

## Chapter 12

# Coalition Government and Democratic Instability: An Analysis of the City of Johannesburg's 2021 Coalition Government

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Since the first local government elections in 2000, South Africa has habitually produced ‘hung councils’, where no political party wins more than 50% of the municipal seats. This chapter examines the 2021 coalition government in the City of Johannesburg and its democratic instability. The chapter argues that one of the factors contributing to this trend of instability in local government is the lack of a conducive environment in which coalition governments can thrive. It also examines coalition governments, taking into account existing theories of democratic principles and theories of coalition formation. The chapter outlines the findings that political ideological struggles and the lack of a conducive democratic environment underpinned the instability of the coalition government in the City of Johannesburg. The chapter also recommends mature coalition political leadership, collaborative governance and a legal framework to strengthen democratic principles in coalition governments.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

South Africa is a constitutional democracy founded on the supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, sec 1(c)). The Constitution is committed to democracy as demonstrated through the values of “universal adult suffrage, a national common voters’ roll, regular elections and a multiparty system of democratic government to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, sec 1(d)). The South African government functions through a quasi-federal system of co-operative government. This system is established in Sec-

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tion 40 of the Constitution, which sets out the three spheres of government: national, provincial, and local (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, sec 3(1)).

Since the first local government elections in 2000, South Africa has habitually produced 'hung councils' where no political party attains more than 50% of the municipal seats. The first local government elections produced 29 hung councils. This increased to 31 in the 2006, 37 hung councils in the 2011 elections, 27 in 2016 (Cooperative Governance Traditional Affairs, 2021) and 66 hung councils in 2021 (The Citizen, 2021).

As contemporary African politics develop, the occurrence of post-election coalitions in particular has become increasingly prevalent in governance (Kadima, 2014, p.1). Likewise, as political dynamics change, it is common for parties to experience vacillating shifts between losses and gains in electoral support. In fact, the emerging trend is that the formation of coalition governments, particularly at municipal levels, are usually preceded by a decline in electoral support (Mokgosi *et.al*, 2017, p. 39).

In August 2016, South Africa experienced its own evolution of party governance when the 5th local government elections held since 1995 led to the absence of a clear majority party winner. The ANC had persistently held the majority across different spheres of government. However, since the 2016 municipal elections, the popularity of the ANC went below 50% for the first time, leading to a multiparty coalition led by the Democratic Alliance (DA). This resulted in a stalemate that was the impetus for the DA-led coalition presiding over the Johannesburg municipality from 2016 to 2019 (Mokgosi *et al.*, 2017, p. 37). This particular period was even more politically curious owing to the fact that it spawned more than 20 hung municipalities, the most pertinent being the focus of this case study (Mokgosi *et.al*, 2017, p. 39).

For the purposes of this chapter, the focus on coalition government will be limited to metropolitan councils, particularly the City of Johannesburg that has consecutively produced hung councils hence the formation of coalitions in 2016 and 2021 (Cooperative Governance Traditional Affairs, 2021). In the City of Johannesburg 2016 municipal elections, neither the ANC, the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) nor the Pan-African Congress (PAC), were able to garner the requisite 50% majority to take control of the municipality. Local as well as international observers were swift to rule out any foul play, and agreed that the elections were indeed transparent and credible. (Mokgosi *et.al*, 2017, p. 37). Prior to this development, no such negotiations concerning the formation of a coalition had been attempted. It is not surprising then that in light of these seemingly hasty political alliances the local government elections invariably raised certain questions about the concept of democracy in South African party politics (Mokgosi *et.al*, 2017, p. 38) and the lengths that parties will go to attempt to steer power and political narrative. The coalition government of the City of Johannesburg in 2021 will form the basis of a case study to be discussed here. The case study presented explores the trend of unstable local government coalitions in Johannesburg following the 2021 local government elections.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF COALITION GOVERNMENTS**

At all three spheres of government, national, provincial and local, one of the strategies used by political parties to secure a governing majority or to consolidate electoral support and maximise results is the formation of coalition governments (Doherty, 2004). Coalitions are, by their nature, arrangements of necessity and strategy and have existed in Africa since the transition from colonialism to independence in the 1960s (Sekatle & Sebola, 2020). From 1994 to 1999, South Africa was constitutionally mandated to be governed by a coalition in the form of the Government of National Unity between the first and

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