Water Access as an Election Issue on Social Media Ahead of the 2026 South African Local Government Elections

Factsheet

Introduction

The Gauteng water crisis has brought to light the challenges faced by residents and the perceived indifference of political leaders. Panyaza Lesufi's comment about bathing in hotels while residents are faced with water interruptions has sparked widespread criticism, with many arguing that such statements reflect a lack of understanding of the hardships faced by the public. As political parties prepare for the upcoming local government elections, service delivery issues, particularly water supply, will be under scrutiny.

Beyond giving rise to renewed demands for accountability from elected officials, the incident illuminates social media dynamics that shape pre-election narratives. This factsheet examines the Gauteng water crisis through the lens of social media dynamics, focusing on how Premier Panyaza Lesufi's February 2026 'hotel shower' gaffe ignited significant online backlash that was subsequently referenced and amplified in political messaging by opposition actors, particularly the DA, ahead of the 2026 local government elections.

As South Africa's 2026 local government elections approach, these social media dynamics risk deepening polarisation among an already strained citizenry - and the politicians who must subsequently collaborate in governance despite adversarial pre-election contestation.

Water crisis

South Africa is a water-scarce country, with many regions already experiencing high levels of water stress. But the current crisis is not driven by climate alone. It is also the result of a failure to maintain and manage the infrastructure that delivers water to households and businesses. In Johannesburg, the country's largest metropolitan economy, 46.2% of water is lost as non-revenue water, according to Johannesburg Water's 2023/24 annual report.[1] This includes 24.8% lost through physical leaks, alongside commercial losses and unbilled authorised consumption.[2] The figure is far above international best-practice levels for non-revenue water, which are typically around 15–20% and anything above 35% is considered poor performance.[3] It

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[1] Johannesburg Water. *Annual Report 2023/24*. Johannesburg: Johannesburg Water, 2025. https://www.johannesburgwater.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/FINAL-JOHANNESBURG-WATER-AN-NUAL-REPORT-23_2024-20-02-2025.pdf.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Bill Kingdom, Roland Liemberger, and Philippe Marin, *The Challenge of Reducing Non-Revenue Water (NRW) in Developing Countries*, Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Board Discussion Paper no. 8 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006), 2,

reflects decades of underinvestment, inadequate maintenance and weak governance at municipal level.

Since around 2022, Johannesburg residents have faced intermittent water supply interruptions, termed 'water shifting', where supply is rotated or throttled for certain hours to allow reservoirs - many of which are leaky - to recover levels. This practice mirrors electricity load shedding but affects water, which unlike electricity is essential for life. Access to water is enshrined as a right in section 27(1)(b) of the South African Constitution.

Frustrated Johannesburg residents and civil society groups have put pressure on Johannesburg Water and the City for solutions through protests and demands for accountability.[4] In November 2025, a broad alliance including WaterCAN, faith groups, businesses and residents from diverse areas staged a major demonstration outside Council Chambers, presenting eight demands to Mayor Dada Morero such as ring-fencing water funds, probing R4 billion in missing Johannesburg Water money, faster repairs and reforms to the water board to include civil society oversight.[5] This built on earlier mobilisations during 2022 'Day Zero' scares[6], escalating into February 2026 neighborhood actions in Melville, Emmarentia, Parktown West and beyond, where frustrated communities facing outages of over 24 days[7] marched with buckets, symbolic toilets and chants despite visits from Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi and Water Minister Pemmy Majodina, who residents often shouted down.[8] Reiterated calls among residents include enforcing the Johannesburg Water Turnaround Strategy, curbing corruption, prioritising informal settlements and securing piped water as a constitutional right. Persistent dry taps into 2026 with and limited immediate fixes fueled demands for national intervention.

Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi's Water Crisis Remarks

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https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/385761468330326484/pdf/394050Reducing1e0water0WSS81PUBLIC1.pdf

[4] WaterCAN. (2025, October 15). *Civil society to protest water crisis in Johannesburg.*
https://www.watercan.org.za/news/post/press-statement-15-october-2025
Joburg Crisis Alliance. (2025, November 4). *Water crisis protest.*
https://jca.org.za/newsroom/watercrisis/protest

[5] Ibid.

[6] Daily Maverick. (2022, October 4). *'Day Zero' comes to parts of Joburg as water cuts roll through city and taps run dry.*
https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-10-04-day-zero-comes-to-parts-of-joburg-as-water-cuts-roll-through-city-and-taps-ru

[7] Daily Maverick. (2026, February 11). *No water for 24 days, Joburg protesters scream at city leaders.*
https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-02-11-no-water-for-24-days-joburg-protesters-scream-at-city-leaders/

[8] Eyewitness News. (2026, February 12). *'We want dignity': Johannesburg protests continue despite ministerial intervention.*
https://www.ewn.co.za/2026/02/12/we-want-dignity-johannesburg-protests-continue-despite-ministerial-intervention
GroundUp. (2026, February 20). *Despite President's promise, Joburg protesters say they still have no water.*
https://groundup.org.za/article/melville-residents-protest-with-a-makeshift-toilet-to-demand-an-end-to-their-water-outage/

During a media briefing on 11 February 2026 - one day before President Cyril Ramaphosa's State of the Nation Address (SONA) on February 12 - Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi emphasised no special treatment for government officials amid the water crisis, rejecting claims that public representatives were shielded from shortages.[9] He stated there is no preferential access, positioning himself as equally affected to show solidarity with residents.

However, Lesufi then made a widely criticised comment. He said: 'In some instances, I had to go to a certain hotel so that I could bathe and go to my commitments'. His remark that he personally resorts to showering at a hotel during outages was widely viewed as tone-deaf, given that many residents are left without reliable water access and must rely on water tankers when taps run dry. It sparked immediate social media backlash and outrage, highlighting a perceived disconnect from communities facing weeks-long disruptions, prompting Lesufi to issue a public apology shortly after.[10]

Presidential response to South Africa's water crisis

In his [2026 State of the Nation Address](#) on 12 February, President Cyril Ramaphosa highlighted the water crisis as a top national priority, noting frequent shortages in cities, towns and villages due to failing infrastructure and poor municipal maintenance, which he said made economic growth impossible without being resolved.[11] He acknowledged Gauteng protests over unreliable water access and directed the Ministers of Water and Sanitation and Cooperative Governance to engage communities immediately, reporting progress on pipe repairs and reservoir refilling. Ramaphosa announced decisive actions including a new National Water Crisis Committee (chaired by himself, modeled on the energy crisis response), R156 billion in public funding for water/sanitation infrastructure over three years, a R54 billion metro incentive to ring-fence water revenues for repairs, the Water Services Amendment Bill for licensing providers and revoking poor performers and the National Water Resource Infrastructure Agency within a year. He emphasised constitutional powers for national intervention in failing municipalities and long-term dam upgrades, framing water outages as symptoms of broader local government failures.[12]

Methodology

Social media data for this analysis was collected and analysed using BrandWatch. The keyword search entailed combinations of Panyaza Lesufi's name within five words of the terms 'hotel' or

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[9] Eyewitness News, "Lesufi Rejects Claims Govt Officials Shielded from Gauteng Water Crisis," February 12, 2026,
https://www.ewn.co.za/2026/02/12/lesufi-rejects-claims-govt-officials-shielded-from-gauteng-water-crisis.
[10] The Star, "Lesufi Apology Fails to Quell Outrage over 'Hotel Bath' Remark amid Gauteng Water Crisis," February 12, 2026,
https://thestar.co.za/news/2026-02-12-lesufi-apology-fails-to-quell-outrage-over-hotel-bath-remark-amid-gauteng-water-crisis/.
eNCA, "Lesufi Apologises after Water Crisis Remarks Spark Social Media Backlash," February 12, 2026,
https://www.enca.com/news-top-stories/lesufi-apologises-after-water-crisis-remarks-spark-social-media-backlash.
[11] The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa. "President Cyril Ramaphosa: 2026 State of the Nation Address." Gov.za, February 12, 2026. https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/2026StateOfTheNation
[12] Ibid.

'shower'. content was drawn from across online platforms, including: X, Online News, Facebook, Instagram, Bluesky, YouTube and Tumblr.

Overview of Conversation

- Between 1 February and 5 March 2026, the conversation generated 9 280 mentions[13] (see Figure 1). These posts were produced by 6 216 unique authors, meaning that each author contributed an average of 1.5 posts on the topic.

- The trending topics within the conversation as shown in Figure 1 were (1) put water, (2) Hotel shower, and (3) water crisis.

Total Mentions	Unique Authors	Trending Topics
9280 ↗∞% Previous period: 0	6216 ↗∞% Previous period: 0	1. put water 2. Hotel shower 3. water crisis

Figure 1: Key insights

Topics and sentiment

- The word cloud in Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the conversation. Word size reflects the frequency of mentions. The larger the word, the more often it appeared in the discussion. The visualisation also reflects sentiment: red indicates negative sentiment, grey neutral sentiment, and green positive sentiment. The intensity of the color corresponds to sentiment strength, with darker shades representing more extreme sentiment. Notably, the largest words in the word cloud reflect negative sentiment, while many of the smaller words are neutral. No positive sentiment terms appear in the visualisation. The most prominent terms in the conversation were **ANC** (3 433 mentions), **Ramaphosa** (2 805 mentions), and the **laughing emoji** (2 480 mentions). All three top mentions were associated with negative sentiment.

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[13] A mention on Brandwatch is a single unit of online content such as a tweet, blog post, forum message, or news article that matches the specific search query.

Figure 2: Word cloud of conversation

Mentions over time

- The conversation experienced three distinct peaks. See Figure 3 below. The highest, with 5 305 mentions, occurred on 12 February when Premier Lesufi made the hotel bath remark. The second peak, on 18 February with 449 mentions, followed strong criticism from the DA, who leveraged the comment to urge voters to 'reward him with a golden shower at the ballot box.' The third peak, on 3 March with 282 mentions, coincided with the launch of a DA billboard campaign mocking Lesufi.

Figure 3: Mentions over time

- **Political disconnect**: Many users expressed frustration at the privilege displayed by Lesufi, contrasting it with the daily struggles of ordinary South Africans. The hashtag #Panyaza trended as people shared experiences of water shortages, criticising both Lesufi and Gwede Mantashe for perceived insensitivity toward residents facing water scarcity and unemployed youth. Lesufi's suggestion to bathe at a hotel drew widespread

ridicule. Numerous users saw the remark as reflecting a disconnect between political leaders and residents experiencing prolonged outages of public services such as the provision of water and electricity. These discussions sparked broader debate about accountability, service delivery and the need for change in the upcoming elections. See examples: [1], [2], [3].

- **Social Media Outrage**: Social media erupted with memes and commentary following Lesufi's remarks. Critics on social media argued that such remarks highlight a disconnect between political leaders and the everyday realities faced by citizens. The situation ignited outrage, with calls for accountability from the ANC. Some users characterised the incident as being an indication of the ANC being out of touch with public hardship. A post that garnered high engagement drew comparisons to Marie Antoinette's infamous 'let them eat cake' remark. See examples below in Figure 4.
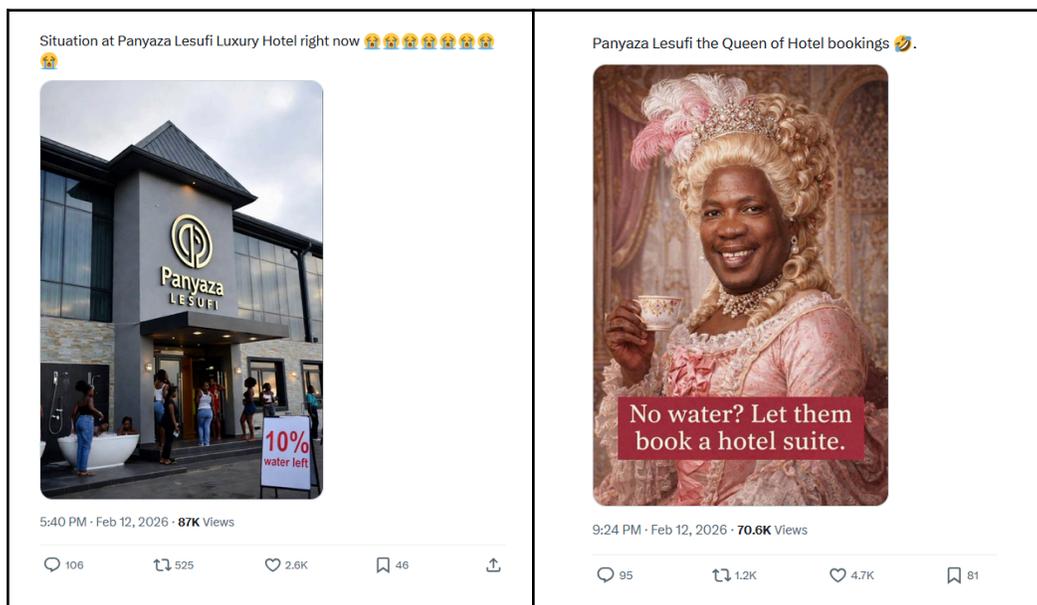

Figure 4: Example posts

- **Democratic Alliance Capitalises on Lesufi's Water Crisis Remark**: The second peak on 18 February 2026 coincided with criticism from the DA. During the 2026 SONA debate, DA Chief Whip George Michalakis said of Lesufi, 'may he be rewarded with a golden shower' at the polls.

- **Public apology**: Premier Lesufi apologised on 23 February stating that his 'hotel comment' was 'misunderstood and misconstrued'. He sought public forgiveness. However, his prior controversial remarks continued to reverberate in the social media conversation.

- **Local government elections billboard water campaign**: On 3 March 2026, the DA launched a billboard campaign referencing the incident, with messages such as: *'ANC showers in hotels. You have no water. Vote DA to put water in your taps.'* (see Figure 5 below). This campaign was amplified through the use of the hashtag #fixdrytaps.

Figure 5: DA Billboard Campaign Messaging

- **Opposition amplification in the news cycle**: The later spikes reflect an 'echo' effect, where the social media virality of the original clip continued to generate attention as it was referenced in subsequent political commentary and campaign activity. By revisiting the remark, opposition actors - particularly the DA - extended its visibility within the news cycle and used it to reinforce criticism of the ANC ahead of the 2026 local government elections.

- **ANC responds legally as DA stands firm:** In response to the DA's billboard campaign, the ANC served the party with a legal letter requesting that the billboard be removed. The DA's Federal Chair has indicated that the party does not intend to take the billboard down.

Hashtags as a means of amplification

- The top five hashtags were: (1) #sona2026, (2) #fixdrytaps, (3) #gautenghumansettlements, (4) #panyaza and (5) #hotel. These hashtags reflect both the original event and the political clap back. Notably, the DA's #fixdrytaps got a higher number of reposts (247) and impressions (over 4 million) than the hashtags #panyaza and #hotel. This implies that there was more amplification of the campaign that made use of the fall out of the remark than the original incident. See Figure 6.

Top Hashtags	POSTS	REPOSTS	ALL POSTS ▼	IMPRESSIONS
#sona2026	15	246	261	924480
#fixdrytaps	5	247	252	4035525
#gautenghumansettlements	1	200	201	177493
#panyaza	3	44	47	2675026
#hotel	2	44	46	2673389

Figure 6: Top five hashtags

Engagement

- An analysis of mention volume over time, overlaid with engagement scores (Figure 7), reveals key differences in amplification patterns. At the initial peak on 12 February 2026, engagement closely tracked mention volume, with queries reaching 5 305 mentions and an engagement score of 41 437. This means that each original post or comment was engaged with nearly 8 times. Engagement could be likes, reposts (retweets), replies or quote posts. These mentions largely expressed public outrage and frustration with leaders, exemplified by sentiments like 'What did we do to deserve such leaders?'. In contrast, subsequent 'aftershock campaign' peaks demonstrate significantly greater amplification relative to content volume. On 17 February 2026, mention volume was just 156, yet engagement reached 5 065 (each original comment or post was engaged with 32 times). Even more starkly, on 3 March 2026, mention volume stood at 282, but engagement hit 13 609 (each original comment or post was engaged with 48 times).
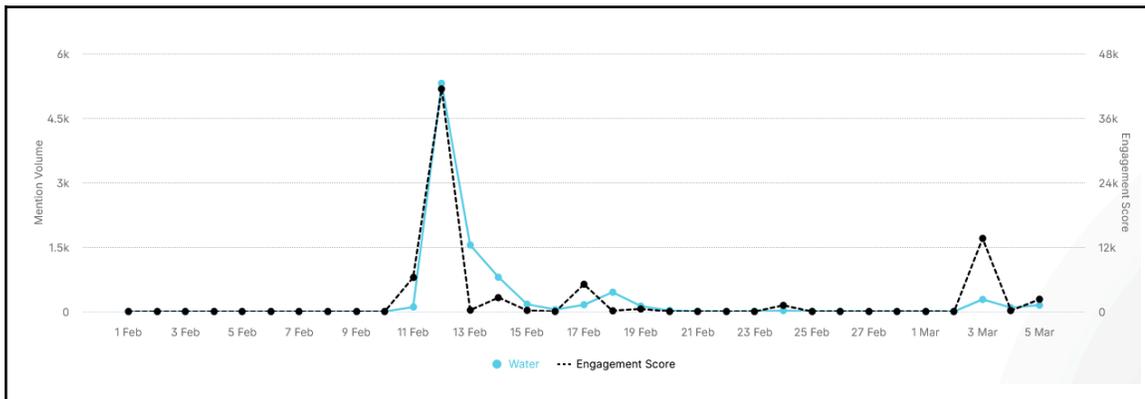

Figure 7: Mention volume over time with engagement score overlaid

- The 3 March peak has particularly pronounced engagement volume. On 3 March 2026 volume was 9300% higher than usual, driven mostly by:
    - 200 mentions using the hashtag #fixdrytaps
    - 112 reposts of this post (Figure 8):

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Figure 8: DA Billboard campaign post

Discussion

The observed amplification patterns carry significant implications for understanding how public outrage evolves into sustained political discourse. The initial peak on 12 February suggests a strong public reaction from users discussing water shortages, where engagement (41 437 score on 5 305 mentions, or 7.8x ratio) aligned closely with mention volume, suggesting genuine sentiment driven by lived hardship.

In stark contrast, the later 'aftershock campaign' peaks - 17 February (32x ratio) and 3 March (48x ratio) - coincide with political campaigning, notably the DA's billboard rollout mocking Lesufi's 'hotel shower' remark. This disproportionate engagement relative to lower mention volumes (156 and 282) highlights how opposition parties strategically build political messaging around existing public grievances for electoral gain. This sustained the outrage far beyond the original trigger with reach amplified through hashtags (#fixdrytaps), echo chamber reinforcement and news cycle extension ahead of 2026 local elections. This dynamic underscores social media's role in transforming leadership missteps into prolonged political liabilities.

Conclusion

Social media is a pivotal arena shaping voter perceptions ahead of the 2026 local government elections. In this case, it amplified Premier Panyaza Lesufi's hotel shower remark into a flashpoint for service delivery debates. Initial organic outrage on 12 February 2026 (5 305 mentions, 7.8x amplification ratio) reflected genuine resident frustration, evolving into later peaks with 32x and 48x engagement multipliers. The DA's #fixdrytaps hashtag (4 million impressions) and billboards proclaiming 'ANC showers in hotels' drove much of this traction, particularly the 3 March 2026 spike. These patterns highlight platforms' power to prolong discourse through reposts, algorithmic boosts, partisan networks and echo chambers.

The ANC's legal response to DA billboards and Premier Lesufi's apology demonstrate the party's countermeasures to mitigate narrative loss in public discourse. Hot-button issues - water shortages, electricity load shedding and basic services - will likely intensify online as pre-election conversations.

Social media dynamics risk deepening electoral polarisation, contributing to an increasingly polarised online political environment. Ultimately, resolving South Africa's water crisis demands political will to deliver water access. This is occurring in the complex local government election year terrain that may once more deliver coalition leadership to major metros.

AI Research Tools Acknowledgement

This factsheet draws on AI-assisted research conducted via Brandwatch's integrated AI analytics for social media analysis—specifically identifying drivers of conversation peaks and synthesising dynamics like sentiment trends. Additional water crisis context, Non-Revenue Water benchmarks and factual sourcing were supported by Perplexity AI, with AI further refining phrasing, flow, and academic tone throughout the document. All interpretations, analysis, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the author.