


# Chapter 14

## Navigating Coalition Dynamics in the City of Johannesburg: A Lefortian Perspective on Political Power

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter offers a theoretical analysis of coalition politics in South Africa, with a focus on the City of Johannesburg's Metropolitan Municipality. It uses Claude Lefort's political theories to examine the fluctuating dynamics of political power in the nation's coalition governments, particularly at the local government level. The chapter traces the emergence and instability of coalitions, highlighted by the African National Congress' (ANC) loss of majority and the subsequent power shifts in Johannesburg. These changes, including the formation of different coalition arrangements and the 2021 Local Government Elections' outcomes, reflect the unstable nature of coalitions in South Africa. The chapter aims to discuss the impacts of these coalitions on governance quality and service delivery, addressing the broader socio-political and economic challenges of the country. Two case studies, focusing on fiscal management and trust in Johannesburg's coalition government, will provide deeper insights into the practical implications of such political arrangements.*

### INTRODUCTION

In a nation where political alliances are in constant flux, prominent French political theorist Claude Lefort's theories on the shifting political power dynamics offer an intuitive lens through which to scrutinise South Africa's complex coalition politics. Coalition governments in South Africa have increasingly become a feature of the political landscape, particularly at the local government level. The emergence of such arrangements can be traced back to significant shifts in voter sentiment, which has resulted in the traditionally dominant political party, the African National Congress (ANC) losing its outright majority. For instance, the ANC experienced a loss of power for the very first time since the advent of South

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Africa's democracy in the City<sup>1</sup> of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality in 2016. This event marked a historical moment when an informal coalition between the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the relative newcomer to the political scene, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) took the reins of governance (Mawere et al, 2022).

## **BACKGROUND**

Coalition governments in South Africa have often proved to be unstable. As witnessed in Johannesburg, the initial 2016 arrangement between the liberal democratic DA and socialist EFF fell apart. The 'voting arrangement' between the two opposition parties ended before the end of the political term of five years. This came because of Herman Mashaba's resignation as Mayor who was a DA member at the time. The reason for Mashaba's resignation as Mayor and as a DA member was because he felt that the DA had a problem with his approach and leadership style. Moreover, he felt that the party had disagreed with his implementation of EFF policies such as the insourcing of 7,000 workers (Mvumvu, 2019). Mashaba viewed this as a step towards promoting racial integration and addressing economic inequality in Johannesburg.

These events subsequently led to the ANC's return to power in 2019. This episode resulted in the formation of the Government of Local Unity (GLU), and this signified the first formal coalition structure in the city (Makhubo, 2020). Such experiences underline the fluctuating nature of coalitions, as political parties usually aim to complete their five-year term of office as prescribed by the Constitution of South Africa.

The dynamics of coalition governance were again assessed during the 2021 Local Government Elections (LGEs), which saw another power shift. The DA along with a few other political parties formed a new Multi-Party Government (MPG) which ousted the ANC, only to be subsequently replaced by the GLU (Madia, 2022). Throughout these changes, numerous motions of no confidence have been levelled against various mayors in the city, with the GLU managing to retain power. This ever-changing landscape of coalition governance in the city is seen also in other larger municipalities across South Africa such as the City of Ekurhuleni and the City of Tshwane (Mawere et al, 2022). This raises critical questions about the durability, efficacy, and democratic implications of such arrangements, this prevalence in tandem sets the stage for an in-depth examination in this chapter.

In the main, the chapter constitutes a theoretical analysis of the scholarly and non-scholarly theoretical positions on offer from a deep engagement with the literature in political theory within the broad domain of the South African political scene, with a primary focus on Johannesburg. The importance of such an undertaking cannot be overstated as shifting power dynamics have created a potent level of uncertainty within all spheres of life throughout the country. This is especially significant because in 2024 South Africa goes into its seventh general National and Provincial democratic elections (Khoza, 2023). The year also marks 30 years of democracy following apartheid colonialism and domination through white minority rule.

Let us consider how coalition politics in South Africa reflect the evolving socio-political dynamics inclusive of exacerbating economic challenges and a culture of general mistrust among political actors as well as the ordinary citizenry (Katzenellenbogen, 2023). While coalitions offer the potential for significant electoral gains and a more inclusive governance structure, they also bring about challenges in decision-making, owing to the need for negotiation among potential partners.

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