and big cities and function under a single structure. The non-metropolitan areas which are towns and rural areas are governed by a two-tier system consisting of district and local municipalities. Each district is composed of several local municipalities. This categorisation grants metropolitans' exclusive municipal executive and legislative authority within their areas while districts and local councils share jurisdiction. All three local government groupings are governed by councils. All municipalities are also divided into wards, with each ward electing a councillor to the municipal council. There is a total of 4427 wards.

Local Autonomy

Mandates

The South African constitution is one of few African constitutions that make detailed provisions for the role and responsibilities of local governments (UCLG, 2020, p.39). The federal, provincial and municipal governments share responsibilities for primary health care, health protection, housing, public transport, environmental protection, local economic development and tourism. There are very few exclusive local government functions, and most are shared among different spheres of government. However, the South African Constitution refers to 'giving priority to the basic needs of the community', which entails water, electricity, sanitation and refuse (SNG-WOFI South Africa, 2019). The larger Metropolitan Municipalities have additional functions to, for example, maintain transport, roads, and community service parks. There is often some ambiguity in the division of functions between district and local municipalities. It is important to note that devolution in South Africa is asymmetric in the sense that metropolitan municipalities have far more autonomy than smaller or local municipalities (UCLG, 2020, p.43).

Table 1

Main Sectors	Municipality Responsibilities
1.General public services	Administration and operation of general services (non-assigned to specific functions)
2.Public order and safety	Police (discretionary service); Firefighting; Civil protection & emergency services
3.Economic affairs/transports	Road networks and facilities (urban roads); Public transport (road); Airports; Support to local enterprises and entrepreneurship; Manufacturing and construction; Tourism; Commerce, Energy (electricity, gas, etc.)
4.Environmental protection	Parks & green areas; Nature preservation; Noise and vibration abatement; Air pollution; Soil and groundwater protection; Climate protection; Waste management (collection, treatment and disposal of waste); Sewerage (waste water management); Street cleaning
5.Housing and community amenities	Housing (subsidies, construction/renovation and management); Urban and land use planning; Urbanism-Town planning
6.Health	Primary healthcare (medical centres); Preventative healthcare; Public health services
7.Recreation, culture & religion	Sports and recreation; Libraries & ; Museums (discretionary service); Cultural activities (botanical gardens, parks and open space etc.)
8.Education	Pre-primary education
9.Social protection	

Source: SNG-WOFI South Africa (2019)

Local Government Finances

Municipalities raise a large proportion of revenue from their own sources, such as taxes and service charges. Service charges have tended to be the largest contributor to operating revenue, followed by government grants. 31% of local government revenue is transfers from federal government, which is significantly less than that of provinces. It is notable though, that within local government, there is a higher reliance on transfers from federal government for predominately rural local government than there is for local governments with a strong urban core. In addition, district municipalities rely significantly on transfers from federal government as they have limited revenue raising ability (SNG-WOFI South Africa, 2019).

Local Democracy

State of Elections

There is a dual local government electoral system consisting of proportional elections based on party lists and ward elections for individual councillors. The division between proportional representatives and ward representatives is 50:50 for metropolitan and local councils.

South Africa's democratic trajectory has been slightly negative for the past decade. The 2021 Municipal Election saw the lowest turnout in the history of South Africa's local government dispensation (see Table 3). This negative trend is partly explained by political disinterest and disillusion, which were the most common reasons cited by South Africans for not intending to vote (IEC, 2022).

The three parties that received most votes in the 2021 municipal election were the African National Congress (ANC) with 45,59% of total votes, the Democratic Alliance (DA) with 21,66% and the Economic Freedom Fighters with 10,31% (IEC, 2022).

V-Dem's Clean Elections Index (see Appendix 2) suggests a downward trend, on par with the Liberal Democracy Index (see Figure 1). Despite these trends, however, South Africa has a high standing on the African continent.

Electoral Outcomes

Table 3

Elections	1995	2000	2006	2011	2016	2021
Voter turnout		48%	48%	57%	57% (58% women; 42% men)	46% (58% women; 42% men)
Female Councillors	19%	29%	40%	38,4% (3494 of 9090)	41,2% (4219 of 10235)	-
Female Mayors	N/A	N/A	N/A	41,4% (115 of 278)	N/A	-

Source: Electoral Commission (2022); Gender Links 2016 (CLGF, 2018)

Women's representation

South Africa was ranked 18th globally in a recent assessment of women's political representation in local governments (UN Women, 2021) and has a relatively high proportion of female councillors (see Table 3), especially in comparison to other countries in the region. The proportion of female council executives (i.e. Mayors) of 41,4% in 2011 is very high, considering the global lack of female executives in local government (UN Women, 2021).

The *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act* of 1998 encourages political parties to field equal numbers of women and men as candidates. This change is reflected in the increase of female councillors between 1995 and 2000 (see Table 3) (CLGF, 2018).

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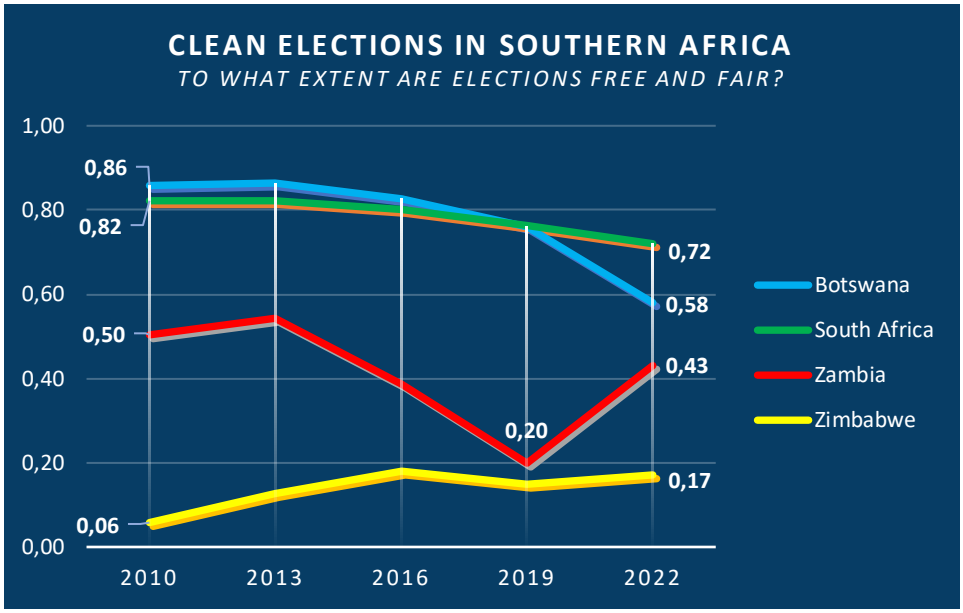
About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organisation is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments. This Country Brief is part of a publication series that investigates the state of decentralisation and local democracy in countries where ICLD programmes operate.

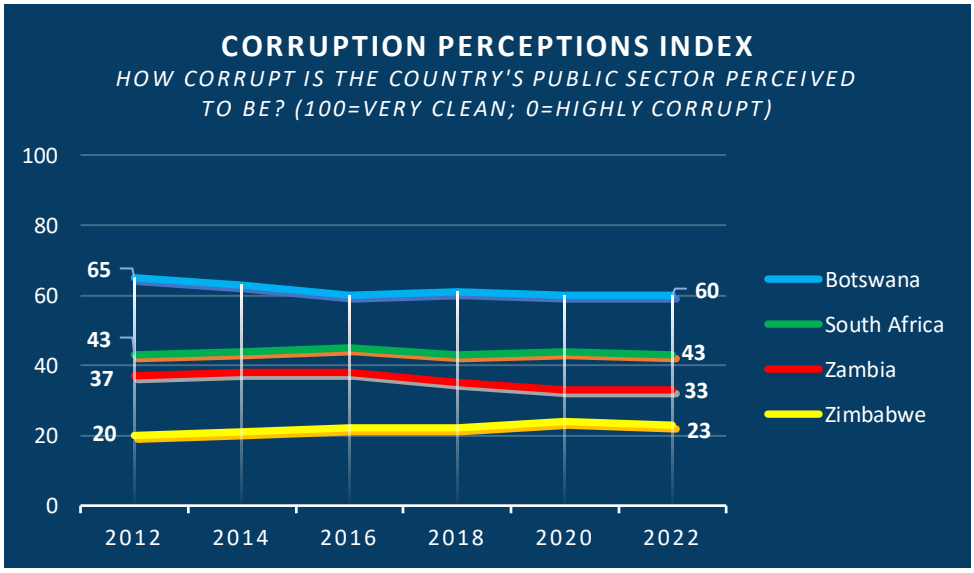
This Country Brief covers events up to October 2022.

Appendix 1: Clean Elections Index

Research Question: To what extent are elections free and fair? (Low to High; 0-1)
Clarification: Free and fair connotes an absence of registration fraud, systematic irregularities, government intimidation of the opposition, vote buying, and election violence.



Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)

Appendix 2: Corruption Perceptions Index

Clarification: CPI measures how corrupt each country's public sector is perceived to be, according to experts and businesspeople.