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Karen Heese and Kevin Allan | Johannesburg: Why the centre cannot hold

news24 Karen Heese and Kevin Allan

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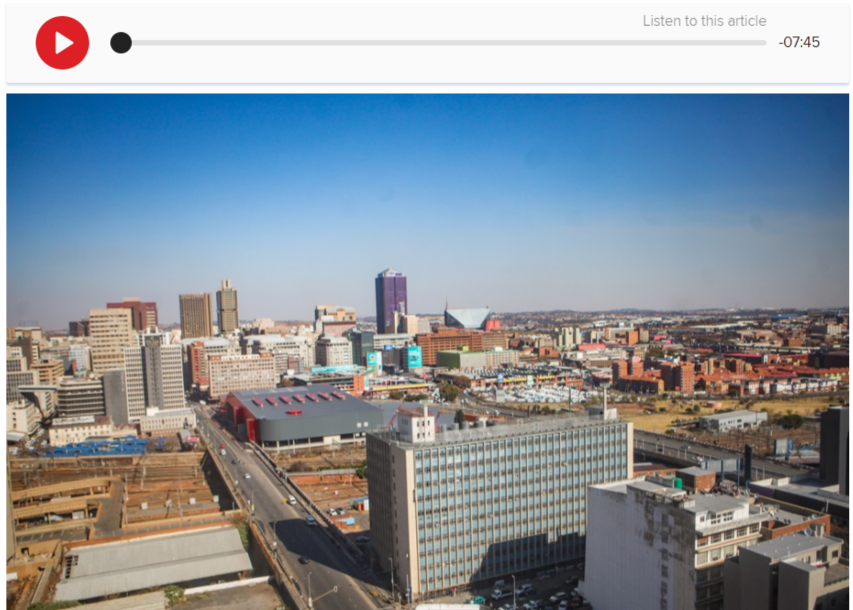

A general view of Johannesburg. It is the biggest city in the country and capital of Gauteng province, which began as a 19th-century gold-mining settlement. (Photo by Gallo Images/Sharon Seretlo)

It seems prospects for the upcoming local government election are grim for the city of Johannesburg, which is dealing with poor infrastructure, little service delivery and even less accountability, writes **Karen Heese** *and* **Kevin Allan.**

Of late it's been all-too-easy to apply the phrase *Things Fall Apart* to South Africa's teetering economic hub, Johannesburg, without any sense of hyperbole for its over five million residents.

The recent tragic death of two newlyweds, **Zaheer Sarang and Nabeela Khan, in their Crosby home** is suspected to be the consequence of illegal connections, but one that had been reported to City Power and only received attention after their deaths.

Few residents of Johannesburg would have trouble believing that City Power had not responded to the call-out, representing just another number in a gargantuan backlog of open calls. With Johannesburg woefully underspending on repairs and maintenance, City Power's technicians are overwhelmed with power surges imposed by poorly maintained ageing infrastructure, illegal connections, and load shedding.

It's not uncommon to see burnt-out substations across the City, with social media footage of them exploding. Against this background, it is deeply unfortunate that the Municipal Entity is said to be compromised by the cancellation of outsourced contractors, some of whom have been accused of facilitating illegal connections.

Dry taps

In addition, whatever the cause of City Power's woes - capacity, an ageing grid, load shedding - the net result has also played havoc with water supply (affecting regional pumps), leaving taps dry in many areas.

Jojo tanks are now a common sight across the City for basic water supply, while residents in affluent suburbs are erecting solar panels and sinking boreholes.

Without adequate water pressure, a house in the same neighbourhood as the President's burned to the ground as the owners and firefighters, unable to react due to low water pressure, watched on. Perhaps instances like these fuel the President's endorsement of outlying Steyn City as a smart city template - one removed from the daily shambles of Johannesburg.

In another life-threatening situation, the remarkable charity, **Gift of the Givers stepped in to drill boreholes** at both Helen Joseph and Rahima Moosa hospitals to secure water supply. While the fragile state of the City's public hospitals cannot be blamed on the City, a lack of resilience in responding to major crises during a pandemic raises questions around why Gift of the Givers is able to respond so ably while Johannesburg's ailing machinery groans, making a mockery of its "A World Class African City" logo (as most recently seen in a Zapiro cartoon).

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In the face of the collapse of basic services, Johannesburg's attempts to provide a positive spin feel superficial and hollow; with the programme *120 Days of Accelerated Service Delivery* too piecemeal to bring comfort with a selective pothole repair, road-markings, and by-law enforcement in targeted wards.

The problems faced by the City have gone beyond the realm of its witty Twitter handle or newly-launched virtual radio station. A revived pothole repair programme with the private sector, while welcome, appears to be a band-aid to the City's dilapidated road infrastructure after reports that the Johannesburg Roads Agency's (JRA) asphalt plant had been out of commission for months.

No coordination

Not only are service delivery silos failing, but so too is their coordination. It needs to be disclaimed that the authors' electricity required a simple resetting of a digital trip switch that took a three and a half-day wait, notwithstanding tweeted reminders to City Power, and promises of escalation. When a City Power technician arrived, he reported that he had been available to attend to the problem from when it first arose.

This unintentional, albeit minor test case suggests that a central referral system failed to allocate available resources, speaking to systemic failure and disorganisation in an entity that manages a massive budget of R65 billion. The same failure that has seen some municipal entities taking to doing the others' jobs (like Joburg Water patching roads after repairing water leaks).

It is apt then to remember that W.B. Yeats' apocalyptic *Things Fall Apart*, written a year after the start of the world's last great pandemic also mentioned the centre:

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

When Johannesburg faced its last major crisis at the turn of the century, iGoli 2002 envisaged a lean centre that would own streamlined municipal entities that would focus on their unique functions - from the popular Zoo, to social housing, parks, electricity, and water. Arguably some have fared better under this ring-fencing arrangement than others.

No accountability

With hindsight, it was ambitious to assume adequate independent capacity for all of these structures, with numerous crises at individual entities emerging either at the board level and/or institutionally, collapsing the intended idea of a specialised network of services, putting pressure on the centre to hold. To make matters worse, there appears to be little by way of accountability where an agency like the JRA blatantly fails in its mandate, with well-remunerated board members and CEOs doing little to right sinking ships.

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For this reason, the City's recent unravelling was accelerated by the institutional instability imposed by the coalition-led government over the last term. While former mayor, Herman Mashaba, understandably blamed his ANC predecessors for an ageing infrastructure, so too has incumbent mayor, Geoff Makhubo, blamed Mashaba for hollowing out institutional capacity, with an exit agreement negotiated with Johannesburg's City Manager earlier this year, amidst acute financial pressure (when Covid-19 bore down on revenue).

It is, of course, also of little help that mayor **Makhubo has been caught up in hearings at the Zondo Commission,** raising worrying questions about his tenure as MMC for Finance. The ANC's DA-EFF predecessors have little room to cast aspersions, though, with a shady Afrirent fleet contract haunting their tenure.

Who will stand?

Where does this leave beleaguered residents? Not only without power and water, but also without any obvious candidates for upcoming local government elections. Can anyone possibly endorse Makhubo after his compromising testimony at the Zondo Commission linking his company to questionable payments by Regiments Capital and EOH, or, alternatively, another opposition coalition, given the City's fragile institutional structures? The decision may rest on the support of king-making parties and with whom they will side.

Johannesburg was founded on hardy prospectors, set on making their own fortunes with little support from authorities. Perhaps with the centre no longer holding, a full circle of autonomy will be reached, with grim prospects for October's polls.

- Karen Heese is Municipal IQ's Economist, Kevin Allan its M.D. Municipal IQ specialises in local government data and intelligence.

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It makes me so mad to think billions of rands are stolen and still being stolen each day by the corrupt politicians and their cohorts whilst this beautiful country and its amazing people suffer. And for what?! The ANC promised this country freedom. Freedom from what? Jobs? Proper education? Power? Clean water? And yet, people will still vote for the ANC. These people are dooming SA! Cry the beloved country.

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