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Coalitions and the GNU in South Africa: Proposals to Embrace, Pitfalls to Avoid

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Recommendations

- To improve governmental accountability, formal coalition agreements should be considered a standard feature of coalition governance.
- There is no one-size-fits-all model of coalition governance and South Africa needs to chart its own course, drawing on aspects and possible trajectories from other country examples.
- Because the government has already been formed, the GNU should focus on its conduct and impact while in office.
- Accountability and effectiveness, rather than retaining power, should be the priorities of coalition partners.

Executive summary

Polls ahead of South Africa's 29 May elections in 2024 suggested that the ruling ANC would lose its majority. The polls proved correct and the ANC had to form a ruling coalition, the Government of National Unity (GNU). Unlike the first GNU of 1994, the 2024 coalition was not mandatory but the outcome of political necessity. Coalition governance in South Africa should be understood in the context of nation-building and a maturing democracy. It is a familiar feature of South African politics, particularly at the local- and provincial-government level, but less so at the national level. Examples of other countries where coalition governance is firmly entrenched, for example in Western Europe, could prove useful to the GNU. However, other African countries' experiences with coalition governance may be more instructive, alongside the country's own experiences at the local level.

Introduction

In the run-up to South Africa's 2024 election, several polls suggested that the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), would lose its controlling majority in Parliament. It was also projected that the country would enter a period of coalition government at the national level. As the polling data suggested, the ANC lost its majority and only received 40% of the vote in the 29 May elections. Its choices were to govern as a minority, which would render the government susceptible to instability, or enter into negotiations with other political parties to form a stable governing coalition.

South Africa is no stranger to coalition governments, which have been present in the country at multiple levels (national, provincial and local) at one time or another during its 30 years of democracy. The country's first democratic government, formed after the 1994 elections, was a coalition known as the Government of National Unity (GNU). The 1993 transitional constitution stipulated that any party that secured 20 seats in the National Assembly 'was entitled to be part of the GNU in proportion to its overall seat tally relative to other political parties. This arrangement would govern the country for the first five years of democracy.'¹ The National Party withdrew from the GNU in 1996 after then president Nelson Mandela had refused to accede to the mandatory GNU applying beyond the 1999 elections. The GNU survived, with the Inkatha Freedom Party remaining in the government. The mandatory coalition requirement had been introduced to 'ensure, *inter alia*, continuity, political inclusiveness and racial and ethnic reconciliation'.²

1 Denis Kadima, "Party Coalitions in Post-Apartheid South Africa and Their Impact on National Cohesion and Ideological Rapprochement", in Denis Kadima, ed., *The Politics of Party Coalitions in Africa* (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, 2006), 27.

2 Kadima, "Party Coalitions", 27.

The GNU born in June 2024, comprising 11 political parties,³ was markedly different from the GNU of 1994. This time it was a product of political necessity in the absence of a clear controlling majority for one party.

Since the dawn of South Africa's democracy, the nation-building project has been crucial in trying to undo the apartheid legacy of racial and social separation. One study argued that the emergence of coalition governance, in lieu of a single dominant party, was a sign of a maturing nation-building project.⁴ Its thematic analysis found that major challenges to a coalition in South Africa would be political brinkmanship and ethnic and ideological tension, which undermine the ability of coalition governance to drive social cohesion.⁵

This policy briefing⁶ explores lessons that can be drawn not only from South Africa's experience with coalition governance but also from other country examples for the new GNU. It notes a link between accountability and coalition agreements – the contracts entered into by coalition members before they form a government – and concludes with recommendations on what the GNU should do differently.

South Africa's previous coalition governments

Coalition governance is a growing trend in South Africa. Apart from the 1994 GNU, coalition governments have occurred in several provinces and at the local-government level for many years. At the local level, the 2021 elections produced 70 hung municipalities, an increase of 159% from the 2016 elections.⁷ At the time, the 2016 local government elections were regarded by some as the ANC's 'worst electoral setback since apartheid ended in 1994'⁸ and as a clear indication that support for it was waning.

The 2016 elections produced multiple hung local councils, including in some of South Africa's largest metropolitan areas. In many of these, the ANC had dominated for years and the election results came as a shock to the party. In the hung councils, coalition negotiations often resulted in alliances between parties considered traditional rivals, their differences temporarily set aside with the intent of keeping the ANC out of power.

By 2021, the landscape had not changed dramatically. Voters made it clear that, overall, they were losing faith in political parties. The outcome again necessitated the formation

3 These parties are the ANC, Democratic Alliance, Patriotic Alliance, Inkatha Freedom Party, Good Party, Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, Freedom Front Plus, United Democratic Movement, Al Jama-ah, Rise Mzansi and United Africans Transformation.

4 Kaizer Makole, Bhekabantu Ntshangase and Samson Adewumi, "[Coalition Governance: Uncharted Waters in South African Political Landscape](#)", *Business Ethics and Leadership* 6, no. 4 (2022): 23–37.

5 Makole, Ntshangase and Adewumi, "Coalition Governance".

6 This policy briefing is based on a SAIIA event on coalition government hosted on 14 May 2024 and expands on a presentation made at this event.

7 Nkanyiso Goodnews Simelane and Boikanyo Nkwatle, "[A Historical Overview of Coalition Governments in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal](#)" (Policy & Practice Brief, ACCORD, June 10, 2024).

8 "[South Africa Local Elections: ANC Suffers Major Setback](#)", *BBC News*, August 6, 2016.

of governing coalitions (or, at least, loose arrangements to oppose the ANC) in several places, including the large metropolitan areas. Similar coalitions against the Democratic Alliance (DA) have also been present in the Western Cape.

Some researchers maintain that,⁹

if the voters wanted coalitions, they did so because they wanted stability and predictable service delivery, after the non-stop tussle for control of municipalities between the ANC, EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters] and DA between 2016 and 2021, and also after previous decades of ANC dominance.

However, this period of coalition governance did not result in stability. Between 2016 and 2021, the country saw several 'waves of factional fights, legal challenge and counter-challenge, criminal charges laid against leading party members, a Commission of Inquiry into State Capture and an attempted insurrection', alongside continued indicators of the ANC's declining popularity after the 2019 national elections.¹⁰

Broadly speaking, the growing prevalence of coalition governance in South Africa is attributed to two factors: a maturing electorate and a maturing democracy.¹¹ On the one hand, the local-government coalition model in South Africa is one that 'can be used as a new governance model that can improve leadership, share governance practices, and service delivery to guide future national governance trajectory'.¹² However, research on South Africa's coalition governance at the local level reveals some concerning trends.

At the local level, coalition partnerships tend to be formed on the basis of party-political interests rather than the will of voters, resulting in weakened party identity, ineffective local governance and compromised citizen engagement.¹³ When coalition partners' agendas and governing principles are diametrically opposed, it hampers service delivery.¹⁴

If a coalition government is to be effective, it is necessary for the partners in these agreements to remember to whom they are accountable. This is especially so with South Africa's proportional representation electoral system, where party lists determine who represents voters. The needs of the party ultimately have to be set aside to ensure that decisions reflect the will and needs of the electorate. Coalitions should be formed to govern and serve the needs of the people and should be less about coming into, and holding on to, power. Coalition agreements should also be formalised, as this contributes to enhanced post-election accountability measures.

9 David Everatt and Marius Pieterse, "Outsourcing Governance: Local Government and the Future of Democracy in South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022).

10 Everatt and Pieterse, "Outsourcing Governance", 789.

11 Makole, Ntshangase and Adewumi, "Coalition Governance".

12 Makole, Ntshangase and Adewumi, "Coalition Governance".

13 Lulamile D. Hanabe and Unathi Malinzi, "Party Coalition as a Model to Govern Municipalities in South Africa", *Journal of Public Administration* 54, no. 1 (2019): 41–51.

14 Joshua Mawere, Matoane James and Khalo Titos, "Coalition Governance and Service Delivery in South Africa: A Case Study of Tshwane, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipalities", *Journal of Public Administration* 57, no. 2 (2022): 272–283.

Lessons from coalition governance in Africa and Europe

Coalitions in Africa

Makole, Ntshangase and Adewumi make an interesting observation regarding the colonial history of African countries and their likelihood of transitioning to coalition governance post-independence. They argue that former British colonies tend to be more inclined to coalition governance because the British encouraged the formation of governing coalitions at independence, unlike the French, who withdrew without guiding post-independence governments.¹⁵

Kenya

The 2008 Kenyan GNU was formed following contested electoral results. Some observers have argued that the formation of a GNU was necessary to contain a volatile situation. After the 2007 election, an estimated 1 000 people died in the resulting protests and conflict, forcing Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga to form a GNU and so prevent further turmoil.¹⁶

Prof. Peter Kagwanja argues that, in the Kenyan context, the GNU (2008–2013) was an attempt to resolve the widespread post-election violence; in other words, it was born of necessity. The grand coalition ushered in important reforms such as a new constitution, with many recommendations from the country's African Peer Review Mechanism report underpinning the reforms. Kagwanja notes that the agreement between the opposition parties in the coalition was extremely informal and has been dubbed the 'handshake'.¹⁷ He also cautions that a coalition government could lead to a trap of perpetual campaigning during which the developmental priorities of the country are lost.

Lesotho

Lesotho's experience with coalition governance has been tumultuous. The country's first coalition government was introduced in 2012 and comprised five political parties. Its formation marked the first instance of multiparty government after more than a decade of one-party dominance.¹⁸ This coalition government has been described as 'inherently unstable', in part because the negotiations that led to its formation were rushed. It also consisted of former opposition parties with a parliamentary majority of only 61 seats out

15 Makole, Ntshangase and Adewumi, "Coalition Governance".

16 Jephias Mapuva, "Government of National Unity (GNU) as a Conflict Prevention Strategy: Case of Zimbabwe and Kenya", *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 12, no. 6 (2010).

17 Newzroom Afrika, "What Can South Africa Learn from Kenya's Government of GNU?", YouTube, June 8, 2024.

18 Dimpho Deleglise, "The Rise and Fall of Lesotho's Coalition Governments" (Monograph, ACCORD, 2018).

of 120.¹⁹ Because of its instability, this coalition disintegrated in June 2014 after one of the major partners withdrew.²⁰

In February 2015 a new coalition government was formed comprising seven parties. In an attempt to avoid the instability that had led to the crumbling of its predecessor three years earlier, party representatives suggested that a more formal agreement be made. 'The Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform: Lesotho's Second Coalition Government Agreement, April 2015' formalised the second coalition government. This agreement set out several 'broad objectives of the coalition and a policy programme, with key priority areas including the reform of the constitution and the public service'.²¹ It also provided guidelines for managing the coalition, stipulating 'good faith' between partners and monthly meetings to track progress.²² However, this coalition proved to be no more stable than the preceding one and in 2017 Parliament was dissolved and fresh elections called.²³

The demise of this second coalition was the result of disagreements within the coalition government, causing its haemorrhage. A faction of the National Executive Committee withdrew from the coalition government and came to an agreement with the opposition. This ultimately resulted in a successful motion of no confidence and fresh elections.²⁴

Malawi

Throughout Malawi's democratic history, several political alliances have been formed with the purpose of either effecting democratic change or becoming the official governing or opposition grouping. The latter includes alliances between the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), the United Democratic Front (UDF) and AFORD, and the UDF-AFORD-NCD Coalition.²⁵ In the early 2000s, experts noted that the popularity of political parties in Malawi was in decline. Overall, the coalition governance experience in Malawi has been inconsistent and unstable, crumbling before a full term has passed. One study of coalition governance in Malawi in the early 2000s found that 'coalitions have led to the demise of many political parties and leaders with some leaders being appointed ambassadors and posted outside the country as a way of sidelining them'.²⁶ However, widespread public support for coalitions strengthened the alliances between partners and allowed parties to achieve more than they would have had they campaigned on their own.²⁷

19 Deleglise, "Lesotho's Coalition Governments", 29.

20 Deleglise, "Lesotho's Coalition Governments".

21 Deleglise, "Lesotho's Coalition Governments", 35.

22 Deleglise, "Lesotho's Coalition Governments".

23 Deleglise, "Lesotho's Coalition Governments".

24 Deleglise, "Lesotho's Coalition Governments".

25 Denis Kadima and Samson Lembani, "Making, Unmaking and Remaking Political Party Coalitions in Malawi", in Kadima, ed., *The Politics of Party Coalitions*.

26 Kadima and Lembani, "Political Party Coalitions in Malawi", 142.

27 Kadima and Lembani, "Political Party Coalitions in Malawi".

Coalitions in Western Europe

As coalition governance is the most common form of government in Western Europe, the region offers interesting examples for analysis.

A key attribute of Western European coalition models is the use of institutionalised conflict management mechanisms to deal with tensions between the inevitably conflicting political ideologies of coalition members. However, in coalitions formed between parties with similar or comparable policies, finding compromises is relatively easy and a comprehensive coalition agreement may even be redundant.²⁸

One study surveying party supporters following the 2019 Spanish election showed that they were willing to accept concessions resulting from coalition negotiations. However, this willingness declined when people strongly identified with the relevant party and/or cared about the issue at stake.²⁹ In the UK coalition of 2010–2013, the coalition government had the effect of tightening up government spending, moving away from the arm's length approach.³⁰

In Germany, parties enter into formal, often-lengthy coalition agreements that cover a range of eventualities. This process can take weeks, even months, to complete. For example, in Hesse, a central German state, it took 118 days for the new government to be sworn in after the 2013 elections for state parliament.³¹

There is debate as to whether public coalition agreements are purely ceremonial or provide some analytical insights as policy documents.³² Interestingly, coalition agreements seem to become public fairly late (an observation from Denmark, Ireland and Italy, which have had many minority coalition governments, ie, coalition governments formed by a single party that has the largest share of the vote but not a clear majority).³³ One of the main challenges faced by minority governments in forming a coalition agreement is that they do not have the necessary parliamentary majority to enact the agreement themselves. As a result, these agreements are often watered down and become more symbolic.³⁴ Danish coalition agreements are particularly short, with 87% of the content concerning policies.³⁵

28 Albert Falcó-Gimeno, "The Use of Control Mechanisms in Coalition Governments: The Role of Preference Tangentiality and Repeated Interactions", *Party Politics* 20, no. 3 (2014).

29 Carolina Plescia, Alejandro Ecker and Thomas M. Meyer, "Do Party Supporters Accept Policy Compromises in Coalition Governments?", *European Journal of Political Research* 61, no. 1 (2022).

30 Matthew Flinders and Katherine Tonkiss, "From 'Poor Parenting' to Micro-Management: Coalition Governance and the Sponsorship of Arm's-Length Bodies in the United Kingdom, 2010–13", *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 82, no. 3 (2016).

31 Katrin Praprotnik, Maria Thürk and Svenja Krauss, "Duration of Coalition Formation in the German States: Inertia and Familiarity in a Multilevel Setting", *Parliamentary Affairs*, July 6, 2024.

32 M. Laver and N. Schofield, *Multiparty Government: The Politics of Coalition in Europe* (University of Michigan Press, 1990); W.C. Müller and K. Strøm, "The Key to Togetherness: Coalition Agreements in Parliamentary Democracies", *Journal of Legislative Studies* 5 (1999).

33 Flemming Juul Christiansen and Helene Helboe Pedersen, "Minority Coalition Governance in Denmark", *Party Politics* 20, no. 6 (2014).

34 Christiansen and Pedersen, "Minority Coalition Governance".

35 W.C. Müller and K. Strøm, eds, *Coalition Governments in Western Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

What should the GNU do differently?

Unlike the Western European examples discussed above, coalition governance is not yet firmly entrenched in South Africa and so it cannot rely solely on that experience. Lessons from other African countries' experiences with coalition governance will likely be more instructive, alongside the country's own recent experiences at the local level. South Africa needs to chart its own course. Aspects of coalition governance and possible trajectories from other coalitions may provide guidance, but these cannot be applied wholesale to the South African context.

Furthermore, the GNU was formed after the election, unlike most of the other countries reviewed here. Thus, focus should be placed on the conduct of coalitions and their leaders while in office. To their credit, the South African coalition partners managed to forge a broad and complex GNU in a very short time. The election took place on 29 May and by 14 June negotiations had been completed. No formal agreement has been published, other than a broad framework of cooperation, a statement of operationalisation and statement of priorities in President Cyril Ramaphosa's opening address of Parliament.

Here it is pertinent to recall the aspiration at the heart of democracy: that it is government for the people. Coalition partners and leaders should therefore put the desire for power aside and work towards accountable and effective governance. In the longer term, coalition-building mechanisms could be emulated in the South African context to better manage the process. Having a strong agreement in writing would help increase the stability of coalitions and iron out differences among parties. For the local-government coalition model to be effective at the national level, its shortcomings should be acknowledged and improved upon. These relate to having formal agreements in place and setting ideological differences and power-grabbing tactics aside in the interests of governance for the benefit of the electorate.

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Cover image

Cape Town, July 2024: President Cyril Ramaphosa Opens Parliament In A Joint Sitting (Jeffrey Abrahams/Gallo SA Editorial)

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