



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Game-changing 2016 Municipal Election

The 2016 Municipal Election was a watershed moment for South African politics, dramatically changing the face of the political landscape. After 22 years of almost complete electoral dominance by the African National Congress (ANC), signs began to emerge that their grip on power was starting to wane, and a more competitive multi-party framework was beginning to emerge.

Of South Africa's nine Metropolitan Councils, the ANC only managed to win an outright majority in four; of South Africa's four major metropolitan councils, the ANC now only has a majority in one – eThekweni in the region of Durban. It had once controlled all nine Metropolitan Councils, and in the previous Municipal Election in 2011 had won an absolute majority in eight of the Councils. In 2016, the ANC lost control of South Africa's capital city (Tshwane), its economic hub (Johannesburg) and its surrounds (Ekurhuleni), and the major Metropolitan Council of Nelson Mandela Bay in Port Elizabeth in the province that is often regarded as its political heartland (the Eastern Cape). Less surprisingly, it also once again came a distant second to the Democratic Alliance (DA) in the City of Cape Town. Perhaps most strikingly, the ANC's overall share of the popular vote fell to just 53.3%, down from 62.2% in the general election in 2014. Whilst one must be wary of extrapolating the outcome of local government elections into the national sphere, 2016 was a clear indication that the ANC's electoral dominance is not infallible.

Despite its losses, only one opposition party was able to win an absolute majority in one of the councils, with the DA retaining its firm grip on the City of Cape Town. The ANC, just one seat short of a majority, was able to retain control of Ekurhuleni through a coalition with the African Independent Congress (AIC). However, in the other three 'hung' major Metropolitan Councils, the opposition parties rallied together to vote the ANC out of power, electing DA mayors in Tshwane, the City of Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay.

As a result of this significant shift in power, coalition politics is now an integral part of South Africa's political scene, and voting trends and polling suggest that it may play an even bigger part in provincial and even national politics in the years to come.

1.2 What has happened since 2016?

After a somewhat stable start, we are now beginning to see that the coalition game is a complex one, with power struggles and in-fighting starting to emerge especially in the closely contested Nelson Mandela Bay Municipal Council. This should have been expected. All the evidence from elsewhere suggests that coalition politics is one of the most complex and difficult political art forms, requiring a range of expertise and skills to manage the tense power dynamics as foes become friends. Parties seek to retain their independence in the eyes of the electorate, but at the same time are forced to collaborate with perceived adversaries whilst in office. They may have to support policies and legislative reforms that are deemed necessary by the coalition partners but that conflict with that specific party's manifesto or which clash with its worldview (Moury and Timmermans 2013: 17).



government (Sridharan 2008: 17). The success of this pre-electoral coalition has led others in India to follow-suit both nationally and regionally by forming these bonds before campaigning begins.

In Europe, Italy is the most striking example of pre-electoral coalitions. The two Prodi administrations of 1994-1996 and 2006-2008, and the Berlusconi government of 2001-2006, were both formed on the basis of a coalition created by a formal agreement prior to the elections (Moury & Timmermans 2013: 122). Pre-electoral coalitions have also been seen in Sweden during the last decade. Generally, however, post-electoral coalitions have been more common in European countries in which coalition politics are commonplace. Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands have predominantly been governed by coalition governments since the 1980s which are almost exclusively formed after an election.

Other than the type of electoral system operating in a country, empirical evidence does not suggest a clear trend that shows whether a pre- or post- electoral coalition is preferable or more effective when certain conditions prevail. However, one consideration appears to be information certainty. Parties need to be certain of their, and their intended coalition partners', electoral success before entering into a pre-electoral coalition. A party that believes it has a chance of gaining an electoral majority is unlikely to commit to a coalition prior to the election as it does not want to be hamstrung by coalition partners if it can attain a governing majority on its own. Similarly, they will not commit to a coalition partner if there is uncertainty as to whether that partner will gain a sufficient number of votes to be an effective, influential and preferably decisive (in terms of taking the coalition arrangement over the governing majority threshold) partner. Parties also fear that forming and announcing a pre-electoral coalition will antagonise voters who disapprove of intended partners or compromise the image and independence of the party and its message during campaigning. However, as seen by the Mauritius example, forming a coalition at the pre-electoral stage can lead to a smoother transition into government. It can also disperse campaign costs and is more transparent *vis-à-vis* the electorate.

That being said, in proportional representation systems with a low electoral threshold as is the case in South Africa (where just 0.25% of the vote will secure one seat in the National Assembly), forming coalitions at the post-electoral stage appears to be the preferred approach – at least so far in the relatively short history of coalition politics in South Africa. Without the necessity of coalition partners for electoral success, South African parties are apparently reluctant to make coalition commitments to other parties until they have absolute certainty as to whether a coalition is required and how large the coalition needs to be to gain a majority in the relevant legislature. In addition, the ideological, historic and ethnic divisions amongst South African political parties means that there is a higher risk of voter backlash if a pre-electoral coalition is formed with a partner that is not readily acceptable to the party's core supporters.

3.2 Permanent Coalitions v Issue-by-Issue Co-operation

Coalitions have many variations. Beyond a formalised coalition based on an agreement to act in terms of a united front, political parties collaborate by several other means. In many cases, instead of a permanent coalition, parties may commit or agree to vote with others on a particular issue or set of issues (Gelman 2003: 1). Such issues may be policy objectives or structural aspects such as government formation where parties may agree to collaborate to elect/appoint specific leaders but no more.



In South Africa, we have seen this in recent times. After the 2016 Municipal Elections that resulted in three hung major metropolitan councils, the EFF had the opportunity to act as king-maker. They insisted that they were not interested in a permanent coalition arrangement unless certain strict conditions were met, yet agreed to vote with the DA and its partners to ensure that the ANC were ousted as the governing party in those three Metropolitan Councils. Since then, they have shown a will to switch their allegiance, or adjust the basis of their co-operation with other political parties, according to the specific, changing context.

If a party or parties remain independent in hung legislatures and opt to vote on an issue-by-issue basis, one is likely to see what is called a “minority coalition” which can lead to a “minority government”. A minority government is a government comprised of members of a party or coalition that neither on its own nor in terms of a permanent coalition enjoys a majority of seats in the legislature. Therefore whilst a party or a coalition of parties may have a majority in government, it does not have a permanent coalition sufficient to maintain a majority in the legislature. This can result in policy deadlock and compromise the efficiency of both the executive and the legislature. A minority government is also vulnerable to constant power struggles and votes of no confidence as support can swing at any time as the government does not enjoy ongoing majority support from the legislature.

That being said, there is a good deal of merit in a party taking the issue-by-issue approach despite the fact that it may often create problems of trust and reliability from the point of view of other parties. Firstly, it places the party that stays clear of a formalised coalition in a position of power as it may be able to act as a king-maker or hold the swing vote on any governmental appointment or proposed legislative reform. As a result, that party may be able to control legislative policy at least to an extent. The issue-by-issue approach also allows parties to retain their individual identity and be true to their manifesto and mandate without having to compromise their policy to respect the overall will of a coalition.

Permanently hung legislatures can also be vibrant ones, as parties are compelled to negotiate the most appropriate approach to each issue, voting according to their principles and convictions rather than blind loyalty. In addition, a party that remains neutral can have the power to cast the swing vote on important issues, yet it keeps a degree of distance to government, allowing it to be critical of government during later electoral campaigning. It avoids being tainted or associated with a legislature or government that passes and implements controversial or unpopular policies that may also contradict its own core values or policy principles (McMillan 2014: 192). For this reason, it has frequently been seen in India that several parties, whilst happy to participate in a legislative coalition, refuse to accept governments positions in order to retain their identity and ability to criticise government in their electoral rhetoric (McMillan 2014: 199).

However, a party that wishes to remain independent is vulnerable if the minority coalition is able to incorporate another party or parties to elevate it to a majority. A party that wishes to remain neutral therefore runs the risk that its powerful position as a king-maker will be relegated to that of a weak party in a small opposition.

