



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

COALITIONS: LESSONS FROM FINLAND

By Daryl Swanepoel

Coalitions is a hot topic in South Africa. With general elections looming, the ruling party's power and support is ebbing, largely due to corruption and loadshedding. On the other hand, the opposition is steadily gaining support.

In a poll conducted by Ipsos in June 2023, it was revealed that the ruling party's support amongst all eligible voters has systematically been reduced – dropping quite dramatically by 6% in the last six months of that period. Whereas the opposition has been steadily growing to the point where the combined opposition has now overtaken the ruling party.

The ANC does perform somewhat better when considering only registered voters. Realistically, although a lot can change before the elections in May, what could be expected is a medium voter turnout in which the ANC will get around 50% of the vote at the national level. If they fall just below the 50% mark, they will require a smaller party to help them form a governing majority. The opposition parties will battle to put a coalition government together, because under this scenario they will garner only around 39% of the votes. However, in three provinces coalition governments are almost a certainty. The EFF could play quite a kingmaker role in many instances.

That said, South Africa is clearly heading in the direction of a coalition government. But some analysts have suggested that the country is not yet prepared for this eventuality. Its legislation is not ready, and it simply does not have that culture in place, with the parties' tendencies towards stubbornly pushing party agendas and using bullying tactics in government negotiations. And with many people still casting votes based on tradition, history and loyalty, rather than on the basis of informed, rational decisions.

For coalitions to succeed, and function, South Africa needs policy cohesiveness in setting them up, and there must be an acceptable culture of cooperation. This is certainly new terrain for the country, and it will need to draw on the experience of those who have gone before, such as Finland.

In a high-level webinar – hosted by the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI), in conjunction with the Finnish Embassy in South Africa – held late last year, expert panellists were invited to share their knowledge on the Finnish experience on coalitions.

For more than 100 years, Finland has had relatively successful coalition governments, with no party ever being even close to securing a majority of the seats in the Parliament. This stability is in part due to the party system being able to accommodate several different societal conflicts, but also due to the parties being able to evolve over time. Radical ideas and those parties or actors willing to destabilise the status quo have been tamed through offering responsibility, and at the same time, willingness to take responsibility has been expected of them.

However, the South African context is significantly different from the Finnish context. With its fragmented society in terms of racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions, the South African experience is that of a one-party dominated state since 1994. Within this setting, power sharing in practice has often turned out to be at best co-option, if not direct repression, of the opposition.

The factions and their behaviours within most dominant parties and state party systems are remarkably similar, and include patterns of patrimonialism or clientelism which, in one way or another, can also be linked to corruption. And coalitions are not useful for the corruption appetites of dominant parties, as coalitions put a dampener on corruption possibilities.

In Finland's case, parties are more or less medium-sized, and they are not dominant parties. And although there are party loyalties among the supporters, there are also swing voters. So the parties are actually competing for power based on policy programmes rather than identity and political loyalty choices. Voter behaviour in South Africa, and with South Africa not being a mature plural democracy (yet), make the country's coalition success being based on the competition for ideas less probable than in Finland. Coalitions will more likely be formed based on the necessity to achieve a working majority in Parliament.

A key insight gleaned from the webinar was that coalition governments are both a result and precondition of inclusive political systems and institutions – which feeds the stability and legitimacy of the democratic system. In order to form a coalition government, and especially a majority coalition, a number of parties are required to cooperate.

Secondly, even though it is a case of, the bigger the party, the more ministers and the more say they have in the government programme, it is still a negotiation, a coalition, so nobody gets to have all the power. And in that discussions take place within legislated spending limits, parties cannot come with outrageous promises, since they have to work within that fiscal framework.

Thirdly, it is because the Finnish system of coalitions is very much reliant on the "rule-of-law" approach and mechanisms that sustain coalitions, that they are viable. It is these aspects that build trust between the political actors and among the civil society. It allows parties that have had very little trust in each other to make the necessary compromises in order to build healthy coalitions to move the country forward.

Lastly, Finland also has long-held traditions involving civil society organisations, other than parties, in the political arena. In Finnish government negotiations, experts from various fields – from civil society to the ministries or administration and NGOs – are brought in to mediate, and to help build common ground, and to level the playing field.

Coalitions are often thought of in terms of enabling a governing majority. However, coalitions might also be useful in diverse and fragmented societies, such as in South Africa, where it is not necessarily about forming a governing majority, but rather, a way to increase social and political cohesiveness - of course, always guarding against the danger of co-option.

But, trying to build democratic coalitions without the right attitude and political education is foolhardy and will not lead to stability. South Africa would do well to draw lessons from the Finnish experience, and others, in preparation for the country's upcoming elections.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute, This articles draws on the content od the Institute's recent high-profile webinar report Coalitions: Lessons from Finland.