

GOVERNANCE FAILURE IN THE CITY OF JOHANNESBURG AMID THE FORTHCOMING 2026 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS: WHAT WENT WRONG?

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Abstract: This article examines why governance failure in the City of Johannesburg persisted into the period before the 2026 local government elections, and what that failure means for service delivery and electoral accountability. It asks what forms of failure are documented, what causes them, how they are experienced through service breakdown and protest, and what prospective implications follow for the 2026 elections. The study uses qualitative desktop research on public audit reports, municipal oversight documents, Gauteng City-Region Observatory research, legislation, and peer-reviewed literature. Its analytical framework is accountability and consequence management: whether audit findings are answered, whether sanctions and recovery follow, and whether repeated findings are prevented. The analysis finds a broken accountability chain rather than a single administrative error. Coalition instability after 2021, appointments shaped by loyalty rather than merit, weak internal controls, and slow or incomplete consequence management reinforced each other, while water, electricity, roads, and waste services became less reliable. Protest activity between September 2025 and March 2026 is treated as evidence of that breakdown, not as a measure of its size. The article concludes that recovery depends less on a new set of promises than on published coalition programmes, merit-based appointments, a public

register of audit follow-up, and maintenance reporting that citizens can check. Electoral effects are discussed as prospective implications only, because the documentary corpus contains no voter survey or turnout data that would support a causal claim about election outcomes.

Keywords: Coalition governance; Accountability; Consequence management; Service delivery protests; Local government elections

INTRODUCTION

Local government in South Africa is the sphere closest to daily life. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) assigns municipalities a developmental role, including basic services, social and economic development, and democratic participation. The City of Johannesburg (CoJ) carries that mandate at metropolitan scale. It is a Category A municipality in Gauteng, covering 1,643 square kilometres and including Soweto, Sandton, Randburg, Roodepoort, and the inner city. As the economic centre of the country, its administrative performance matters nationally as well as locally (Gibbs & Naidoo, 2024; Mbinza, 2025).

The problem in this article is not service pressure alone, which is common in large cities, but recurrence: governance problems recorded in successive audit and oversight reports have not been corrected. Since 2016 Johannesburg has been described as politically unstable, with fragile coalitions, frequent leadership change, senior vacancies, and weak policy continuity (Pholoma, Lubinga, Masiya, & Madumo, 2024; Tladi, 2024). Instability intensified after the 2021 local government elections, when coalition government became the normal route to power (Makgale, 2024; Masekesa & Chikuruwo, 2025). The question is therefore why institutions designed to detect and correct failure did not do so in time.

Four research questions guide the article. First, what forms of governance failure are documented for Johannesburg, across political, administrative, and financial domains? Second, what causes explain their persistence rather than their first appearance? Third, how are they experienced through service breakdown and protest between September 2025 and March 2026? Fourth, what

prospective implications follow for the 2026 local government elections, and what reforms address causes rather than symptoms? No hypothesis about voting behaviour is tested, and no election result is predicted, because the evidence base is documentary, a limit stated in the method section.

The contribution is analytical. Public audit reports, oversight documents, Gauteng City-Region Observatory research, legislation, and peer-reviewed studies are organised through one accountability chain: findings must be answered, consequences must follow, and repetition must be prevented. Where one link fails, the next inherits the problem. Figures are reported only where scope and year can be labelled from the source, and national context is kept separate from Johannesburg evidence throughout. That discipline is what allows the article to be read as an argument rather than as a summary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Governance failure as an accountability failure

Governance failure is used here in a precise sense: the failure of public institutions to meet the linked duties of answerability, enforcement, and prevention, to explain decisions and spending, to act when rules are broken, and to stop the same failure recurring (Mabizela & Malinga, 2025; Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022). Accountability has a horizontal side, through audit, oversight committees, and internal control, and a vertical side, through public reporting, participation, and elections. When horizontal accountability produces findings but no consequences, protest often becomes the visible form of the gap (Mamokhere, 2023a; Ngcamu, 2019).

Consequence management is the enforcement link. Shava, Muringa, and Oladejo (2025) and Mabizela and Malinga (2025) find that local government accountability is weakened less by the absence of audit than by slow disciplinary processes, incomplete recovery of losses, and inconsistent sanctions. Lungisa, Nzewi, and Sikhosana (2023) connect the same problem to risk ownership, and Makole and Ntshangase (2023) show that consequence management improves performance only when it applies consistently, including to senior officials. Thusi and Matyana (2024a) stress that audit

authority alone does not produce compliance; implementation depends on council, executive leadership, and oversight committees. Van der Walldt, Fourie, and Malan (2024) show that annual Auditor-General recommendations are often noted rather than implemented, which explains why the same categories of finding reappear. Financial accountability follows the same logic: Mabelane, Mongwe, Mbuva, and Marwala (2023) link audit outcomes to institutional capacity, Moji, Nhede, and Masiya (2022) identify political interference and weak follow-up as intervening causes, and Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023) argue that performance tools help only when targets are linked to budgets, maintenance plans, and public reporting.

Coalition governance, cadre deployment, and professionalisation

Coalition government after 2021 changed the political conditions of administration. Makgale (2024) argues that the 2021 Johannesburg coalition produced instability because partners had not agreed a programme that could survive disagreement. Pholoma et al. (2024), whose study includes Johannesburg, find that unstable coalitions disrupt decisions and delay appointments. Tladi (2024) shows how struggles over power can displace policy discussion. Masekesa and Chikuruwo (2025) provide the constructive test: coalition governance can support housing and basic services under Sustainable Development Goal 11, but only when partners agree a programme, allocate responsibilities, and accept joint accountability. Coalition government is therefore not itself failure. Failure occurs when a coalition has no published programme, no agreed decision rule, and no cost for breaking the agreement.

Appointment practice is the administrative side of the same problem. Mlambo, Zubane, and Thusi (2022) argue that appointment by loyalty rather than competence weakens institutional memory. Masiya, Davids, and Mangai (2021) show that performance is shaped by political interference and unclear roles, and Munzhedzi (2021) finds that managerial reform fails when political principals override professional judgement. Thusi and Matyana (2024b) argue the reverse case: professionalisation through merit-based appointments, protected tenure for senior managers, and clear performance agreements stabilises finances by stabilising decisions. Masuku and Jili (2019), Fourie and

Van der Waladt (2021), and Mbandlwa and Mishi (2020) add that political influence shapes priorities directly, while participative planning and accountable ward leadership make priorities harder to displace by factional interests. Three indicators follow for the analysis: programme clarity, appointment merit, and board and entity independence for City Power and Johannesburg Water.

Service delivery, infrastructure, and protest

Service literature links governance quality to reliability, not access on paper alone. Chili, Akbar, Nyika, and Mbonye (2023) find that institutional and financial weakness, not only scarcity, explains uneven delivery. Maumela, Mathaba, and Kao (2025) show for Gauteng water infrastructure that planning, maintenance, and revenue collection must be managed together. Veriava (2019) examines non-revenue water in Johannesburg, where leaks, theft, and billing failure combine to undermine supply and finances, and Khonjelwayo and Nthakheni (2021) provide a comparable electricity mechanism in Tshwane. Gibbs and Naidoo (2024) place these problems in a wider social contract argument, and Mbinza (2025) notes that Johannesburg's world-class branding has coexisted with uneven development, so aggregate performance can hide local breakdown.

Protest literature governs how protest evidence is read. Ngcamu (2019) finds that post-apartheid protests often follow repeated, unanswered grievances. Mamokhere (2023a) argues that protest can force issues onto the planning agenda, but its effect depends on whether officials respond with a plan or only with temporary relief. Mamokhere (2023b) warns that protest levels do not map neatly onto service levels, because organisation, history, and trust shape mobilisation, and Mamokhere and Meyer (2023) argue that early inclusion in integrated development planning makes formal channels more likely to be used. Protest counts alone therefore do not measure governance failure. What matters is whether protest follows unanswered audit findings, complaints, and oversight, which is the pattern the accountability framework predicts. Existing work describes Johannesburg symptoms and national audit patterns well, but less often separates national context from Johannesburg evidence and traces

one accountability chain from finding to consequence to prevention. This article does that separation explicitly.

METHOD

This study uses qualitative desktop research. No interviews, surveys, or field observations were conducted, and no municipal internal records were accessed. That choice fits questions about documented governance patterns, but it limits what can be claimed. The study can show that findings recurred, that oversight bodies recorded the same categories of weakness, and that residents mobilised around service failures. It cannot show internal intentions, the exact size of every financial loss, or the causal effect of service failure on any individual vote.

The corpus has four parts. First, audit and oversight documents, principally the Auditor-General of South Africa consolidated general report on local government audit outcomes for 2023-24, and the City of Johannesburg Municipal Public Accounts Committee oversight report on the 2022-23 annual report. Second, Gauteng City-Region Observatory research on the state of Johannesburg (Götz et al., 2025). Third, legislation framing municipal duties, including the Municipal Finance Management Act and the Municipal Systems Act. Fourth, peer-reviewed literature on South African local governance, together with the documentary sources above, listed alphabetically in the reference list. Contemporary policy analysis and news reporting were used only to locate protest events and check dates and locations, not as substitutes for audit or peer-reviewed evidence. A document was included if it addressed Johannesburg directly, or South African local government in a way that could be labelled as national context. Protest events were included only for September 2025 to March 2026, with a location and stated cause given.

Analysis followed thematic content analysis: reading for repeated themes, coding against the accountability indicators (answerability, enforcement, prevention) and coalition indicators (programme clarity, appointment merit, entity independence), triangulating audit findings against oversight reporting and peer-reviewed analysis, and seeking negative cases, including relatively

stable refuse removal and cases where coalition governance worked under a clear programme. Three limits apply throughout. National and Johannesburg statistics are kept separate. The protest table is evidence of mobilisation, not a verified count of all protests, and several rows have no per-row source, as stated in the table note. Election implications are prospective, because the corpus contains no voter survey, polling, or turnout series.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Evidence map: Johannesburg evidence and national context

Table 1 separates Johannesburg evidence from national context, the separation on which the rest of the analysis depends. National audit percentages and Johannesburg service descriptions are presented with scope labels throughout, so national problems are not read as Johannesburg problems and vice versa.

Table 1. Evidence map, by scope and source type

Indicator	What the corpus shows	Scope and period
Political instability	Fragile coalitions, leadership change, policy discontinuity	Johannesburg, post-2021
Senior capacity	Vacancies and turnover, weak continuity	Johannesburg, since 2016
Audit compliance	Material non-compliance, weak controls, repeated findings	Johannesburg, AGSA 2023-24
Clean audits	Only a minority achieved clean audits	National, 2022-23 and 2023-24
Revenue and finance	Non-payment, debtor impairment, rising debt, low maintenance spending	Johannesburg, with national context
Water and electricity	More unplanned disruptions since 2017-18, losses, ageing systems	Johannesburg
Roads and waste	Road backlogs, low satisfaction; refuse relatively stable but vulnerable	Johannesburg
Safety perceptions	Around 85 percent of inner-city residents felt unsafe walking at night	Johannesburg inner city, survey data in observatory research

Protests	11 rows, September 2025 to March 2026, mainly water, electricity, governance	Johannesburg, September 2025 to March 2026
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Note. Table 1 is an analytical map, not a new dataset. No figure is added beyond the corpus. Where a single Johannesburg total could not be reconciled to a labelled source, the pattern, repeated unauthorised and irregular expenditure with weak controls, is reported instead of a disputed total.

Two features matter. First, Johannesburg evidence is strongest on instability, service interruption, and perceived insecurity, and weakest on precise city-only financial totals. Audit reports publish city findings, but a single city total for unauthorised expenditure could not be reproduced here with sufficient precision to check against the report, so it is not presented as a verified total. Second, national evidence shows Johannesburg operates in a weak accountability environment, not that it is necessarily the worst case, a claim this article does not make.

The accountability chain: findings without consequences

The core finding is a broken accountability chain. Audit findings were produced and oversight bodies recorded them, yet the same categories of weakness recurred, consistent with Shava et al. (2025), Mabizela and Malinga (2025), Lungisa et al. (2023), and Makole and Ntshangase (2023) on slow discipline, incomplete recovery, and inconsistent sanctions. Detection functioned: audit and oversight reports identified supply chain non-compliance, weak procurement and contract management, inadequate provider oversight, and unreliable reporting. Enforcement is where the chain weakens. Thusi and Matyana (2024a) explain that the Auditor-General can report, but implementation depends on council, executive leadership, and oversight committees, and Van der Walddt et al. (2024) show recommendations are often noted rather than closed. Prevention therefore also fails, and the next cycle records a similar finding in different wording.

Financial evidence illustrates the mechanism without a disputed total. Unauthorised expenditure (spending beyond approved budgets), irregular expenditure (spending that does not comply with supply chain and financial

rules), and fruitless and wasteful expenditure (spending avoidable with reasonable care) must not be added together as one scandal, and national figures must not be reported as city figures. What can be stated is that Johannesburg combined weak budgetary control with weak procurement control and weak revenue collection, reducing funds for maintenance. Mabelane et al. (2023) link audit outcomes to capacity in this way, Moji et al. (2022) identify political interference and weak follow-up as intervening variables, and Schoeman and Chakwizira (2023) show performance management fails when targets are not linked to budgets and maintenance plans. The same cycle appears in infrastructure: deferred maintenance increases breakdowns, breakdowns increase emergency spending, and emergency spending reduces planned maintenance (Gibbs & Naidoo, 2024; Maumela et al., 2025).

Coalition governance and professionalisation

Coalition instability after 2021 is the political mechanism that most directly explains why the chain stayed broken. Makgale (2024), Pholoma et al. (2024), and Tladi (2024) link unstable coalitions to delayed decisions, delayed appointments, and displacement of policy by power struggles, matching the Johannesburg pattern of leadership change, motions of no confidence, and a shift from long-term planning to short-term survival. Appointment practice completes the mechanism: Mlambo et al. (2022), Masiya et al. (2021), and Munzhedzi (2021) show that loyalty-based appointments weaken memory and professional judgement, while Thusi and Matyana (2024b) argue that merit-based appointments, protected tenure, and clear performance agreements stabilise decisions and finances. Where shareholders usurp board functions in municipal entities, boards cannot hold management to account, raising the risk of wasteful spending.

Masekesa and Chikuruwo (2025) provide the counterfactual: coalition governance can support housing and basic services when partners publish a programme, assign responsibilities, and accept joint accountability. Fourie and Van der Walddt (2021) and Mbandlwa and Mishi (2020) add that participative planning and accountable ward leadership make priorities harder to displace

by faction. The reform implication, developed in the conclusion, is therefore specific: a coalition agreement that is not published, with a programme and a dispute mechanism, is a survival pact, not a governance instrument. Two cautions apply. Coalition instability since 2021 does not explain every problem since 2016; earlier ageing, revenue weakness, and leadership disputes created the conditions in which post-2021 coalitions operated. And cadre deployment is an institutional mechanism, not a label for every appointment: the claim is that loyalty-governed tenure and removal damage continuity and oversight, regardless of individual intention.

Service delivery protests, September 2025 to March 2026

Protest is treated as evidence of a broken social contract, not as a count of failure, following Ngcamu (2019) and Mamokhere (2023a, 2023b). Table 2 presents the 11 rows from the compilation, re-categorised so different kinds of conflict are not counted as the same phenomenon.

Table 2. Protest incidents, September 2025 to March 2026

Date	Location	Category	Stated cause
Sep 2025	Ward 58	Service	Service delivery issues; 45-day ultimatum to mayor
Sep 2025	Tsakane, Vlaskfontein, Westbury	Service	Water shortages; road blockades in Westbury
Sep 2025	Coronationville	Service	Water and electricity shortages; violent protest
Nov 2025	Council Chambers	Governance	Accountability and water crisis; demands on water funds, tanker contracts, Water Turnaround Strategy
Jan 2026	Region F, Wards 66, 118	Service	Prolonged electricity outages
Jan-Feb 2026	Melville, Westdene	Service	Persistent water shortages
Feb 2026	Westbury	Service	Extended water

			outages; tanker shortages
Feb 2026	Various, Joburg Crisis Alliance	Governance	Systemic municipal collapse
Feb 2026	Johannesburg CBD	Regulatory/labour	Informal traders: permits and Metro Police harassment
Mar 2026	Randburg Depot area	Regulatory/labour	Waste disruption and labour disputes
Mar 2026	Malatjie Informal Settlement	Service	Poor infrastructure and waste management

Note. Source: Author compilation, March 2026, from the documentary corpus in the method section. Per-row sources were not specified, so rows are recorded events, not independently verified counts. Category C rows in the original coding are shown here as Regulatory/labour and are not counted as service protests. Location names are reproduced as recorded. Westbury here and Westburg in a separate 2024 news report are not treated as the same place, because that identity is not established in the corpus. The Ward 58 location and a Braamfontein location in related narrative material are likewise not merged. Per-row verification against a named source is required before this table is presented as verified fact.

Three points follow, with those limits. First, water dominates: seven rows concern water, electricity, or both, and water appears in every month except January 2026, when electricity dominates, matching the infrastructure pattern of losses, ageing systems, and tanker constraints (Maumela et al., 2025; Veriava, 2019). Second, governance mobilisation emerges distinctly in November 2025 and February 2026, when demands shift from restoration of a single service to accountability for water funds, tanker contracts, and strategy implementation, consistent with protest escalating when restoration is repeatedly promised and not delivered (Mamokhere, 2023a). Third, separating regulatory and labour rows matters: trader formalisation and waste labour disputes are legitimate grievances, but counting them as service protests would inflate the measure and hide problems needing different responses. Safety and communication compound the pattern: observatory research reports rising murders in Jeppe, Johannesburg Central, and Hillbrow precincts and around 85 percent of inner-city residents feeling unsafe walking at night, while inadequate communication

about restoration timelines and tanker capacity turns a technical outage into a political grievance.

Prospective implications for the 2026 elections

On this evidence, the 2026 elections test accountability rather than a single service. Three prospective mechanisms can be stated without predicting a result. Performance voting becomes more plausible when failure is repeated and visible, although party loyalty remains powerful (Mamokhere, 2023a; Ngcamu, 2019). Opposition framing becomes easier when audit findings are public and unanswered, because a campaign can point to a published finding, a missed deadline, and a protest that followed. Coalition formation after the election becomes the critical moment: if the next coalition forms, as in 2021, without a published programme, the chain is likely to remain broken regardless of its composition (Makgale, 2024; Pholoma et al., 2024), whereas a programme-based coalition, as in Masekesa and Chikuruwo (2025), offers a different trajectory. Limits apply: the corpus contains no voter survey, polling, or turnout series, so no claim is made about turnout, vote shares, or demographic behaviour, and protest is not a vote. The practical standard for parties and citizens is the same: publish, before the election, the coalition programme, appointment criteria, and audit follow-up timetable that would allow delivery to be judged.

CONCLUSION

The four questions can now be answered. First, failure takes three linked forms: political instability and turnover, administrative weakness in appointments and entity oversight, and financial weakness in control, procurement, and revenue collection. Second, failure persisted because findings were not followed by consequences and prevention. Third, residents experienced it as unreliable water, electricity, roads, and waste services and as inner-city insecurity, and mobilised in protest from September 2025 to March 2026, with water as the dominant trigger and governance accountability emerging as a distinct demand. Fourth, the prospective election implication is that 2026 will test

whether accountability is treated as a condition of power, not only whether services improve briefly before polling day.

Recommendations are linked one to one to those findings, without a budget, target, or timeline the corpus cannot support. (1) Coalition programmes: publish every coalition agreement in full, with priorities, responsible parties, and a dispute mechanism, before the mayoral election in council (Makgale, 2024; Masekesa & Chikuruwo, 2025). (2) Professionalisation: make senior appointments against published criteria, with performance agreements and annually reported turnover (Masiya et al., 2021; Thusi & Matyana, 2024b). (3) Audit follow-up: maintain a public register of Auditor-General and oversight findings, with a named owner, due date, and status, closed only when correction is published (Shava et al., 2025; Van der Walddt et al., 2024). (4) Maintenance reporting: publish quarterly City Power and Johannesburg Water reports on disruptions, non-revenue losses, tanker use, and backlogs in a standard format (Mamumela et al., 2025; Veriava, 2019). (5) Participation and communication: publish restoration timelines, tanker deployment, and collection schedules through ward channels at the time of an outage, and include communities in planning before priorities are fixed (Fourie & Van der Walddt, 2021; Mamokhere & Meyer, 2023). Johannesburg failure is not a mystery or a single event. It is a system in which findings are produced, consequences are delayed, and repetition therefore becomes rational for those who benefit from weak oversight. Breaking it requires ordinary accountability disciplines, applied consistently, published openly, and enforced even when politically uncomfortable, and the 2026 elections provide an opportunity to demand them.

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