

Chapter 9

Critical Reflections on Coalition Politics: Prospects and Challenges From an African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Political coalitions have a deep history which transcends geographical boundaries. The rationale for establishing them varies. In the absence of a guiding framework, coalitions become unsustainable. The aim of this chapter is threefold. Firstly, it traces the history of coalition politics. Secondly, it discusses prospects for successful coalitions. Thirdly, it considers challenges involved in coalition politics. While conceding that coalitions are a global phenomenon, the chapter focuses on Africa. It argues that since the dawn of democracy in Africa, different forms of coalitions have been used with different results. As the number of political parties increase in each election, coalitions have become a reality.

INTRODUCTION

Coalition politics have become a general norm across the globe due to a variety of reasons. While some coalitions are planned, others are necessitated by the outcome of an election. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that some coalitions have survived while others have had a short lifespan. Geys et al. (2006, p. 957), aver that, “coalition formation is often an important part of the political process.” Implicit in this statement is the view that coalitions are a necessity. As mentioned above, coalitions are necessitated by different reasons, hence the different types discussed later in this chapter. One point worth mentioning at the outset is that forming and managing coalition governments is not always an easy task. It needs leadership dexterity and flexibility amongst negotiators. Generally, both coalitions and alliances tend to struggle in managing ideological differences and different interests of coalition partners. At times there are unrealistic expectations from coalition partners. Some are caused by lack of knowledge while

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others are made deliberately for political expediency. It is for this reason that the success of coalition governments depends on the extent to which coalition partners realize and accept the importance of not only finding points of convergence, but also agreeing that there will be times when there will be points of divergence and thus plan for both situations. Failure to do so would render a coalition or alliance a stillborn child with no prospect of ever surviving.

In its general discussion on coalitions, the National Democratic Institute (2015, P. 9) argues that in established and emerging democracies “ruling and opposition parties have formed coalitions to: increase their electoral competitiveness; advocate for democratic reforms; improve their influence in policy formulation; use their limited resources more effectively; and reach agreement on programs for government”. This observation is meant to address the question ‘why’ coalitions are formed in the first place. Surely, no politician would voluntarily aspire to just form a coalition for the sake of it. Certain circumstances must prevail and dictate that forming a coalition is the best way to go. Some of these circumstances prevail even before an election is held. Others do not exist until after an election. Either way, forming an election is driven by a particular need. Politicians respond to that need out of necessity.

There is a view that “one of the main challenges involved in defining coalitions, is how to distinguish them from networks” (Fox, 2010, p. 486). In a nutshell, a coalition government refers to a government in which two or more political parties govern jointly. Generally, this happens when there was no outright winner in an election. This is a post-election coalition. However, there are instances where politicians want to bring a semblance of peace in a volatile political situation or if they realize that the prospects of a single political party gaining an outright majority in the election are either minimal or nonexistent. In such cases, politicians agree upfront (before an election is held) to form a pre-election coalition. In so doing, they must find common ground at least on certain issues of national importance. One of the definitions of a coalition is that it is “a team of individuals or groups that unites for a common purpose” (Strøm and Nyblade, 2007, p. 782). This definition is predicated on the understanding that coalition partners must have a common purpose and certain goals which they hope to realise working as a collective. In the realm of management, the term ‘coalition’ is used to refer to individuals with different interests working together to increase the odds of achieving some goal (Mithani & O’Brien, 2021, p. 172). Here, too, the common denominator is that coalition partners are goal oriented. They might have different interests but there should be something that binds them together – the goal to be achieved. In the present chapter, the working together will be confined to political parties, not individuals. This is because party politics have been the dominant feature in African elections. In South Africa, independent candidates will be allowed for the first time in 2024 to participate in an election. Since 1994, elections have always been contested solely by political parties.

Many democracies globally use this system of governance (coalitions) out of necessity or as a matter of choice. While it is true that certain countries are relatively new in this form of governance, others have vast experience in using it. The reality is that different continents have examples of coalition governments. In Asia, examples of this system of governance include Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, and Iraq, among others. In Europe, examples include but are not limited to Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Germany. Examples from the Oceania region include Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Tonga. The Americas have their own examples. These include Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Chile, and Uruguay. As mentioned above, these lists are not exhaustive. The African continent cannot be insulated from this political reality. Among the African countries that are governed (or have been governed) by coalitions are: Algeria, Gabon, Kenya, Lesotho, and Senegal. This means that there is no region of the world that has not at some point tried coalition governments with varying degrees of

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