



Municipal Coalitions – A Viable Way Forward?

1. Introduction

More than month after the official results of the 2021 Local Government Elections were released, the mayoral committees of at least three major cities had not been finalised. Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni were all 'won' by the Democratic Alliance, and that party's nominees duly took up the two most important roles, mayor and speaker, in all of them. As for the remaining executive positions – effectively the political heads of the various portfolios – the horse-trading dragged on an on.¹

A similar situation obtained in Ethekwini, where the ANC was helped into the mayoral seat by a couple of small parties, African Democratic Change and Abantu Batho Congress, which were insisting on the chairperson positions of some of the most important portfolios.²

Elsewhere, in some district and local municipalities where no party managed an outright majority, small parties were demanding mayoral or deputy-mayoral posts as a condition for supporting either the ANC or the DA despite, in some cases, obtaining as little as 5% of the vote.

All this shows how difficult it is to form workable coalitions in South Africa and, even if they can be put together, how difficult it is going to be to sustain them for any length of time. Such uncertainty and instability, in turn, is bound to have a negative impact on already poor levels of service delivery, and will merely reinforce the

perception that the majority of local government politicians are focused more on their own advancement than on meeting the needs of voters.

2. Welcome Surprise or Poisoned Chalice?

2.1. The DA in Gauteng

Ordinarily, any party winning less than a third of the votes in three major cities, and yet walking away with the mayoralty in each of them, would consider itself to be a big winner. This is what happened to the DA in Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni, where it managed only 26%, 32% and 29% respectively, compared to the ANC's 33.6%, 34% and 38%. (The DA was also markedly down on its 2016 performance, when it won 38%, 43% and 34% in these cities.)

The DA's 'wins' were due to the support that its candidates for mayor, deputy-mayor and speaker received from the EFF and ActionSA in these metros, as well as the votes of some much smaller parties. This support rather flew in the face of the DA's refusal to contemplate any coalition with the EFF, and the cold shoulder it offered to ActionSA's Herman Mashaba when he made it clear that he wanted the mayor's desk in Johannesburg. In effect, these two parties told the DA, "we will support you whether you like it or not; and whether we like you or not."

This support was, of course, based on the determination of Mr Mashaba and the EFF's Julius

Malema to keep the ANC out of power, rather than on any rapport with the DA's policies, especially where Mr Malema is concerned. This kind of negative support is unlikely to be long-lasting or durable; it is based on expedience and, therefore, as soon as it suits those involved to withdraw it – for instance because of a deal somewhere else between the ANC and the EFF – they will do so. It is also difficult to see how the DA and the EFF will find sufficient common ground when it comes to drawing up the budgets in these metros. They are on opposite sides of the fence in matters such as the allocation of public resources, the role of the private sector, the insourcing of labour, affirmative action, and a number of other contested points. Come June next year either the EFF or the DA, or both, will have to put aside some dearly-held principles if the budgets are to be passed.

2.2. The ANC in Ethekwini and Nelson Mandela Bay

In Ethekwini, where the ANC fell from 56% of the vote in 2016 to only 42% this year, a coalition has been put together between the governing party and a number of very small parties. One of them, as noted above, has already been rewarded with the deputy-mayor position, and various others are jostling for committee chair positions. But even before the final places were determined, some party leaders were warning of regular votes of no confidence – any one of which could collapse the coalition, with predictable results for governance and service delivery.³

Something similar could happen in Nelson Mandela Bay, where the DA and the ANC almost dead-heated, with 39.92% and 39.43% of the vote respectively. It was the ANC that managed to secure small party support here, with no less than seven of them supporting the ANC and receiving mayoral committee seats. Even with this support, the mayor and speaker were each elected by a one-vote margin, 60 to 59 (for the DA's candidates), which again hardly promises stability.⁴

2.3. Smaller municipalities

This pattern repeats itself in a number of non-metro municipalities. In this election 67 councils, almost exactly a quarter of the total, ended up

'hung', with no party obtaining an outright majority.⁵ KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape lead the pack, with 19 and 15 respectively. At first it seemed that the ANC and the IFP had reached an agreement in KZN that each would support the one with the greater share of the vote in a given municipality; but this agreement quickly collapsed, with each blaming the other for having put up candidates in bad faith.⁶ Instead, in many of these councils the IFP now governs with a very thin majority, dependent on small party support. Understandably, the ANC will view these places as targets for a take-over as soon as possible.

All this simply goes to show that governing a municipality without a majority can be a poisoned chalice. There is no certainty that complex coalitions and pacts will hold, nor that the junior partners will support the dominant one in crucial matters such as the budget. And you might have to water down your policies, abandon key principles, or postpone plans, to keep a vital partner from scuppering things. This consideration was behind the DA's early announcement that it would not enter coalitions with the EFF, since the 'values' of the two parties were too far apart. Instead now, the DA finds itself in three metros and in a number of important local and district municipalities at the head of potentially fractious coalitions and still, in some of them, dependent on the votes of the EFF to get anything passed. A similar situation faces the ANC in Ethekwini and Nelson Mandela Bay. All in all, despite appearing to be the biggest winners, neither of the country's biggest parties find themselves in an ideal situation.

3. Maturity

It should surely stand to reason that, in the absence of an outright win, the party which secures the highest number of votes (a plurality) is entitled to occupy most of the main positions in a council; or to put it another way, that the positions should be shared out more or less proportionately to the votes won by the various coalition partners. There is no logical reason why a party that got 5% of the vote should be entitled to the mayoralty, or to demand which committee chairs it wants. In the recent coalition talks in Germany, for example, there was no attempt by the Greens or the Free Democrats (which won

60% and 40% respectively of the number of votes polled by the Social Democrats) to demand the Chancellorship, or a disproportional number of cabinet seats, as a condition of joining the coalition.

Contrast this with the line taken by the Patriotic Alliance (PA) in various Western Cape municipalities. Party leader Gayton McKenzie was reported as follows:

"In Beaufort West, we asked for a PA mayor, the DA rejected this [and] the ANC said they will get back to us on Wednesday. In Prince Albert, they wanted a DA mayor and we said that's fine but we want a PA deputy mayor. In Laingsburg, we said we want a PA mayor and a PA municipal manager."

"In Theewaterskloof, we said we want a PA mayor, we want one mayoral committee member and we want the municipal manager to be from the employment equity. In Witzenberg, we said we want a deputy mayor position."⁷

In only one of these municipalities – Beaufort West – did the PA come close to the score of the two big parties (22% compared to 28% each for the ANC and the DA). In Laingsburg it won 14% compared to the ANC's 26% and the DA's 24%; in Theewaterskloof it won 5% against the ANC's 29% and the DA's 42%! It also won 5% in Witzenberg (ANC 32%; DA 37%) and in Prince Albert it polled 15%, beating the ANC but coming in far behind the DA's 38%.

This is not to single out the Patriotic Alliance, since a number of small parties have made similarly unrealistic demands, but merely to illustrate the problem: our coalition negotiations seem generally to proceed on the basis of what positions and concessions can be squeezed out of the bigger parties, rather than on the basis of shared vision, compatible policies or, least of all, respect for the will of the voters.

This, in turn, speaks to the relative immaturity of our party politics, especially since coalitions on this scale are a relatively new phenomenon. Perhaps, though, this is a stage which we have to go through after so many years of one party dominance. The opportunism and self-

advancement on display here may be a price worth paying if it means that, in 2024 or 2029, when it seems very likely that the ANC will dip below 50% nationally and in some provinces, the ensuing coalition talks can proceed with greater maturity and with more respect for the will of the electorate.

4. A Missed Opportunity

Despite its present travails, the ANC remains by far the most popular party in the country, with more than double the support of its nearest rival, the DA. The latter, for its part, has proven itself to be, by a similar distance, the best performing party when it comes to efficient and clean administration, as measured by the Auditor-General.

On the other hand, both parties suffered serious setbacks in this election. Compared to their results in the last local government election in 2016, the ANC declined by 15% and the DA by 22%.⁸ Clearly, their support bases have shrunk as a result of dissatisfaction among the voters, albeit the dissatisfaction may not be for the same reasons in either case.

These two sets of facts suggest an intriguing question: What might the outcome be if these two parties were to find a way of combining their two biggest strengths – the ANC's vast popularity and its strong 'brand loyalty', and the DA's ability to run a tight ship and to stay on the right side of the many municipal management laws? Especially at local government level, what matters most is basic service delivery, and not the big ideological and identity questions that consume so much time and energy at national level, but which do nothing at all to fix potholes and get refuse collected.

Our two biggest parties had a golden opportunity to put aside their relatively minor policy differences and the egotistical rivalries of some of their more strident national leaders, and show the electorate that they had actually been listened to. This is not to say that such coalitions would have been smooth sailing, or that they would necessarily have lasted, but at least in cities like Tshwane and Nelson Mandela Bay, where the ANC and the DA finished neck and neck, they could have demonstrated a willingness to compromise

and to develop a common approach to pressing local issues. Instead, both parties dismissed this possibility in the first few days after the elections and adopted an ‘anyone but them’ stance that, in the end, is unlikely to produce enduring improvements in people’s day-to-day lives.⁹

5. Conclusion

The 2021 local government election was our fifth under the post-1994 dispensation, to go with six national/provincial elections. We sometimes overlook the fact that holding regular, peaceful, free and fair elections is one of the hallmarks of a multi-party democracy and that, on that score, we are doing very well as a country.

This election was also the first in which the ANC failed to secure 50% or more of the vote. If you believe that, for a multi-party system to be worth the name, it is important that more than one party has a chance to govern at some stage, then this will also be a welcome development.

Those who hold that coalitions are the way forward for our country will also be encouraged, and will hope that the various partners will genuinely work together in the interests of the electorate. However, in the six weeks or so since the election we have already seen enough jostling for position, enough rigidity and stubbornness, and enough putting of party interests before those of the voters, to wonder how genuine their intentions are. Maybe we have yet to fully embrace Pope Francis’s notion that “politics is a noble activity”.

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¹<https://www.news24.com/citypress/politics/anc-piles-pressure-on-new-joburg-mayor-as-da-coalitions-in-gauteng-metros-hit-speed-bumps-20211210> These mayoral committees were eventually announced in the second week of December, five weeks after the election.

²<https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/news/smaller-parties-flex-muscles-and-push-for-bigger-portfolio-committee-roles-in-ethekwini-municipality-89c87054-9ba9-467d-b2ee-d457963a2603>

³ *Ibid*

⁴<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/local/pe-express/ancs-eugene-johnson-elected-nelson-mandela-bays-new-executive-mayor-20211122> ; <https://www.heraldlive.co.za/news/politics/2021-11-22-new-nelson-mandel-bay-mayor-names-mayoral-committee-members/>

⁵ <https://ewn.co.za/2021/11/04/2021-local-govt-elections-full-list-of-hung-municipalities-in-sa>

⁶<https://theconversation.com/post-election-pact-failure-echoes-of-fraught-history-between-south-africas-anc-and-inkatha-172696>

⁷<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/kingmakers-want-mayoral-chains-in-hung-councils-20211111>

⁸ The ANC won 54.5% in the 2016 local government election, and 46.14% in 2021. The DA fell from 27% in 2016 to 21.66% in 2021.

⁹ <https://www.enca.com/news/2021-municipal-elections-watch-no-coalition-talks-between-da-anc>

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