

## Coalitions

19 May 2023

Since the 2021 local government elections, several municipalities have been governed by coalitions. It has not been a happy experience. Johannesburg recently had its eighth mayor elected in eight years. In Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Nelson Mandela Bay power has been bouncing around between the major parties like ping-pong balls.

Position, power, and patronage determined the formation of the councils, and governance fell by the wayside. It was and is about who will govern, not how they will govern.

The term of the current parliament comes to an end in May 2024, and a national election must then be held. (The Constitution allows for some postponement.) Currently, opinion polls and by-election results indicate that we may face a situation where no single party will have 50% plus one, leading to a coalition government at national level. In the light of what has been happening in municipalities, this possibility fills many people with horror.

## National numbers

Elections are a numbers game. Currently, opinion polls put the African National Congress (ANC) in the mid-forties, the Democratic Alliance (DA) in the mid-twenties, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) below 15% and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and ActionSA at between 4% to 5% each. Each of the three major parties are roughly twice the size of the next one.

A massive shift would have to occur for the DA to become the biggest party (the premise of the 'Moonshot Pact'), for the EFF to overtake the DA, and for the IFP or ActionSA to overtake the EFF. The overwhelming probability is that the ANC will still be the biggest party after the next election, followed by the DA and the EFF.

Several new parties have created much excitement. The test is how many votes they could garner. In the 2019 national elections 48 parties registered but only 14 made it to the National Assembly. Of those 14, four parties (the ANC, DA, EFF and IFP) garnered 92% of the vote and 10 shared the remainder. Many small parties feature in the South African political landscape and every election has seen newly formed parties.

The biggest question in South African electoral politics concerns the millions of eligible voters who have increasingly chosen to stay away on voting day. Will they vote this time round? If yes, for whom will they vote? We simply do not know and will have to wait for the votes to be counted.

## A comeback?

Could the ANC still clear the 50% hurdle? Two factors could make this happen.

- 1 First there is load-shedding. Our proprietary research, shared with clients, indicate that sufficient renewable power and storage is set to come online over the next year to alleviate (not terminate) load-shedding. Almost all this new capacity is being built by the private sector, which is no doubt in a hurry to connect to the grid (these projects all have access to the grid). An alleviation of load-shedding may work in favour of the ruling party. If the election is postponed, it will benefit the ANC more.
- 2 The second factor is the social-grant system. The social-distress relief grant of R350 per month, which 10 million people currently receive, is scheduled to end on 31 March 2024. The chances of the grant being terminated two months before an election are absolutely zero. It is more probable that the grant will be made permanent, dolled up a bit and its name changed to 'basic income grant'. It will infuriate both the left and the right, but it may encourage a lot of voters to, once again, entrust their votes to the ANC.

Whether these two factors can negate the anger of the populace at load-shedding, increasingly dysfunctional municipalities and ever more news of corruption remains to be seen. Again, we will have to wait for the votes to be counted.

## Forming a coalition

Let's now turn to the possibility that the ANC does not get to 50% plus one, necessitating a coalition government at national level.

During April, the three main parties of the centre, the IFP, the DA and the ANC, all showed their hands on coalitions.

The IFP's Mkhuleko Hlengwa, chair of Parliament's Select Committee on Public Accounts (Scopa), succinctly summarised the IFP's position. Their core values for a coalition are democracy, equality, social justice, economic development, and honest leadership. Going beyond those five values, he added: 'It is essential that we create an environment and an engagement of parties that can work successfully should the electorate not give one political party a 50% majority in 2024.' So not just values, but also an inclusive style of politics. Very important in an election year.

Also in April, the ANC outlined a framework on local government coalitions, which will presumably apply to the national level too. The framework states: 'Coalition partners must also commit to shared values – stability, accountability, ethics and integrity, community participation, good governance, respect for the Constitution and the rule of law, social justice and equity, human dignity, non-racialism and non-sexism.' These values do not seem too far removed from those of the IFP. On paper at least, values will not be a big problem.

The ANC framework also listed several principles on which a coalition should be based. Ten days later, though, these principles were roundly ignored in the election of the Johannesburg mayor. ANC members, activists and supporters have their work cut out for them to get their party to stick to its adopted framework.

DA leader John Steenhuisen, in his re-election acceptance speech on 2 April, did not refer to specific values, but put the focus on who would be included and excluded in a coalition – the 'Moonshot Pact'. He was very clear: the EFF is the DA's public enemy number one, and no grouping or party that has 'tethered itself' to the ANC would be welcome in the 'Moonshot' coalition. It's a very rigid stance, and he may have painted himself and his party into a corner. Here too, members, supporters and activists will have to work to get their party out of that corner. However, most DA members would agree with the values listed by the IFP as well as the more detailed list of the ANC.

The ANC's first stop for a coalition partner will probably be the IFP and some of the other smaller parties. If between them they can make 50% plus one, that will be the government. If they cannot reach the threshold, the ANC would have to cast their net wider.

### A grand coalition

Irrespective of whether there is a 50% plus one outcome, 2024 is an ideal opportunity to establish a coalition of the democratic centre.

It is clear from the above that the three parties can find sufficient common ground to work together. The real moonshot would be uniting the middle in a grand coalition that would have the support of 70% or more of the voters.

It will provide the stability, social cohesion, and unity of purpose to get the job of proper governance done. By now it should be clear that to realise the promise of the Constitution, political stability, a very capable state, and a national will are required. All will be well served by a grand coalition.

We have seen repeatedly that the vast majority of South Africans are not extremists. They all want the same outcome: a society with much less unemployment, inequality, violence, and crime. A society where the dignity of all people is manifested in every person's everyday life. If the values and the goals can be agreed on (which the parties of the centre do), differences of opinion on how to get there are surmountable.

### So what?

- We run the risk of South Africa's democracy being delegitimised by the instability and failure in local government, and more broadly, by the failure to restore the dignity of all citizens as promised by the Constitution.
- The country is in many ways where it was in the late 1980s – it again requires a political initiative to get out of the quagmire and set out on a new trajectory.
- A grand coalition of the parties of the middle may be the launchpad for such a new beginning.