

Occasional Paper

365

March 2026



Coalition Politics, Democratic Accountability and the Potential for Reform in Post-Majority South Africa

FRIEDRICH VON TRESKOW, ISABEL BOSMAN-BURNETT & STEVEN GRUZD

African perspectives
Global insights

SAIA 90 EST. 1934

Abstract

South Africa's 2024 election ended three decades of dominant-party rule and confirmed coalition governance as a prominent feature across all spheres of government. The formation of a 10-party Government of National Unity (GNU), new provincial coalition governments and more municipal coalitions reflect a fragmented electorate unwilling to entrust any single party with a unilateral mandate. Coalitions, although necessary in circumstances such as those currently faced by South Africa, offer clear advantages for democratic and accountable governance. They can broaden representation, moderate policy shifts and introduce internal checks and balances often absent under dominant-party rule. However, South Africa's experience so far has been marked by public coalition disputes and instability. At the municipal level, revolving leadership and short-lived administrations undermine service delivery and public trust, while GNU disputes expose the risks posed by informal, non-binding arrangements and opaque decision-making processes. Today, the challenge is no longer whether to have coalitions, but how to structure them for accountable and efficient governance. Reform efforts by GNU members seek to create stable frameworks for coalition governance, but need to go further by formalising transparent and enforceable coalition agreements and mechanisms that allow publics to track delivery against stated goals. Such frameworks are essential to ensure stability and democratic trust in a new era of cross-party cooperation.

Introduction

South Africa's 2024 national and provincial elections cemented a structural shift in the country's political landscape. The formation of a 10-party Government of National Unity (GNU), alongside the emergence of three provincial coalition governments, signals that South Africa's dominant-party era under the African National Congress (ANC) has effectively come to an end at all levels of government. While, at the local level, coalition governments became entrenched after the 2016 and 2021 elections, hung councils increased twofold after the latter. Polls have long indicated a broader decline in support for the former liberation movement that ruled South Africa from 1994 (62.65% of the vote) to 2024 (40.2% of the vote).

South Africa's 2024 national and provincial elections cemented a structural shift in the country's political landscape

At the same time, public expectations surrounding this transition remain fragile. While the GNU formation generated a post-election surge in optimism regarding the country's democratic quality and future prospects, recent polls indicate a return to previous dissatisfaction, as 80% of South Africans view the country to be 'on the wrong track'.¹ The question now is not whether coalition politics will endure, but how South Africa's institutions can effectively manage them and increase public confidence across the national, provincial and local spheres of government.

While the GNU has survived several high-profile disputes, public fallouts between the two largest coalition partners, the ANC and Democratic Alliance (DA), expose its political fragility.² At provincial and municipal levels, outcomes are similarly uneven. In Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and the Northern Cape, provincial coalition negotiations saw collapsing partnerships and the outsized influence of small 'kingmaker parties'.³ At the local level, where coalitions have become relatively common, short-lived alliances, revolving-door leadership and governance gridlocks continue to impact service delivery, particularly in large metropolitan municipalities.⁴ However, these governance failures

1 Ipsos, "Eight in Ten South Africans Say Country Is Heading in Wrong Direction as GNU Struggles to Restore Confidence", September 9, 2025; Rorisang Lekalake and Matthias Krönke, "Was South Africa's 2024 Election a Win for Democracy?", Afrobarometer, May 29, 2025.

2 Daryl Swanepoel, "The Fragility of the Government of National Unity – the Risk Is Palpable", *Daily Maverick*, April 14, 2025.

3 Susan Booysen and Zenzo Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II, 2023–2025: Monitoring Project of National, Provincial, and Local Coalition Government in South Africa", Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, 2025, 7.

4 Pandelani H. Munzhedzi and Moraka Shopola, "Coalition Council in South African Local Government", *International Journal of Social Science and Religion* 12, no. 1 (2024).

have not translated into wholesale rejections of coalition politics. Ahead of the 2026 local government election, 54% of South Africans support inter-party cooperation at municipal level, compared to only 24% who oppose it. Crucially, this support cuts across partisan divides, with majorities of both ANC and DA supporters in favour of local cross-party cooperation.⁵ This suggests that, despite their dysfunctions, coalitions are now perceived as inevitable and, for many voters, the only legitimate future of South African politics.

In South Africa's diverse social and political context, coalitions are not only unavoidable but also normatively desirable

At the same time, sustained cooperation failures hold inherent risks for long-term democratic trust and stability if such cooperation is not underpinned by robust institutional arrangements. In South Africa's diverse social and political context, coalitions are not only unavoidable but also normatively desirable. Cooperation arrangements broaden representation, can moderate policy volatility and strengthen accountability.⁶ However, without clear rules and transparency, legitimacy deficits arise if party disputes blur the line between coalition partners and the opposition, and when elite bargaining remains shielded from public scrutiny.⁷

To this end, a transparency-first approach is proposed to guide debates around coalition governance reform:

- the publication of detailed coalition pacts and portfolio allocation rules;
- procedural guidelines for decision-making and dispute resolution; and
- mechanisms allowing public tracing of progress made against set delivery targets.

While such measures offer democratic accountability benefits to citizens, parties can profit from the chance to demonstrate performance. However, coalition governance can also erode the individual profile of coalition parties, with each wanting to benefit at the expense of the others. A new coalition framework should allow parties to form such distinctions but also demonstrate that, if a coalition is seen as unstable overall, every coalition partner incurs net losses.

5 Ipsos, "Eight in Ten South Africans".

6 Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*, 2nd edition (Yale University Press, 2012), 2.

7 Soares Clovis Noutchie, "Balancing Power and Policy: Governing South Africa Through a Fragile National Unity Coalition", *International Journal of Business Ecosystem & Strategy* 7, no. 3 (2025).

The argument made in this policy insight builds on comparative analysis of South African coalitions across the three spheres of government since 2021 (at local level) and 2024 (at national and provincial level), respectively. At each level, coalition performance is evaluated to identify common patterns in formation, stability and breakdowns, as well as the institutional and political dynamics that shape governance outcomes.

This analysis proceeds as follows. After establishing the benefits of coalition governance in contemporary South Africa, the emergence of coalition politics across the three levels of government is traced, highlighting patterns of resilience and instability. The factors most often undermining durability are identified and discussed before the evolving reform debate in the national policy discourse is reviewed. Finally, solutions to the current challenges are presented, combining regional and international examples with incentives for South African innovation in coalition governance.

Why coalitions matter: The case for power-sharing in South Africa

South Africa's post-apartheid political system was negotiated under expectations of prolonged single-party governance. However, its constitutional design, based on proportional representation, ensures that coalition governance becomes the norm once that dominance weakens. With no threshold for parties to be represented in Parliament and a high number of seats relative to population size, it is considered 'the most proportional electoral system in use in any democracy'.⁸ While proportional representation, in theory, makes it hard for parties to secure outright majorities, the

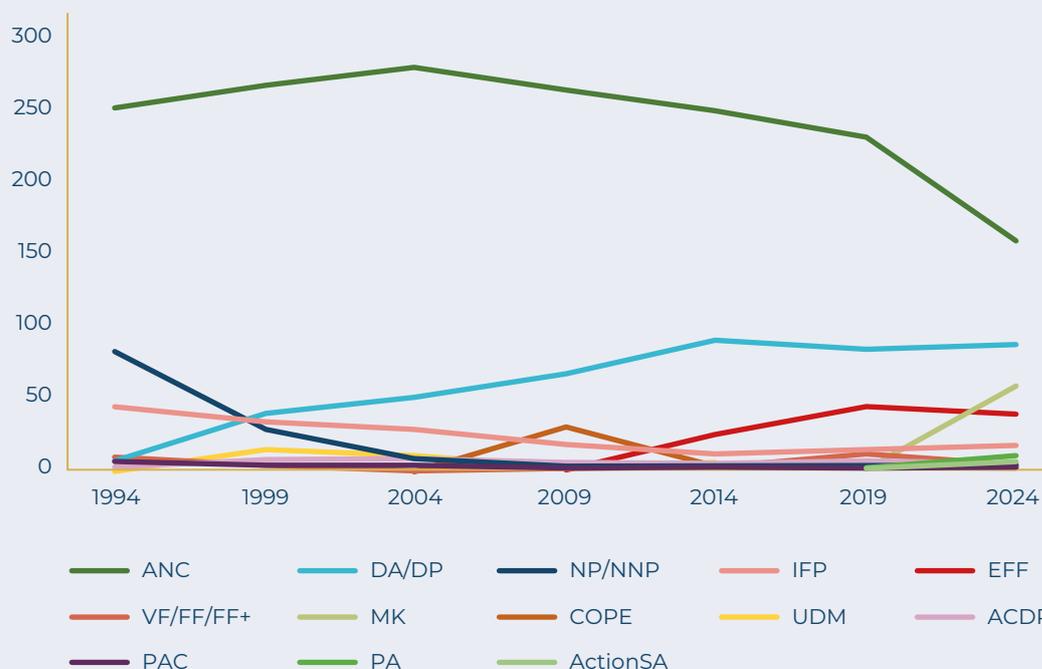
Coalitions were anticipated as integral to South Africa's new democracy, and are the natural political outcome in a diverse and multifaceted society

ANC's electoral dominance largely obscured this feature over the past three decades. Yet coalitions were anticipated as integral to South Africa's new democracy, and are the natural political outcome in a diverse and multifaceted society. South Africa's 1996 Constitution emphasises cooperative, multi-actor governance. It states that all spheres of government must provide 'effective, transparent, accountable and coherent government for the Republic as a whole' and must 'co-operate with one another in mutual trust

⁸ Amanda Gouws and Paul Mitchell, "South Africa: One Party Dominance Despite Perfect Proportionality", in *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, eds. Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 2005), 361.

and good faith'.⁹ However, while this principle structures relations between established governmental actors, its extension into political culture and party-political behaviour remains limited in instances where adversarial politics have significant governance costs.

Figure 1 Seat distribution of major political parties in South Africa's National Assembly, 1994–2024



Source: Electoral Commission of South Africa, "Results Dashboard: 2024 National and Provincial Elections", accessed February 5, 2026, <https://results.elections.org.za/dashboards/npe/>

Notably, the 2024 GNU is not South Africa's first experience of coalition government at the national level. The Union Buildings were first shared in 1994, when the ANC, National Party (NP) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) briefly governed together in a transitional GNU to guide the country into its new democratic era.¹⁰ While the 1994 GNU was constitutionally mandated under the Interim Constitution and collapsed after the NP's departure in 1996, it set a precedent for consensus-based national government.¹¹

The ANC's domination of South Africa's political landscape collapsed with the 2016 municipal elections. That year, the ANC lost its majority in the key metropolitan municipalities of Johannesburg, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay and Ekurhuleni, followed

⁹ Constitution of South Africa, Section 41(1), 1996.

¹⁰ Masila Masipa and Seane Mabitsele, "Exploring Factors that Contributed to the Formation of Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2024", *Journal of Nation-building & Policy Studies* 9, no. 2 (2025).

¹¹ See Isabel Bosman, Laura Rubidge and Steven Gruz, "Coalitions and the GNU in South Africa: Proposals to Embrace, Pitfalls to Avoid" (Policy Brief 302, South African Institute of International Affairs, December 2, 2024).

by eThekweni (Durban) in 2021.¹² Mirroring these trends at national and provincial levels, ANC support dropped significantly in 2019 and 2024, introducing the GNU and provincial coalitions in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape.¹³

Several factors make coalition governance a promising model for South Africa. Mainstream democratic theory contends that, in plural societies, political culture benefits from institutionalised party dialogue that transcends ethnicity, language and religion.¹⁴ Against South Africa's demographic diversity, coalitions thus embody the ethos of cooperation laid out in the constitution. When ascribed group features such as ethnicity dominate party identity, coalitions support conciliatory politics through institutionalised intergroup dialogue and power-sharing.¹⁵ Thus, coalitions can act as a catalyst for social cohesion by helping to address the persistent socio-economic challenges rooted in South Africa's history of racial and economic exclusion.

Further, coalitions institutionalise political checks and balances often absent under single-party dominance. The ANC's electoral decline is, at least in part, attributed to growing voter perception of poor service delivery, mismanagement of public resources and corruption.¹⁶ Given the salience of these issues for voters, coalition governance can directly address public frustration with unaccountable and underperforming leadership by ensuring plural monitoring and evaluation of predetermined goals. For instance, a wider spectrum of officials in municipal councils minimises the risk of power abuse in tender allocation and political appointments.¹⁷ In South Africa, where entrenched politicisation of the public administration increasingly weakens merit-based appointments, multiparty councils offer especially important oversight and scrutiny. Unlike dominant-party systems, coalition arrangements collectivise the costs of poor performance, as voter punishment is more likely to be shared across governing parties.

Coalitions in South Africa have had mixed results for citizens

Despite this potential, coalitions in South Africa have had mixed results for citizens. Changing and collapsing alliances produce extreme instability and leadership turnover in some municipalities, negating the intended benefits of coalition governance, with

12 Kanego Mokgosi, Kgothatso B. Shai and Olusola Ogunnubi, "Local Government Coalition in Gauteng Province of South Africa: Challenges and Opportunities", *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation* 6, no. 1 (2017), 40.

13 Booysen and Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II", 39.

14 Mpumelelo Phakathi, Bonginkosi Ngwenya and Ayanda Nene, "South Africa's New Era of Coalition Government and Multi-Party Democracy", *Democracy and Security* (2025), 3.

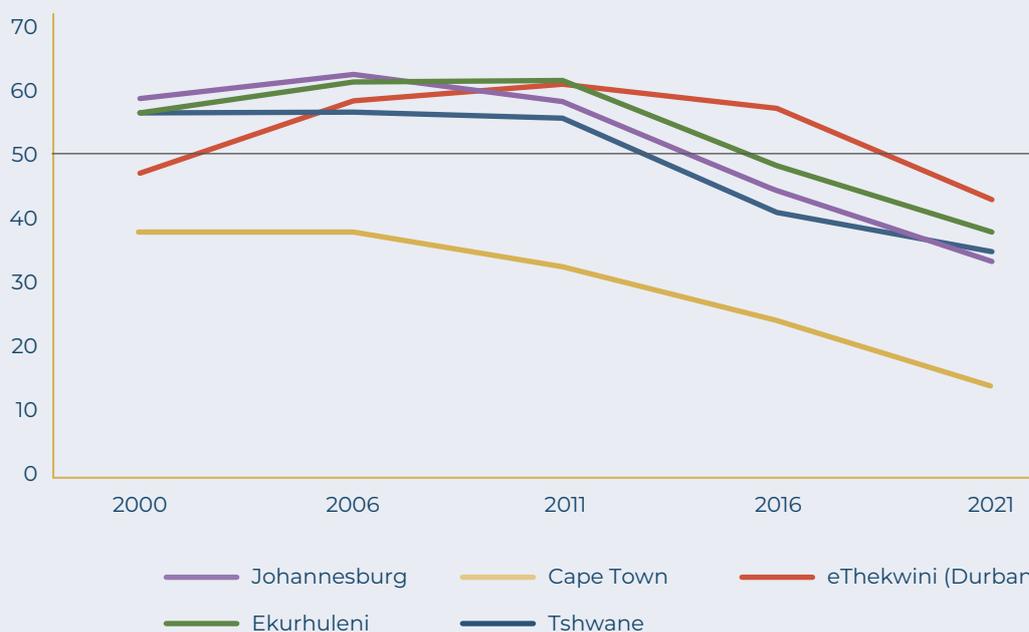
15 Donald L. Horowitz, "Ethnic Power Sharing: Three Big Problems", *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 2 (2014), 7.

16 David Everatt, "The Long Decline of South Africa's ANC", *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 4 (2024), 135.

17 Nyawo Gumede, Dominique Emmanuel Uwizeyimana and Alouis Chilunjika, "Unpacking the Merits and Demerits of Electoral Coalitions in South African Metro-Municipalities from 2016–2019", *PanAfrican Journal of Governance and Development* 6, no. 1 (2025).

Johannesburg the most striking example.¹⁸ At the provincial and national level, antagonistic disputes and resulting gridlocks further dampened hope for greater stability. South Africa’s challenge is not whether to form coalitions, but how to structure them in ways that ensure governability and effectiveness. If guided by public and enforceable rules, coalitions can deliver on the dual promise of South Africa’s democracy: representation and accountability. To identify where institutional innovation and clearer guidelines are needed, the following section examines how coalition dynamics have played out in practice.

Figure 2 ANC share of council seats (%) in the largest metropolitan municipalities, 2000–2021



Note: Straight line indicates 50% threshold needed for a single-party majority

Source: IEC, “Results Dashboard: 2024 National and Provincial Elections”, accessed February 5, 2026, <https://results.elections.org.za/dashboards/npe/>

The coalition experience: Lessons learned

Coalition formation and bargaining

National level

The ANC’s historic loss of its parliamentary majority in the May 2024 general election necessitated negotiations for a national coalition government. In a first for South Africa,

¹⁸ Mpho Tladi, “Antagonistic Politics and Coalitions: South Africa’s Local to National Landscape”, *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 51, no. 3-4 (2024).

several parties had in fact already formed a pre-coalition alliance in anticipation of later coalition governance. The 'Multi-Party Charter' (MPC, formerly known as the 'Moonshot Pact'), established in August 2023, brought together key opposition parties such as the DA, IFP, Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and ActionSA.¹⁹ Specifically aimed at countering a potential national coalition between the ANC and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the MPC agreement laid out a shared cooperation framework based on constitutionalism, rule of law, accountable governance and market-oriented reforms. The identity of each party would remain intact, and all would contest the elections separately.

Beyond policy priorities, the agreement also defined specific aims for power-sharing, including mechanisms for monitoring and accountability, planning and budgeting, and allocation of leadership positions should a coalition be formed among the member parties. While innovative, the MPC, with its clause to 'not entertain any working arrangements or co-governing agreements with the ANC, EFF or any rival formations', was ultimately rendered obsolete. The general election outcome left no viable majority without ANC participation.²⁰ Although the ANC retained a substantial plurality of the vote, the result reflects increasing fragmentation of the party landscape rather than consolidation behind an opposition alternative.

Despite a weakened mandate, the ANC remained close to twice the size of the next-largest party, the DA, and thus led the negotiation process for a national coalition. Pre-election polling indicated that voters were roughly split in preference between an ANC–DA and ANC–EFF coalition in the event that the ANC lost its majority, suggesting no clear public preference for either ideological direction.²¹ However, the constitutionally imposed two-week limit on governance formation deterred ANC leaders from prolonged bargaining games and pushed the ANC toward the most pragmatic path, namely a GNU with the DA as its main partner.²²

While ANC leaders initially considered ruling as a minority government through 'confidence-and-supply' arrangements, this was ultimately abandoned in favour of a broader coalition framed as necessary for stability.²³ The subsequent decision to invite all parliamentary parties to join a GNU was driven less by inclusive intent than by strategic considerations. After decades of casting the DA as its ideological adversary, the ANC had little interest in formally elevating the DA's status to that of a national co-partner. By broadening participation to include any willing smaller parties, the ANC avoided the optics of a 'grand coalition' with the DA, diluted the latter's influence in government and retained narrative control of an 'ANC-led' GNU. Conveniently, this also made EFF exclusion inevitable, as the party had already rejected any arrangement involving co-leadership with

19 Democratic Alliance, "[A Multi-Party Charter For South Africa](#)", accessed February 5, 2026.

20 DA, "A Multi-Party Charter".

21 Social Research Foundation, "[If the ANC Falls Below 50% What Coalition Government Would South Africans Wish to See in Power](#)", April 2024.

22 Constitution of South Africa, Section 51(1) and (2), (1996).

23 Susan Booyesen, "Accountability and Representation in South Africa's 2024 Elections: A Reshaping of the Political Landscape", *Journal of African Elections* 23, no. 2 (2024), 8.

the DA or FF+.²⁴ The EFF's prior alignment with the newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party, an ANC breakaway under former president Jacob Zuma, rendered an arrangement with the DA the less costly political option for the ANC. For the DA, joining the GNU was as much about seizing an opportunity to govern at the national level as it was about preventing what it termed a 'doomsday coalition' between the ANC and EFF or MK.²⁵

By broadening participation to include any willing smaller parties, the ANC avoided the optics of a 'grand coalition' with the DA, diluted the latter's influence in government and retained narrative control of an 'ANC-led' GNU

By 14 June 2024, the end of the two-week formation period, signatories to the GNU included the ANC, DA and Patriotic Alliance (PA). Over the next 10 days, the IFP and seven smaller parties joined, with the GNU now constituting over 70% of the general election vote.²⁶ Interestingly, several of these latecomers, including the United Democratic Movement, Al Jama-ah and the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, had initially aligned with the Progressive Caucus, a bloc formed around the EFF.²⁷ The caucus sought to unite left-leaning parties – later also the MK – as an alternative to the ANC and DA, but its cohesion quickly fractured as some members opted to join the GNU instead. Ultimately, the resulting GNU is less a product of shared political vision than of political necessity in a landscape where a fragmented electorate mandates no single party to govern alone.

Provincial level

At the provincial level, coalition alliances proliferate due to election results, with little prior formal negotiation. Mirroring the national trend, the 2024 elections eroded ANC majorities at the provincial level in Gauteng, KZN and the Northern Cape. With the 14-day rule applicable here as well, coalition negotiations were soon initiated in all three provinces.

At the provincial level, coalition alliances proliferate due to election results, with little prior formal negotiation

24 Booyesen and Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II", 21.

25 Willie Aucamp, "DA's Participation in the GNU Generates Positive Outcomes for the Economy", DA, Press Release, August 20, 2024.

26 African National Congress, "ANC Welcomes Political Parties to the Government of National Unity", Media Statement, June 22, 2024.

27 Thabiso Goba, "Progressive Caucus Not Planning to Disband after 3 Parties Join GNU", *Eyewitness News*, June 24, 2024.

In KZN, an electoral earthquake saw the newly formed MK emerge as the largest party, pushing the ANC from the top to the third-largest party, now also trailing the IFP. When IFP talks with MK fell through after the latter's demand for the premiership and stated intent to contest the election's result, the IFP agreed to form a coalition with the ANC and DA.²⁸ However, this alliance fell short of reaching a majority by one seat in the provincial legislature. The single seat held by the National Freedom Party (NFP) thus became decisive, as no combination without it could secure a majority excluding MK. By joining the IFP, ANC and DA in the new Government of Provincial Unity (GPU), the NFP effectively assumed an outsized kingmaker role, mirroring a broader pattern across coalition governments in which smaller powers wield disproportional influence.²⁹

In Gauteng, negotiations for a new coalition proved more protracted and tense. With the ANC falling under 35% and the DA (27%), EFF (almost 13%) and MK (almost 10%) winning significant shares, Gauteng became the most competitive province of all. Initially, it seemed the province would follow the national GNU model and that an agreement on government formation would lead to the election of ANC Premier Panyaza Lesufi with DA support.³⁰ However, this alliance soon collapsed over disputes concerning the divisions of executive portfolios. Although Ramaphosa reportedly instructed Lesufi to include the DA in a Gauteng GPU, Lesufi's public posture toward the DA and previously dismissal of coalitions as 'a major setback' for South Africa made meaningful cooperation difficult from the onset.³¹ As the Gauteng ANC co-convenor, he offered no more than three minor portfolios to the DA, far short of the four substantial positions the DA argued were necessary to reflect its vote share and ensure proportional representation within the coalition.³² With the provincial ANC unwilling to improve the offer, negotiations ultimately broke down, and Lesufi pursued a coalition with minority partners the PA, IFP and Rise Mzansi. The EFF, falling short of becoming an official coalition partner, offered its support on a case-by-case basis.³³ This episode demonstrates not only how fragile agreements are born when ANC–DA talks fail but also internal ANC divisions over how to approach coalitions in the post-majority era.

In the Northern Cape, the ANC fell short of an outright majority by less than 1%. Having secured 15 out of the 30 seats in the provincial legislature, it opted for confidence-and-supply agreements with the FF+ and PA. In exchange for its support in electing an ANC premier, the FF+ reportedly secured a commitment from the ANC to politically acknowledge the self-determination claims of the Afrikaner settlement of Orania.³⁴

28 Chris Makhaye, "Inkatha Says It Will Form KZN Government of Provincial Unity with ANC, DA and NFP", *Daily Maverick*, June 12, 2024.

29 Sandile Motha, "Struggling NFP Emerges as the Kingmaker in KwaZulu-Natal", *Sunday World*, June 12, 2024; Booyesen and Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II", 40.

30 Anthony Tshwarelo Malapane, "Prospects of the Gauteng Government of Provincial Unity Post 2024 Elections in Entrenching Multi-Party Democracy in South Africa", *Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives* 10, no. si1 (2025), 128.

31 "2024 Elections: Lesufi Laments Failure of Coalition Governments", *eNCA*, March 6, 2024.

32 Booyesen and Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II", 50.

33 Booyesen and Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II", 46.

34 Dawie Boonzaaier, "ANC and FF Plus Forge Agreement in Northern Cape with Orania Condition", *News24*, June 16, 2024.

The ANC's consideration of such a concession, having long framed Orania as an ideological affront to the non-racial nation-building project, underscores the outsized leverage of small parties in the ANC's scramble for majorities.

These provincial coalition arrangements have yet to translate into improved governance outcomes on the ground. Recent provincial-level polling indicates that, among the three coalition-run provinces, only Gauteng records citizen approval ratings for performance exceeding one-third.³⁵ KZN and the Northern Cape fall well below this threshold, with the Northern Cape registering the lowest approval rating of all South African provinces at just 16%.³⁶

These provincial coalition arrangements have yet to translate into improved governance outcomes on the ground

Municipal level

Unlike the national and provincial spheres, local elections have produced widespread political fragmentation since 2016 and 2021, respectively. Municipal coalitions are often described as marriages of convenience primarily aimed at removing the ANC from power after decades of unilateral leadership.³⁷ This pattern is most pronounced in the country's metropolitan municipalities, where the electorate includes larger concentrations of racial minorities and middle-class voters. These are the groups for whom the ANC's electoral appeal has historically been most limited. In these urban centres, the effects of prolonged misgovernance are also most visible in infrastructure decay and urban decline, accelerating voter alienation from the ANC. As a result, coalition bargaining triggered by ANC decline has been most intense in the heavily contested metro municipalities of Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni (all in Gauteng), eThekweni (KZN) and Nelson Mandela Bay (Eastern Cape).

A notable consequence of electoral fragmentation since 2016 has been the EFF's increased leverage as an unlikely kingmaker for DA governance. Despite their profound ideological distance, the EFF supported DA mayoral candidates in Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela Bay.³⁸ After 2016, DA-led minority coalitions in these metros relied on EFF support to pass mayoral votes, budgets and bylaws.³⁹ While the EFF

35 Ipsos, "Eight in Ten South Africans".

36 Ipsos, "Eight in Ten South Africans".

37 Gumede, Uwizeyimana and Chilunjika, "Unpacking the Merits", 170.

38 Munzhedzi and Shopola, "Coalition Council", 24.

39 Munzhedzi and Shopola, "Coalition Council", 24.

remained formally outside the municipal executive, this arrangement gave it leverage over policy formulation, particularly demands for insourcing local staff.⁴⁰ Crucially, however, the EFF seemingly approached these arrangements as an instrumental exercise rather than a commitment to governing stability. Support for DA administrations was reversible and calibrated to maximise party advantage. This logic became evident after the DA's refusal to support the EFF's parliamentary motion on land expropriation without compensation – the party's defining ideological demand. This exposed the irreconcilable ideological incompatibility and led the EFF to pull back its support in both the Johannesburg and the Ekurhuleni municipalities.⁴¹ The working relationship was officially severed in 2019, when the DA refused to give the mayoral position in Tshwane to the EFF after DA mayor Solly Msimanga had resigned to run for Gauteng premier.⁴² In Ekurhuleni, the ANC successfully avoided a DA-led coalition after the 2016 elections by retaining marginal control through a coalition arrangement with several minor partners.⁴³

Johannesburg offers the clearest illustration of fragmented coalition politics, where constant coalition breakdown has entrenched political instability

Johannesburg offers the clearest illustration of fragmented coalition politics, where constant coalition breakdown has entrenched political instability. After the ANC's loss of a majority in 2016, the DA formed a minority government with several small parties. While the EFF did not officially join the executive, a transactional confidence-and-supply arrangement saw it support the election of DA mayor Herman Mashaba and enabled budget support in exchange for issue-specific concessions. Despite deep ideological divisions, this agreement allowed the DA to govern while rendering the administration structurally dependent on EFF support. This fragile coalition eventually collapsed in 2019 with Mashaba's withdrawal, paving the way for the ANC's return to municipal control, again enabled by EFF support.

Since 2021, such cross-ideological bargaining has been a permanent feature of Johannesburg politics. The first post-2021 coalition saw DA mayor Mpho Phalatse gain the support of ActionSA, IFP, ACDP, FF+ and the Congress of the People (COPE), but the collaboration soon broke down over internal disputes and shifting alliances.⁴⁴ Since then, a constant rotation of governing arrangements and mayors has introduced a permanent

40 Martin Pholoma et al., "The influence of Unstable Coalition Governments in Gauteng Metropolitan Municipalities", *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 5 (2024), 5.

41 Pholoma et al., "The influence of Unstable Coalition Governments", 5.

42 Greg Nicolson, "It's Done, It's Finished – Malema on Voting Pact with DA", *Daily Maverick*, July 2, 2019.

43 Tladi, "Antagonistic Politics", 144.

44 Muhammad Hussain, "How Johannesburg Managed to Go Through 4 Mayors – and Counting – in 18 Months", *News24*, May 3, 2023.

state of instability and poor service delivery outcomes for citizens. These circumstances further elevated the influence of small parties as power brokers amid shifting alignments, with two Al Jama-ah mayors rising to power through ANC-backed deals, despite the party holding only three out of 270 council seats.

The 2021 local elections ushered in even more fragile, transactional and fragmented coalition-building episodes. This was particularly evident in the EFF's gradual realignment with the ANC after previous agreements with the DA.⁴⁵ In Ekurhuleni, the DA managed to oversee a coalition with ActionSA, FF+, IFP, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) and COPE, but governance instability led to multiple mayoral changes and an eventual ANC–EFF deal resulting in an ANC mayor and EFF speaker.⁴⁶ In eThekweni, after the collapse of a failing ANC-led minority government, the ANC in 2023 similarly banded together with the EFF and NFP to gain a legislative majority.⁴⁷

Among metropolitan municipalities, Cape Town provides an important counterexample. After no party secured a municipal majority in 2006, a DA-led, seven-party coalition governing with a thin majority proved capable of gradually stabilising municipal governance. This is perhaps attributable to a spirit of compromise and a focus on service delivery instead of power. Rather than undermining electoral performance, it provided the DA with a platform to secure an outright majority in Cape Town in 2011.⁴⁸ This case illustrates that coalition instability is not inevitable, and that parties can even benefit from such arrangements where governing success is demonstrated.

The limits of informal coalition agreements

A common thread between coalitions at national, provincial and local levels in South Africa is that none rests on formal power-sharing agreements. The GNU itself was built on a nonbinding Statement of Intent. It contains fundamental principles under which the coalition is to operate, but sets out broad policy goals in very general terms, for example,

A common thread between coalitions at national, provincial and local levels in South Africa is that none rests on formal power-sharing agreements

45 Booyesen and Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II", 56; Sell Thorne, "Helen Zille Explains Why DA Administrators Collapsed in Johannesburg", *Newsday*, November 5, 2025.

46 Booyesen and Moyo, "MISTRA Coalitions Barometer II", 150.

47 Khethukuthula Xulu, "ANC in eThekweni Appoints NFP and EFF Members in Key Portfolios", *Mail & Guardian*, February 16, 2023.

48 Marius Roodt and Terence Corrigan, "Making Coalitions Work: Weight of Responsibility Rests on ANC", *News24*, July 15, 2023.

creating a more just society, fighting corruption and strengthening social cohesion.⁴⁹ Among its provisions, the GNU Statement of Intent also mentions the need for a *lekgotla*⁵⁰ to develop and agree on a policy agenda and a 'clearing house' mechanism that would act as a forum for policy disagreements among GNU partners, presided over by the Office of the Deputy President.⁵¹ However, lacking legal force, these mechanisms depend heavily on political goodwill.

The Basic Education Law Amendment (BELA) Act, passed before the 2024 election, became the GNU's first substantive point of contention and an early stress test for the clearing house mechanism. Tensions emerged when Ramaphosa unilaterally signed the Act into law without consulting coalition partners, despite the absence of an agreement on how to manage such prior commitments under the new coalition.⁵² The DA – now holding the Basic Education portfolio under the GNU – claimed the move negated the 'good faith' basis of the coalition.⁵³ The implementation of Sections 4 and 5 of the Act, containing the most controversial and significant provisions regarding language and admission policies, was postponed pending further deliberation under the clearing house mechanism.

The subsequent handling of the BELA dispute further weakened confidence in the clearing house mechanism. After the mechanism produced a recommendation in favour of full implementation of the bill in its resolution, the DA consented to it, although not without controversy.⁵⁴ Despite earlier endorsements, Helen Zille, chairperson of the DA's Federal Council and part of the mechanism's task force to solve the issue, deemed the mechanism corrupt and prone to manipulation, stating that the DA would not rely on it again.⁵⁵ More recently, the publication of concrete BELA implementation guidelines by DA Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube has been criticised as politically aimed at weakening the new act's most controversial provisions.⁵⁶

As the credibility of the clearing house mechanism eroded, the DA increasingly turned to the courts to resolve internal GNU conflicts. At times, this juridification produced unexpected alignments. In early 2025, the ANC's budget passed only with the support of smaller parties after the DA had joined MK and the EFF in voting against it, primarily over the proposed 2% VAT increase.⁵⁷ The DA and EFF then jointly challenged the legality of the fiscal framework itself, with the Treasury ultimately cancelling the VAT increase

49 ANC, "Statement of Intent of the 2024 Government of National Unity", June 14, 2024, [Statement-of-Intent-of-the-2024-Government-of-National-Unity.pdf](#).

50 A gathering or assembly to discuss important issues.

51 ANC, "Statement of Intent".

52 Noma Maseko and Damian Zane, "Education Reform Row Threatens South Africa Unity Government", *BBC*, September 13, 2024; Paula Ensor, "Explainer: BELA and Its Controversies", *GroundUp*, February 4, 2025.

53 Maseko and Zane, "Education Reform Row"; Paula Ensor, "Explainer".

54 Presidency of South Africa, "Statement by President Cyril Ramaphosa on the Commencement of the Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill", December 20, 2024.

55 *Eyewitness News*, "Politricking with Helen Zille", *YouTube*, July 26, 2025.

56 Takudzwa Pongweni, "Confusion or Clarity? Mixed Reactions to Gwarube's Bela Implementation Guidelines", *Daily Maverick*, June 21, 2025.

57 Rob Rose, "South Africa's Budget Postponed for First Time After Cabinet Rift", *Financial Times*, February 19, 2025.

and the courts affirming the DA–EFF case.⁵⁸ Similar dynamics emerged around the Expropriation Act, passed by an ANC-controlled assembly and signed into law only after the election and challenged by the DA on constitutional grounds before the Western Cape High Court.⁵⁹

While the GNU has so far survived these contentious disputes, they underscore a growing reliance on courts to arbitrate GNU disagreements. This points to a deeper problem than institutional under-design. As critics argue, patterns of unilateral action directed at coalition partners suggest that key ANC actors approach the GNU less as a genuine power-sharing arrangement than as a tactical device.⁶⁰ Under such conditions, effective deadlock-breaking mechanisms are not merely absent but actively undesirable, as a coalition partner intent on regaining unilateral control has little incentive to construct institutions that would constrain its own room for manoeuvre.

Patterns of unilateral action directed at coalition partners suggest that key ANC actors approach the GNU less as a genuine power-sharing arrangement than as a tactical device

Similar dynamics are visible at the provincial and local level. In Gauteng and KZN, coalitions are also held together by statements of intent that are as non-binding and indeterminate as the national one, while municipal coalitions operate without any formal agreements at all. Taken together, this state of play allows several key observations about coalition governance in South Africa.

Firstly, coalitions are fragile from the start. Bringing together parties with deeply divergent ideological commitments and constituency interests means that core issues are often treated as non-negotiable. The BELA Act illustrates this clearly. For the DA, the legislation touched core concerns around language rights and public schooling governance while, for the ANC, it reflected longstanding commitments to uniformity and the assertion of a dominant post-apartheid national project. In the absence of a shared willingness to recognise and accommodate these competing priorities, the existential nature of early disputes embedded antagonism into the GNU from its inception.

Secondly, dispute resolution mechanisms may not be effective if they are non-transparent and thus susceptible to political contestation. While the clearing house mechanism technically resolved the dispute over the BELA Act, it remains opaque, as demonstrated

58 Government of South Africa, Ministry of Finance, “Minister of Finance Consents to Order Suspending Decision to Increase VAT to 15.5%”, April 27, 2025.

59 Siyamtanda Capa, “DA Launches Court Bid to Nullify Expropriation Act”, *News24*, February 10, 2025.

60 Terence Corrigan, “2025 in Retrospect”, *Daily Friend*, December 15, 2025.

by the DA's later contestation of its legitimacy. However, allegations that the mechanism is prone to manipulation have not been substantiated and can lead to impressions of elite bargaining and political play. The adoption of the mechanism's Terms of Reference one year into the GNU confirms its recommending, non-binding function, and now even allows parties to 'agree to disagree', signalling low expectations of internal consensus.⁶¹ Given its limited authority and transparency, coalition partners are likely to continue relying on courts for dispute resolution. To ensure transparency, the GNU should consider taking minutes or publishing objective reports of committee meetings.

Thirdly, a clear framework for coalition-building will be beneficial for future coalitions. The uneven distribution of ministerial positions between the ANC and DA (22 to six) almost derailed coalition formation and created an atmosphere of confrontation and distrust with implications for future tensions and dynamics within the GNU.

Finally, broad principles are hard to enforce and can complicate implementation and accountability. These shortcomings point more to systemic weaknesses in South Africa's current approach to coalition governance than to isolated design flaws, underscoring the need for clearer rules and stronger mechanisms of accountability.

Current legislative proposals and their limits

Several proposals aimed at reducing instability in coalition governments are currently considered by Parliament, mostly focused on local government but with implications for the broader system. The most prominent initiatives come from individual DA members and the IFP-led Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA). While none of the bills has yet advanced beyond the introduction or public comment stages, they mark important attempts to draft legislative innovations for coalition governance in post-majority South Africa.

Concerning the provincial and national levels, the DA's Constitution Nineteenth Amendment Bill, originally introduced by then-DA chief whip Gwarube in June 2023 and re-submitted in 2025, seeks to limit the use of motions of no confidence in the president, cabinet, provincial premiers and executive councils.⁶² It proposes allowing such motions only once every 12 months, except when constitutional or legal violations or serious misconduct occur. The intention is to protect national and provincial coalitions from the fate of constant leadership breakdown seen in local municipalities since 2016. However, lacking cross-party support, the bill remains stuck in Parliament's introductory phase. While the FF+ has shown support, the ANC prefers a CoGTA-driven approach,

61 Government of South Africa, "Deputy President Paul Mashatile Statement on the Adoption of the Terms of Reference of the GNU Clearing House Mechanism", Media Statement, October 29, 2025.

62 Parliament of South Africa, "Constitution Nineteenth Amendment Bill (B1-2025)", accessed February 5, 2026, <https://www.parliament.gov.za/bill/2321674>.

while the EFF rejected the bill outright, stating that such motions are vital for democratic accountability.⁶³ In practice, motions of no confidence have not been deployed frequently at the national or provincial level, and the feared pattern of destabilising leadership churn has not materialised in these spheres.

At the local level, several proposals aiming to amend the 1998 Municipal Structures Act are moving through the legislative process, all seeking improved frameworks for municipal coalition governance. The first two are private members' bills introduced by the DA's George Michalakis between early 2024 and 2025. The Municipal Structures Amendment Bill (B2-2025) focuses primarily on limiting motions of no confidence to unseat key office-bearers in coalition councils.⁶⁴ It does so by capping how often such motions may be brought and requiring that they be screened by independent panels before councils vote on them. The Municipal Structures Second Amendment Bill (B9-2025) addresses coalition formation timelines and electoral thresholds.⁶⁵ By extending the period within which newly elected councils must convene and elect key officials from 14 to 30 days, it gives parties a more realistic time window to negotiate and formalise coalition agreements after elections. Further, it requires parties to reach at least one seat before receiving surplus seats, reducing extreme party fragmentation in municipal legislatures. This means that when major parties proportionally do not fill all the seats in the legislature based on their share of the vote, the rest is given to the next biggest parties even if they got a small number of votes.

In parallel, the CoGTA, then under minister Thembi Simelane (ANC), published its own proposal in early 2024, commonly referred to as the 'Coalitions Bill'.⁶⁶ It represents the most substantive attempt at coalition reform, requiring hung municipalities to move from mayoral systems to a collective executive committee, ensuring all major parties are proportionally represented. It further limits motions of no confidence to once every two years and introduces a 1% electoral threshold for parties to gain seats, reducing micro-party fragmentation. While replacing secret ballots with votes by show of hands for electing or removing key positions aims to counter 'vote-buying' and secret deals, critics argue that abolishing the secret ballot may expose councillors to intra-party pressures rather than allowing them to follow their conscience.⁶⁷

While, under the GNU, the CoGTA portfolio changed hands from the ANC to the IFP, the Coalitions Bill remains the central vehicle for coalition reform at the local level. The multi-party CoGTA portfolio committee in Parliament is pushing to consolidate the bill with

63 Marianne Merten, "DA's Constitutional Amendment Proposal to Limit Coalition Instability After 2024 Election Met with Lukewarm Reception", *Daily Maverick*, September 14, 2023.

64 Parliament of South Africa, "Local Government: Municipal Structures Amendment Bill (B2-2025)", accessed February 5, 2026, <https://www.parliament.gov.za/bill/2321679>.

65 Parliament of South Africa, "Local Government: Municipal Structures Second Amendment Bill (B9-2025)", accessed February 5, 2026, <https://www.parliament.gov.za/bill/2321679>.

66 Department of Co-Operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, "Local Government: Municipal Structures Amendment Bill", *Government Gazette* 707 (May 21, 2024).

67 Olebogeng Mongale and Boikanyo Nkwatle, "From Policy to Practice: Strengthening Local South African Government Coalitions Through Legislation Ahead of the 2026 elections" (Policy & Practice Brief, ACCORD, October 2025).

the DA's proposals, aiming to pass a unified framework before the 2026 local elections.⁶⁸ This signals a cooperative posture among GNU partners amid a growing recognition that voters are becoming intolerant of instability in hung councils.

The bills propose no independent or transparent mechanisms to monitor compliance with set goals and say little about how to manage deadlock on core decisions

Yet, the various proposals also share important limits. Firstly, no bill mandates binding coalition agreements. While the CoGTA draft encourages them, it falls short of requiring detailed pacts that would shift ad-hoc post-election bargaining to the pre-election pact phase, for example by pre-defining proportionality in portfolio allocation, transparency in dispute resolution or what happens when a partner breaks ranks. Further, the bills propose no independent or transparent mechanisms to monitor compliance with set goals and say little about how to manage deadlock on core decisions. Finally, current actions understandably prioritise local governance reform ahead of the upcoming elections, but national and provincial coalitions require similar attention to ensure increased voter trust in cooperative arrangements.

Conclusion and recommendations

South Africans are closely watching coalitions across all spheres of government for signs of improved governance. Increased transparency between citizens and governing coalitions, as well as within coalitions themselves, will only benefit the country's democracy in the long run. Greater transparency will also improve accountability, especially when it rewards durable governance over short-term tactical behaviour. If coalition government is to become a regular and workable feature of South African politics, these deficiencies must be addressed directly.

The legislative initiatives currently before Parliament, despite applying primarily at the local level, converge on three major interventions that should be part of any legislative reform going forward:

- extending the time allowed for coalition formation to avoid compressed timelines that rush deals and incorporate unresolved tensions into coalitions;

⁶⁸ Parliament of South Africa, "[COGTA Committee Calls for Expedited Alignment of Coalition Governance Bills](#)", Media Statement, April 1, 2025.

- containing the use of motions of no confidence to enhance governing stability; and
- introducing modest electoral thresholds to curb excessive party fragmentation.⁶⁹

Further, coalitions should be constituted on the basis of formal, codified, perhaps even legally binding agreements that are publicly available. Such agreements should specify core elements of partnership, including policy priorities and rules governing disputes. Making coalition agreements publicly accessible, through official government and legislative websites, would improve transparency, allow voters to understand the trade-offs underpinning coalition decisions and enable meaningful accountability.

More attention should also be paid to implementing robust oversight mechanisms to monitor party compliance with coalition agreements. Monitoring of how GNU commitments translate into action, as done by the Sivio Institute, demonstrates how process tracking can highlight progress and shortcomings.⁷⁰ A public 'Coalition Tracker' that provides a structured record of the government calendar as well as updates on its workings, meeting records and dispute resolution would be a good way for South Africa's coalition governments to maintain legitimacy. It would also support accountability and transparency. Independent audits, open data and regular assessments that demonstrate coalitions' progress toward commonly agreed goals should be considered good practice and beneficial to all coalition partners.

More attention should also be paid to implementing robust oversight mechanisms to monitor party compliance with coalition agreements

It was to be expected that South Africa's GNU would have some teething problems. But if the record of provincial and local government coalitions is anything to go by, things can often be unpredictable, and stalemates do not benefit citizens. If coalitions are to serve cities and provinces, South Africa must move beyond improvisation and codify rules to ensure that good practice becomes enforceable.

69 South African Institute of Race Relations, "Submission to the National Dialogue on Coalition Governments", July 21, 2023.

70 Yolokazi Mfuto, Eddah Jowah and Rebekah Cross, *Finding Their Feet: South Africa's Government of National Unity First Anniversary Report* (Sivio Institute, September 2025).

Authors

Friedrich von Treskow

is a former visiting fellow at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and MSc candidate in International Political Economy at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Isabel Bosman-Burnett

is a researcher at SAIIA in Johannesburg.

Steven Gruzd

is a programme head at SAIIA.

Acknowledgement

SAIIA wishes to thank the New Futures Fund of the Social Justice Initiative for their generous support for this publication.

About SAIIA

SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

SAIIA's occasional papers present topical, incisive analyses, offering a variety of perspectives on key policy issues in Africa and beyond.

Cover image

Gwede Mantashe, Pieter Groenewald and Leon Schreiber during the swearing-in ceremony of the new National Executive members in July 03, 2024 in Cape Town, South Africa. The new National Executive constitutes the 7th Democratic Administration as a Government of National Unity comprising a diversity of political parties (Misha Jordaan/Gallo Images via Getty Images)

All rights reserved. Copyright is vested in the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the authors, and no part may be reproduced in whole or in part without the express permission, in writing, of the publisher.

The views expressed in this publication/article are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of SAIIA.

Please note that all currencies are in US\$ unless otherwise indicated.



*African perspectives.
Global insights.*

Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021 · Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154
www.saiia.org.za · info@saiia.org.za