



ABSTRACT FROM THE MAPUNGUWE INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC REFLECTION (MISTRA)

GAUTENG PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT – BROWN BAG SESSION, 5 SEPTEMBER 2023

COALITION GOVERNANCE

“Evolving coalition governance in South Africa: dimensions, lessons and prospects”

Professor Susan Booysen

13 July 2023

In the 30 years of its democratic era, South Africa has experienced coalition government at national, provincial and the local levels. The quality and constructiveness of coalition governments are embedded in the political cultures and contexts of the time. This means that as the political context changes, past experiences become obsolete and new rules of coalition governance emerge rapidly. This is the setting of coalition government praxis in South Africa circa 2023. To shed light on the coalition dynamic that is driving South African politics in the run-up to the 2024 elections (and will continue impacting in the election aftermath), this analysis identifies and dissects the three key sets of coalition driving forces and the interactions between them. These forces are embedded in the unstable and unpredictable field of South African party politics and political culture: manifested as the movement of the tectonic plates of three decades of one-party dominance amid multipartyism.

The analysis identifies and dissects these forces and considers their impact. The first set is the maneuvers that permeate contemporary coalition politics in South Africa. Opportunism and shifting coalitions, and power quests at all cost, are typical actions. Motions of no confidence have a tyranny over municipal council proceedings; coalition agreements are often meaningless; and small parties prevail as they top up interchangeable support for bigger players. The second set of driving forces is the myriad of proposals and initiatives to control or manage the coalition formations. Operational plans to limit or extend powers of municipal structures – and cater for the possible advent of coalition provincial and national government – flourish. Legislative changes are proposed, as are constitutional changes. Special summits and national conferences are convened, while legislative and constitutional proposals are fleshed out. Some of the events openly foster future coalition formations; others try to influence the field more subtly. The third set of driving forces relates to the election dynamic. Political parties have an eye on both how to influence public perceptions, and how to relate to the electorate and other parties come the results of South Africa’s Election 2024 – and specifically in case there should be shortfalls below the level of outright majorities. This myriad of interactive factors determines the current political terrain and in particular the ability of coalition government to deliver services and govern developmentally. It is these factors that will have to be managed in the run-up to and aftermath of Election 2024.

This analysis and presentation thus assess the extent of unfolding change and reflects on prospects to steer these forces to constructive outcomes.
