

COALITION POLITICS AND SOUTH AFRICA

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Research Question:

What types of parliamentary coalitions can be formed and how does this process work?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Coalition governance has long been a feature of African parliamentary politics, particularly within the South African context which will serve as a case-study throughout this essay in understanding the types of parliamentary coalitions found on the African continent, as well as the processes that allow them to function. Three major forms of coalitions and alliances have surfaced on the African continent and within South African politics, that have been distinguished by the theories that underpin them. Namely, these informing theories are that of size, ideology, and prevention, which will be further unpacked in the discussion to follow.

However, before unpacking these underpinning theories and the impact they have on coalitions within South Africa and the boarder African continent, a distinction must be made between the terms ‘alliance’ and ‘coalition’ along the parameters defined in the literature. ‘Alliance’ refers to the coming together of at least two political parties prior to an election in order to maximize their votes, while ‘coalition’ refers to the association of at least two political parties to work together in government on the basis of election outcomes. (Wyatt, 1999)

Many African countries, such as Kenya and Malawi, operate within a system of plurality; where the winner is the party with the greatest number of votes. Additionally, these states make use of electoral quotas, where parties must receive a certain percentage of votes to be allocated a seat within the national legislature. As a result, pre-election alliances are widespread within these states to ensure political partners are able to maximize the votes they receive, and stand a greater chance of being represented in government. (Kadima, 2014:8) However, South Africa makes use of a proportional electoral system, which inherently maximizes the vote of every individual. Each vote contributes to the make-up -by percentage- of its national legislature, and as a result of this maximization, coupled with the absence of an electoral quota, an environment is created where there is little need for the formation of pre-election alliances. Even smaller parties, with adequate voter bases, are able to be represented in parliament. Thus, the relevance and prevalence of pre-election alliances within South Africa are minimal at best. Therefore, this

essay will maintain a heavy focus on post-election coalitions; particularly their formation, their weaknesses and their viability as a national form of government.

II. A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON COALITION POLITICS

The emergence of coalition politics on the African continent

Included in the many colonial activities of Europe within Africa in the 17th Century, were the redrawing of state boundaries on the continent, in total disregard of the existing populations and cultural boundaries that presupposed their arrival. This colonial practice created African states that were diverse in their ethnic, religious, and linguistic make-up; formed and held together entirely by European economic interest. (Kadima, 2014:6) As foreseeable, the separation and clumping of vastly diverse peoples and cultures later gave rise to serious concerns of national and governmental cohesion upon the arrival of independence, as new and plentiful political parties and alliances formed along secular ethnic lines. (Bogaards, 2008) Different African states posed different solutions to the issue of national and governmental cohesion, with most opting early-on for the establishment of a single-party system - such as Cameroon and Tanzania - while fewer states sought a collation of these ethnic interest parties as an answer to governmental and national cohesion, such as Mauritius.

However, this trend ultimately reversed with the dismantling of single-party rule during the early 1990s, and the subsequent spread of multi-party systems across the continent. The re-introduction of political plurality across Africa aided the resurgence and wide-spread adoption of coalition politics (Kadima, 2014:7); as coalitions not only provided an avenue of accommodation for the multitude of special interest parties that existed within these states, but additionally, coalition politics provided a platform for multi-party consensus that created an overall perception of national cohesion. South Africa, in particular, was no exception to this trend.

South Africa's rich history with coalition politics

Democratic South Africa has long fostered a relationship with coalition politics, starting at its very inception with the inclusion of a Government of National Unity (GNU) within the nation's Interim Constitution of 1993, requiring that parties who had achieved a minimum of 10% of the national vote, form a part of the national executive. (Booyesen, 2014:72) This saw the legislated coming-together of the African National Congress (ANC), a multiracial party, as well as the National Party (NP) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), of whom both advocated for different secular ethnic interests, in a government aimed at national cohesion and coalition governance. Ultimately, the GNU provision was excluded from the final Constitution of the Republic, and in subsequent election cycles, the growth in electoral dominance of the ANC (Kadima, 2014:9) eliminated the need for the formation of coalitions for the party to govern; and thus heralded the demise of coalition politics within South Africa's national sphere. However, coalition governance continued to play a part of South Africa's provincial sphere, where coalitions existed between the ANC and the IFP to govern the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal in 2004. (Booyesen, 2014:80) Additionally, coalition politics trickled into South Africa's local government sphere, spurred on by the myriad of hung municipalities left in the wake of the 2016 Local Government Elections, that required multi-party coalitions to run some of South Africa's largest Metros. (Mahlati, 2022)

However, despite South Africa's rich history with coalition politics, many political parties often displayed a reservation to the practice, informed by the respective trends that coalition politics has had on both senior and junior signatories. Senior parties often eat away at the voting base of their juniors (Kadima, 2014:10); speaking to the hesitation of smaller parties entering into long-term coalitions. This is evident in the steady decline of IFP support in Kwa-Zulu Natal during the late 2000's, with the growing strength of the ANC in the same province; to the eventuality that the ANC was able to govern without the need of a ANC-IFP coalition. Moreover, the tendency of senior partners to swallow their juniors is demonstrated in the Independent Party's eventual disintegration into its coalition partner, the Democratic Alliance, in the Western Cape province. Additionally,

reservations existed from senior parties, as the volatility of recent political coalitions in South African Metros, such as the City of Johannesburg or the Municipality of Nelson Mandela Bay with executives in continuous turn-over (Mahlati, 2022), have dissuaded senior parties from the utility of coalitions, as despite achieving a plurality of the electoral support, their governance will ultimately be held hostage by the representatives of a much smaller portion of the electorate.

However, this reservation held for coalitions within South Africa has shifted dramatically over the past two years, as the declining support of the ANC reached a new low with the political juggernaut's first cumulative result below 50% of votes cast in 2021. (Mahlati, 2022) This spurred the very real possibility that a return of functional coalition politics, in almost 25 years of absence from the national sphere of government, was now imminent. In the wake of the 2021 election, many political parties have implemented internal structures and frameworks as to how they will approach coalitions. (Mahlati, 2022) However, to better understand what a possible South African national coalition would look like, an interrogation is demanded on the different forms of coalitions and the factors that have driven their formation within the nation, and moreover on the continent, allowing us to assess how they may manifest in our very near future.

III. COALITIONS UNDERPINNED BY THE THEORY OF SIZE

Definition and underlying objectives

The theory of size speaks to coalitions formed between political actors with the sole purpose of meeting the minimum requirements to form a government, in a coalition that includes as few political parties as possible. This form of coalition is one that speaks to the power-seeking nature of political parties, where cabinet portfolios serve as payoffs for coalition partners, and are maximized by the small number of parties it is to be shared amongst. (Riker, 1962) Furthermore, coalitions formed under the theory of size, pay special heed to the political regime of the nation, particularly within parliamentary regimes such as Mauritius and South Africa,

where the longevity of government is at the discretion of parliament. (Kadima, 2014:8) As a consequence, partners place emphasis in ensuring the cohesion of the governing coalition, a task made easier by the small number of partners who are large enough only to meet the threshold for the legislature's confidence.

Spheres of South African politics and the theory of size

Within South Africa, a parliamentary regime utilizing proportional representation, the need has yet to arise for a national coalition underpinned by the theory of size, due to the electoral domination of the ANC who have far exceeded the 50% mark in parliamentary elections since 1994. However, on the smaller scale of provincial and local government - where ANC dominance is less prevalent - there exists numerous coalitions that have formed with the primary objective of seeking power. Such an example includes the short-lived union of ActionSA and the Democratic Alliance (DA), along with other smaller parties, within the City of Johannesburg after no single party achieved a majority in the 2021 Local Government Elections (LGE). The DA and ActionSA, in the run-up to the 2021 LGE, were often involved in heated de-campaigning against one-another - as the latter was a splinter of the former. (McMichael, 2020) However, both parties entered into a coalition in pursuit of control over the Johannesburg City Council and coveted Executive positions such as Members of the Mayoral Committee (MMCs), of which ActionSA were appointed to three, and the Mayoral post, of which the Democratic Alliance secured. This multi-party coalition was able to achieve moderate success, however - almost a year later - Action SA pulled out of the coalition in citing a break-down in the relationship between the DA, and itself. (Mahlati, 2022) Subsequently, when the opposition called for motions of no-confidence against the DA Mayor and Speaker, without the necessary votes in the legislature to stay on, they were ultimately removed from power. This highlights the necessity of the partners in these forms of coalitions to place emphasis on maintaining a stable and strong relationship, because of the vulnerable position the defection of a single signatory would have on the overall stability of government, and speaks to the greater volatility of coalitions founded largely under the theory of size.

Implications on a national stage

The functioning of this form of coalition in the microcosm of local government politics, is indicative of the manner in which the theory of size may function in a national setting. Coalitions underpinned by the power-seeking nature of this theory would be highly volatile and unstable, unless its partners placed sufficient emphasis in maintaining unity, of which many major parties at a local level, such as the DA, have failed to do.

IV. COALITIONS FORMED BY THE THEORY OF IDEOLOGY

Definition and underlying objectives

The theory of ideology speaks to coalitions and alliances formed between political actors with policy-seeking intentions, where all coalition partners share common ideology and policy goals. These forms of coalitions aim to maximize the benefits of their arrangement and minimize the policy cost of coalition bargaining, by aligning themselves with ideologically related movements. (Axelrod, 1970) It must be noted that these forms of coalitions are not limited to parties whom wish to govern, but also assist smaller parties that seek a larger impact with-in the national legislature. Ideologically similar coalitions also display a greater degree of longevity and stability as partners need not make greater compromises in their formation and, in some cases, their governance. (De Swaan, 1973)

Ideology homogeny across the continent

Across Africa, coalitions underpinned by the theory of ideology are far and few in-between, because of the lack of discernible diversity in the policy of many of its political parties. (Kadima, 2014:14) This can be attributed to the fact that many African states face the same colonial-spawned struggles of poverty and lack of access to both education and health. As a result, many political parties in Africa list similar objectives, and collectively agree upon the role of national government as a driver of socio-economic development within the State.

Ideological coalitions in South Africa

Still, a small number of African countries, such as Mauritius and South Africa, have a discernible left and right within their respective political spectrums. However, the majority of the electorate and political actors within these states find themselves in the centre of this spectrum, with similar ideas and views on governance. (Kadima, 2014:14) As a result of this overpowering centrist consensus, it is often the fringe parties in these countries that form coalitions based on ideology (ideology that often has ethnic and social subfactors), so as to pool resources and gain a larger voice in these respective legislatures. An interesting case study of such is the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) of South Africa, a conservative right-wing political party that is the result of a coalition-merger of namely three separate political parties; the Freedom Front, the Conservative Party, and the Afrikaner Eenheidsbeweging. (Gottschalk & Kotze, 2019) All three of these parties held adjacent ideologies stemming from their shared Afrikaans nationalist social cleavage, and were united in their collective policies strongly opposing affirmative action and land expropriation without compensation. These parties formed themselves into a political alliance, that soon amalgamated into the coalition party known as the FF+, which has seen steady growth in every election cycle since, attributed to this expansion on a basis of ideology, and through social cleavage by appealing not only to the white electorate-but to the Afrikaans speaking coloured electorate as well. (Gottschalk & Kotze, 2019)

Ideological coalitions in the national sphere

The viability of such coalitions built on ideology, and to an extent social cleavage, are vastly restricted to smaller parties on a national scale in South Africa because of the lack of its utility to national players. The dominance of centrality within major parties such as the ANC and the DA, means that there is no need for a collation on the basis of ideological preservation and policy influence. Moreover, major South African political parties boast a racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse membership (Booyesen, 2014:86), that eliminates the utility of appealing to a specific social cleavage. Thus, coalitions formed under the theory of ideology are not as appealing to the juggernauts of South African politics as coalitions on the

theory of size are, illustrating how ideology seems to be more the interest of smaller fishes. Thus, coalitions informed by the theory of ideology have - and to my assessment - will continue to play a limited role in South Africa's national coalitions.

V. AGREEMENTS FOUNDED ON THE THEORY OF PREVENTION

Definition and underlying objectives

The theory of prevention is a novel idea that underpins agreements and loose forms of unofficial coalitions between political parties in South Africa. Its rise to prevalence is a fairly recent phenomenon, and in my research, I have come across no literature discussing the underlying theory of such a coalition, and have thus coined the term for the theory myself. The theory of prevention speaks to an unofficial 'coalition-adjacent' agreement in hung legislatures between political parties - who do not share common ideology and have no intention of sharing power - to assist one another in the election of positions and passage of budgets, so as to prevent a common adversary from forming a majority coalition. However, by their very nature, these agreements are a weak backing of government and contribute to an extremely unstable environment, as there is no solid agreement between a majority of the legislature as to how it will conduct its business beyond the election of its officials.

The antagonistic force of the Economic Freedom Fighters

The theory of prevention has risen to prevalence in local sphere of South African politics as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party have come to dominate the role of king-maker in provincial and local legislatures across the country. The EFF is a socialist left-wing splinter-party of the ANC (Caldwell, 2013), that has consistently grown support in every election since its formation in 2013. Since its inception, the EFF has fervently criticized both major parties in South Africa. The party often exchanges harsh words with the ANC - whom it aims to represent itself as an alternative to - by asserting the ANC has failed to deliver on the socialist

promises it presented to the populace. Additionally, the EFF has had serious public conflict with the DA, a moderate and centre-right party, because of its classical neo-liberal views which are in direct conflict with the ideologies of EFF on race, economy and social structure. (Mahlati, 2022) Thus, in its emergence as the third largest party in South Africa, the EFF has become an antagonist to both the ANC and the DA.

The application of the theory of prevention in South Africa

In the aftermath of the 2016 LGE, the ANC dipped below the necessary 50% to form a majority government in the City of Johannesburg. Within this hung City Council, the EFF agreed to back its ideological antagonist, the DA, by supporting the DA's candidates for Speaker and Mayor, as well as passing the DA's budgets with certain concessions. (Schröder & Tau, 2021) There existed no official coalition agreement between these two parties, but there was consensus that such action was necessary to prevent the ANC from forming an alternative coalition and retaking control of the Council once again. Thus, it was not an agreement held together by power-seeking or policy-seeking objectives, but one that sought to prevent another opposition party from gaining legislative and executive control. However, as expected by a consensus with no defined parameters - other than the setting up of government – and rooted in the sole objective of political prevention; the agreement collapsed, and the EFF withdrew its support for the DA's appointments in 2019. Shortly after, a motion of no-confidence was called against the City Speaker and Mayor, where they were ultimately defeated and replaced by members of an ANC-led coalition. (Mahlati, 2022) Yet, the practice of prevention politics was not inhibited by its poor longevity in the aftermath of the 2016 LGE, as a similar sequence of events unfolded in 2021 within the City of Johannesburg; where the EFF once again voted alongside the DA in support of its candidates, but entered into no official coalition with them.

National governance under this form of coalition

Thus, such a coalition forming within the national sphere of politics is entirely plausible within South Africa due to its high prevalence on a local government

level, and the apparent affinity of the EFF for such a practice, bolstered by the ample opportunity it will have in a hung national legislature as the third largest political party in the country. (Mahlati, 2022) However, such an agreement underpinned by this theory would culminate in an extremely unstable government. Moreover, unlike the volatility of a coalition underpinned by the theory of size, there exists no continuing and tangible benefit for one party - other than the denial of access to political adversaries - and no such framework to maintain good-faith between partners. This leaves the officials appointed by such an agreement extremely vulnerable to dismissal by motions of no-confidence, and facing great difficulty in reaching consensus for the passage of major legislation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Coalition governance has become a prevalent and relevant a feature of African parliamentary politics, particularly now within South Africa, as the nation faces the possible resuscitation of national coalition governance after 25 years of ANC dominance. Thus, this essay has maintained a heavy focus on the possible post-election coalitions within South Africa - through its enquiry on the types of African parliamentary coalitions and processes - by asking and answering questions of their formation, their weaknesses and their viability as a national form of government.

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