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Julius Malema: Kingmaker and juggler

This month another national player comes to the fore in local government - Commander-in-Chief of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Julius Malema. Malema needs little by way of introduction as a key political player, but has become of immense significance to local government given his view on coalition arrangements that have the potential to unseat a number of DA-run metros. This Newsmaker considers Malema's recent comments on these arrangements and what they might mean for the sector.

Could the tail wag the dog?

Thirty-six-year-old firebrand Julius Sello Malema is aptly named, befitting of Julius Caesar's legacy as a strategist. After his expulsion from the ANC, which he joined as a child, and where he headed the Youth League between 2008 and 2012, Malema founded the EFF in 2013. Despite some scepticism, especially in the ruling party, the EFF managed to garner enough support to help unseat the ANC in Johannesburg and Tshwane in last year's local government elections - the first municipal elections that it contested.

But Malema is quick to point out that he is not in any formal arrangements with the DA - an important strategy to distinguish his left-wing populist party from the centrist DA. He is likely to have observed how other opposition parties such as the Independent Democrats (ID) and the New National Party (NNP) were essentially swallowed up by the DA.

Aggrieved by an apparent arrogance of the DA as a "super-party" in its treatment of the UDM's Mongameli Bobani in Nelson Mandela Bay (citizen.co.za), Malema labelled the decision to remove Bobani as Deputy Mayor "short-sighted" and spurned national meetings to resolve the disagreement on his Twitter account.

Such meetings appeared to have papered over the cracks emerging from the complex ideological ground between opposition parties. In fact, the only apparent glue between the DA and EFF (as strong as it may have been in recent months) is the philosophy "my enemy's enemy is my friend", with little ideological affinity between the average DA and EFF councillor (www.enca.com).

Malema went even further to distinguish the EFF from the DA at his recent BA Honours degree graduation speech in comments that could only have sent a chill through Mmusi Maimane's spine:

"We are not in a coalition with the DA, we have never been in a coalition with the DA... We are in a coalition with our people. If you respect our people, you will get our votes. You ill-treat our people, you disrespect them, you look down on them because you think you are a super political party, we will teach you a lesson. We don't care about these metros [Johannesburg, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay]; whether the ANC takes them, whether the DA takes them, it's none of our business. We will from time to time vote based on issues on the table [but] our vote for the DA is no longer guaranteed."

It is clear from this comment that local government, for the time being, is a pawn for Malema in the greater chess game of national politics - a lesson that controversial opposition leaders, like Johannesburg's Herman Mashaba have to consider when pushing through various agendas. Last week, for instance, Mashaba came under fire from the EFF after violent evictions in Lenasia's Univille (municipaliq.co.za).

But Malema is in charge of a new party which still has to articulate its policies beyond land reclamation and the nationalisation of resources, especially at the local level. This leaves local councillors with little policy guidance beyond their individual outlooks. A key obstacle in any strategy around using coalitions as leverage for Malema, therefore, is the pronounced role of individual councillors. Consider the case where EFF councillors defied national EFF directives in Mogale City (mg.co.za, municipaliq.co.za), given their greater affinity for the ANC's arguments against the DA.

In many ways, Malema is faced with the same challenge that he once posed for the ANC - managing firebrands who are difficult to direct - in a game of political strategy that only he seems to fully understand..

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