



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

The Fragility of the Government of National Unity: A Critical Examination

By Daryl Swanepoel

The recent developments in Parliament with regard to the national budget present a significant challenge for the Government of National Unity (GNU). The Democratic Alliance's (DA) decision to vote against the budget has raised pivotal questions about the future of this GNU and its ability to maintain stability in the long run.

When assessing the political dynamics currently on display, one must consider the implications of these decisions and their potential impact on governance. The fundamental question arises: Can the GNU endure when a key party within it, such as the DA, votes against the very budget they are expected to implement?

This situation is deeply problematic and calls into question the legitimacy and integrity of the GNU itself. If a party publicly opposes budgetary measures, how can it remain committed to implementing them? The contradictions pose a significant threat to the unity and functionality of government.

From the ANC's vantage point, there seems to be different views emerging with regard to the DA's continuation within the GNU. The first perspective leans toward the understanding that the DA's opposition to the budget is untenable for its continued participation in the GNU. Those who subscribe to this view argue that to vote against the budget is to fundamentally reject the government's policies, thus complicating the coherence necessary for effective governance.

On the other hand, there are voices within the ANC that advocate for the retention of the DA in the GNU. The rationale being that the DA's departure could risk destabilising government further, especially when considering that the alternative parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the MK Party also voted against the budget. If the DA needs to be nudged out of the GNU because it cannot align with the budgetary agenda, then what credible reasoning would there be to include other opposition parties that voted against the budget?

The scenario suggests a potential pivot toward a minority government, which raises its own set of challenges. While some in the ANC might view this as a workable alternative, it is crucial to understand that forming such a government is not merely a decision that can be made internally. For a minority government to gain traction, it will require the support of parties that are not part of the GNU. Without winning the approval of more than 50% of the legislature, it will be unable to push through critical legislation and could fall in a vote of no confidence.

From the DA's vantage point, the need to reassess its role within the GNU is becoming increasingly immediate. When agreeing to join the GNU they set out a series of non-negotiable "red lines," which included significant national issues such as the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act, the National Health Insurance Act, legislation enabling the expropriation of property without compensation and a budget that does not increase Value-Added-Tax. Yet, they did not impact these matters as they were

all passed in the original form. This now poses an existential question for the DA: What is the point of their continued participation in the GNU from which they seem to derive little influence or benefit?

Failure to effect meaningful change casts a shadow over the DA's credibility. At what point might their supporters start questioning whether their continued involvement in a government that does not align with their values amounts to co-option. The risk is palpable.

As the DA navigates this precarious terrain, it faces mounting pressure to demonstrate effectiveness within the GNU, because if they cannot assert their position and enact changes to reflect their constituents' concerns, they may find themselves vulnerable. The complexities within the DA also illustrate a nuanced internal struggle. For instance, the party's ministers publicly downplay the repercussions of contentious policies like expropriation without compensation, while the party is simultaneously challenging the constitutionality of such measures in court.

This duality creates a perception of inconsistency, which could further alienate their base who are increasingly questioning how the DA can reconcile these divergent stances on key legislative issues, when their actions seem to contradict their principles?

Recent developments regarding the VAT increase serve as a stark reminder of this disconnect. DA ministers in government will be implementing a budget which their own party is challenging in court as being illegal on the grounds of procedural flaws. This underscores the tension between their political obligations and their legislative platform.

Furthermore, the publicly pronounced position of prominent party figures articulating distrust in the ANC's intentions, adds to the toxic atmosphere surrounding inter-party relations within the GNU.

The fragility of the GNU necessitates a careful examination of the socio-political landscape. As the DA appears to inch closer to the possibility of withdrawing from the GNU, it raises the question of what that withdrawal would mean for the future of governance in South Africa.

The potential dissolution of the GNU looms as a portent of instability not only for the DA and the ANC, but for South Africa as a whole. Looking ahead, the uncertainty surrounding the GNU suggests that it is, at best, a fragile arrangement. While it may hold for the foreseeable future, very little indicates that it possesses the resilience required to endure significant political challenges in the longer-term.

Should the DA ultimately decide to exit, or be nudged out by the ANC, the resultant power vacuum could lead to chaotic governance, particularly if alternative coalitions do not emerge to fill that void. The impact on societal stability and business confidence is worrying.

In conclusion, the current situation surrounding the Government of National Unity shows the complexity of having to weigh ideological considerations against electoral imperatives. With the DA's growing disillusionment and the ANC's mixed signals regarding the DA's future in the GNU, the political landscape is precarious. If this coalition fails to address the legitimacy of its participants and the coherence of its policies, South Africa could face a concerning period of political fragmentation.

As we observe these dynamics unfold, it becomes increasingly clear that the sustainability of the Government of National Unity is contingent upon its ability to adapt, communicate effectively, and foster collaboration among its diverse constituents. Without achieving these aims, the prospects for lasting unity appear dim.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute