

Chapter 16

Coalitions in South African Local Government and the Implications for Public Service Delivery

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ABSTRACT

The decision to establish coalition governments in South Africa is one that lies firmly on political parties. Ultimately the electorate does not have a say in its formation. It is assumed that representative democracy finds expression in the formation of coalitions. The stability of the government will formally depend on the urges of the elected representatives of political parties in a legislative body. It is more likely to depend on political party leaders who, for various reasons, retain considerable control over the conduct of their elected representatives. Coalitions seem to be the solution when political parties in democracies do not win by outright margins and majority governments have to be constituted. Yet, the way in which political parties and politicians practice coalitions in South Africa means coalitions are, at best, a tense alternative. The South African Constitution of 1996 vests legislative and executive authority in the municipal council. As the highest decision-making body, the council must steer the municipality, determine its strategic direction, and take crucial decisions. In coalitions, this requires close cooperation between coalition partners to ensure that the responsibilities of the council are carried out effectively. This chapter argues that, however, in practice, coalition governments have often been unstable and terminated before the end of the council term. Instability in a local coalition can have a severe impact as it may compromise the municipality's ability to adopt policies and by-laws, make senior management appointments, or even adopt a budget. Ultimately, local communities will continue to bear the brunt of unstable coalition politics. The conclusion is that more stable coalitions will therefore contribute to improved service delivery.

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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of South African politics, coalition governments represent a defining feature of a contemporary governance system that characterise many local municipalities. The notion of coalition governance is in line with the practice of representative democracy – a political system in which the politicians are entitled to represent the electorates in all democratic processes (Bouton, 2013). Since 1994, the majority of South African citizens have been accustomed to one political party dominating the others. This has been a defining feature of the post-apartheid politics at the national, provincial and local government levels (Kinsel, 2009) in essence, coalitions are not a new phenomenon, particularly at a municipal level. It is supported by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) which encourages the notion of freedom of association. Consequently, the South African citizens are entitled to floor crossing or establish new political parties which are in line with the country's post 1994 political system (Dladla, 2019).

This chapter seeks to analyse coalition governance complexities across the South African municipalities and to examine its service delivery implications. As such the thematic areas that are covered in this chapter include, *inter alia* (i) evolution of coalition governance: from global to local experiences (ii) coalition governance and implication for public service delivery in South Africa (iii) legislative and policy framework for coalition governance; (iv) Challenges of coalition governance in South Africa, (v) research methodology and presentation of findings; and (vi) conclusion and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

At the onset of the South African democracy, coalition government was experienced when the late former President Mandela, under the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) co-operated with the opposition parties to form the Government of National Unity (South African History Online (SAHO), 2018). Section 88 of the 1993 Interim Constitution of the Republic of South Africa makes provision for the creation of the Government of National Unity. The GNU played a significant role to transform South Africa and reverse the atrocities of the apartheid regimes and further paved the way for the new set of government policies (SAHO, 2018). It is against this background that various researchers, academics and politicians have noted that coalition governance is not a completely novel practice, rather it has become a popular and growing trend especially after the 2016 and 2021 local government elections in South Africa (Mpangalasane, 2020). The governing ANC has been a dominant political party in the South African political landscape since the attainment of democracy in 1994. The support and political hegemony of the ANC is evident with impressive election outcomes since 1994 at national, provincial and local levels. The party has held a majority of the seats in the National Assembly since 1994, being re-elected with increasing majorities in 1999 and 2004, 2009 and with a slight fall in its support in 2014. During first decade of democracy (1994-2014) the ANC has entrenched strong moral and ethical leadership in the South African society which has also amplified massive social transformation and service delivery outputs (Burgess, Jadwab & Miguel, 2015). However, despite these achievements, the political dominance of the ANC has been gradually eroding (Makgale, 2020). To this end, the outcomes of the local government elections in 2016, and 2021 respectively were indeed a watershed moment for the country's democracy as they introduced a large number of coalition governments in the local government sphere. While the the smaller political parties (Democratic Alliance (DA), Economic Freedom Fight-

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