

Navigating the complexities of coalition politics

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SOUTH Africa has entered the era of coalition politics – an era which is possibly going to stay for decades to come. There is certainly a projection that there will be an increase in coalitions in the national elections set to take place this year.

The 2021 local government elections highlighted the pressing issue of hung councils in major metropolitan areas. The often chaotic and unstable nature of the precarious coalition arrangements entered into by the competing political parties in these hung councils has had devastating effects on service delivery and municipal administration, particularly where highly contested municipalities are concerned. This instability led to the removal of Johannesburg's mayor, Mpho Phalatshe, and council speaker Vasco da Gama in the City of Joburg.

While legislative and constitutional factors play a role, it's apparent that the crux of the problem lies in the realm of politics. Coalition governments in local municipalities are often formed out of convenience rather than a shared ideology, which has resulted in instability, factionalism, and administrative disruptions.

The problems created show there is a need to reassess the autonomy of local government, and find ways to navigate the complex landscape of coalition politics for effective municipal governance.

Coalition politics involve multiple political parties collaborating to form a governing body when no single party secures an absolute majority, as is the

case in South Africa's proportional representation system. The Constitution predominantly follows a majoritarian system, where the majority party forms the government, raising questions about its suitability for local governance.

Coalition formation involves several key considerations, such as agreeing on policy agendas, ensuring an equitable distribution of political positions, recognising key roles, and formalising coalition agreements, although these are not legally binding.

Coalition politics offers both advantages and disadvantages for South African municipalities, necessitating thorough research and risk analysis. This needs to be strengthened.

Advantages of coalitions
Coalitions encourage decision-making based on consensus and the consideration of diverse party views.

Reduced regionalism: They favour nationalism over regionalism, fostering balanced regional aspirations.

Checks on dominant parties: Coalitions diminish the dominance of a single political party, promoting a more balanced political landscape.

Enhanced governance: By pooling resources and expertise, coalitions can lead to more effective governance.

Broadened support: Collaborative efforts attract investors and expand support networks.

Information exchange: Coalitions facilitate the exchange of information, skills, materials, and collaboration opportunities.

Advocacy safety: They provide a safe platform for advocacy efforts, especially in hostile political environments.

Resource pooling: Coalitions maximise financial and human resources by consolidating them.

Leadership development: Participation in coalitions fosters the development of new leadership skills among members.

Disadvantages of coalitions
Instability: They often result in unstable governments, leading to delays and disagreements on key issues.

Bureaucratic processes: Managing coalitions can be time-consuming and bureaucratic, diverting attention from service delivery.

The dominance of larger parties: Larger parties may overpower smaller ones, leading to an unequal distribution of power within coalitions.

Conflict and compromise: Partners may have to compromise their stances, causing internal conflicts and resentment.

Recognition issues: Individual parties may not receive due credit for their work, leading to disputes within the coalition.

Dissenting views: Shared decision-making can lead to dissenting views and slow progress on critical matters.

Resource constraints: Limited resources can hinder the implementation of policies and programmes.

Credibility risk: If a coalition breaks down, it can harm the credibility of all its members.

Monitoring challenges: Activities within coalitions can be challenging to monitor and evaluate, making it difficult to assess their impact on governance.

Addressing these challenges

needs strategic interventions:
Strengthening legislation on votes of no confidence: Legislation should be revised to limit the excessive use of votes of no confidence motions, preventing governance disruptions.

Specific legislation for coalition governance: Tailored legislation is required to govern coalition processes, including provisions for the public disclosure of coalition agreements. Public disclosure legislation should be implemented to mandate the written, public disclosure of coalition agreements, enhancing transparency and ensuring political accountability.

Revising election timelines: The current 14-day timeline for newly elected councils to select office-bearers is often insufficient for coalition negotiations, particularly in hung councils. Extending this period would provide more time for parties to form stable coalition agreements and contribute to better governance.

Electoral system reform: Reforming the electoral system to allow for a more direct representation of voters' choices and preferences can help restore faith in democracy.

Municipal committees can play a significant role in strengthening coalitions. Smaller, focused committees can provide oversight and scrutiny over the implementation of coalition agreements, enabling more engagement and monitoring of compromises agreed upon within the coalition.

Consider overhauling the executive mayor system in favour of a fixed executive committee system. Executive committees, fixed by law and not subject to majority rule, could contribute to more stable governance, even in

the event of a coalition collapse. Legislation already provides for executive committees, and more municipalities could adopt this system.

The nature of coalitions requires the highest form of oversight coupled with accountability. Legislation can play a role in the enforcement of legal consequences when parties to a coalition agreement fail to abide by the terms and conditions of an agreement, whereby the consequences become that a coalition collapses. The party in breach must be held liable in law and thus accountable.

The complexities of coalition politics in municipalities reflect the evolving nature of democratic governance. Success hinges on political parties prioritising the interests of the electorate over their own, and committing to transparency, compromise, and effective governance.

By navigating these complexities with a clear vision of serving the people, South Africa can advance towards more stable and accountable coalition governance at the municipal level.

Our democracy deserves a system where municipalities function efficiently, providing essential services to our citizens, and coalitions can be a part of that if managed wisely.

Sithole has an MSc from the University of London and an LLB from the University of the Witwatersrand. This op-ed is based on the article "Coalitions in SA local municipalities: Is the Constitution enabling democracy or not?" in the Inclusive Society Institute's "Journal for Inclusive Public Policy".