

The role of minority parties in the (in)stability of coalitions

South Africa

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The decline in electoral support for the ANC has necessitated the formation of coalition governments in several municipalities across the country. Coalition governments, particularly in metros as exemplified by events in Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni in 2022, are susceptible to instability as bigger parties battle for control. An often-overlooked aspect in discourse around coalitions is the role that minority parties play in the (in)stability of municipalities governed by coalition governments. With the highly anticipated 2024 national and provincial government elections in mind, we take a closer look at the role that these parties play in municipalities, especially in as far as stability is concerned. Our focus is going to be mainly on the post-2021 local government elections (LGE) period, as well as metropolitan municipalities, due to these municipalities' importance to the overall functioning of the country.

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Defining minority parties

In our context, what qualifies a party to be called a minority or smaller party is the number of seats it holds in comparison to other parties in a specific municipality. This means that there is no fixed number of seats that a party must hold in the different municipalities to qualify for the "minority/smaller party" tag as this will fluctuate between different municipalities. Similarly, a party can be among the bigger parties in one municipality and among the minority ones in another. However, an examination of the council composition of different municipalities demonstrates that it is typically the same parties that qualify for the "minority party" tag.

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The case of Gauteng metros

Johannesburg

Smaller parties can be the difference between a particular coalition leading a municipality or occupying the opposition benches, and Gauteng metros such as the City of Johannesburg perfectly demonstrate this point. In December 2021, reports that the DA had concluded a five-year coalition agreement with numerous parties including ActionSA, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the Congress of the People (Cope), Al Jama-ah, the African Transformation Movement (ATM), the African People's Convention (APC), the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) and

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the United Independent Movement (UIM) surfaced.¹ Apart from the high number of parties involved in this coalition, which was largely a result of the DA's unwillingness to work with the EFF, the ideological diversity within the coalition stood out. This is one element that parties tend to overlook when forming coalitions, and over time ideological differences manifest publicly. This is a demonstration of the reality that opposition to the ANC is not a good enough factor to sustain coalition governments.

As soon as January 2022, cracks within the DA-led coalition started to show as Al Jama-ah "withdrew" from the coalition, taking it below the 50%+1 needed to constitute a majority government. However, with its eight seats the Patriotic Alliance (PA) became part of the coalition. Al Jama-ah's withdrawal was controversial as the party claimed it had not joined the coalition because it had not signed the coalition agreement. That said, Al Jama-ah's early withdrawal was sparked by a difference of opinion over the Israel-Palestine matter. Al Jama-ah saw the DA as holding a Zionist stance towards Palestine. Additionally, Mayor Mpho Phalatse under which the party would have had to serve in the coalition was suspended as the member of the mayoral committee (MMC) for Health in 2018 for declaring the City of Johannesburg a "Friend of Israel". Moreover, coalition partners such as the ACDP have on numerous occasions declared their pro-Israel stance. These are the sort of ideological misalignments that parties tend to overlook when forming coalitions, being under the impression that an anti-ANC stance and the willingness to deliver services are enough to enable coalition partners to reach consensus on multiple issues. This is especially the case because parties tend to believe that ideological contestations are above the local government sphere. This is an erroneous assumption because ideological orientation typically informs how a party governs. What issues a government prioritises over others in light of a constrained budget is informed greatly by the governing party's/coalition's ideological inclination.

When trouble began for the DA-led coalition in Johannesburg, the charge was led by its former "coalition partner" Al Jama-ah. The party tabled a motion of no confidence against the DA's speaker, Vasco Da Gama, in April 2022 but later withdrew it out of respect for a bereavement in Da Gama's family. Da Gama was finally ousted in September 2022 following a motion brought by the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC), a party with only one seat in council, and seconded by the African Independent Congress (AIC), a party with two seats. It was supported by larger parties such as the ANC and EFF, and smaller parties such as the United Democratic Movement (UDM) which has one seat. The motion was also aided by smaller parties such as Cope, the ATM and the UIM defecting from the DA-led coalition, in addition to one IFP councillor and two from the ACDP voting in favour of ousting Da Gama.² At the time, the IFP and ACDP communicated their intentions to take disciplinary action against the implicated councillors. It is worth noting that Cope, the ATM, and the UIM all have one seat each. Moreover, the ACDP and Al Jama-ah both have three seats, while the IFP has seven. These are all smaller parties in comparison to the ANC which has

¹ Zintle Mahlati. 2021. "DA signs five-year agreement with coalition partners, dreams big for 2024". News24. <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/da-signs-five-year-agreement-with-coalition-partners-dreams-big-for-2024-20211216>.

² Queenin Masuabi. 2022. "DA coalition partner says Da Gama had to go to balance City of Joburg power dynamics". Daily Maverick. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-01-da-coalition-partner-says-da-gama-had-to-go-to-balance-city-of-joburg-power-dynamics/>

91 seats, the DA 71, ActionSA 44, and the EFF 29. However, their impact on the stability of the city is noteworthy, as their role in the removal of Da Gama demonstrates.

Following Da Gama's removal, Cope's Colleen Makhubele was elected as the speaker with the aid of parties such as the PA which also defected from the DA-led coalition following the DA's refusal to relinquish the position of speaker to the IFP. What followed was the removal of Mpho Phalatse in September last year as the mayor of the city. Strengthened by the support of smaller parties defecting from the DA-led coalition, the ANC-led bloc was able to elect Dada Morero as the mayor of the city. In Morero's new mayoral committee, the PA was rewarded with two seats, while the AIC, the ATM, and Al Jamah-ah each received one seat. Morero's tenure was however very short as the courts reinstated Phalatse on a technicality less than a month after her removal. Notably, the ANC-led bloc was/is composed of parties that are largely not very ideologically distant from one another. The floor crossing activities in Johannesburg by the minority parties introduced a period of political instability and uncertainty that is still discernible to this day. Much of the last quarter of 2022 was spent on speculation as the ANC-led bloc promised to table another motion of no confidence against Phalatse.

Ekurhuleni

The main reason for the ANC-led bloc's reluctance to table another motion of no confidence against Phalatse was the failure of the ANC to reach a coalition agreement with the EFF in the City of Ekurhuleni. This followed the ousting of Tania Campbell as the mayor of Ekurhuleni through an ANC-sponsored motion. The EFF abstained from the vote of no confidence against Campbell. However, to constitute a majority government, the ANC needed the support of the EFF. This is when the EFF made a number of demands including having its Gauteng leader, Nkululeko Dunga, take over the Ekurhuleni mayorship. In return, the party promised to support an ANC member for the Johannesburg mayorship. The parties failed to reach an agreement, and as a result the EFF voted for the re-election of Campbell and there was no motion of no confidence tabled against Phalatse in Johannesburg. This brought to a halt, the ANC's plan to takeover Gauteng metros, including the City of Tshwane.

Apart from the EFF's abstention, the success of the ANC's motion against Campbell was aided by Cope and the PA defecting from the DA-led coalition. This was in addition to other smaller parties, who are members of the Super 7 grouping comprising of the National Freedom Party (NFP), the AIC, the Independent Citizens Movement (ICM), the PAC, the UDM, and the ATM in addition to COPE. Apart from the AIC which has three seats, all Super 7 members have one seat each in council, while the PA has four. These numbers appear insignificant but in the context of a hotly contested municipality, they give the minority parties a significant voice in deciding the composition of the government. It must be remembered that the DA-led coalition government was a minority government which owed its triumph over the ANC-led bloc to the support of the EFF.

Smaller parties emboldened?

At least in Gauteng metros, smaller parties are becoming more emboldened in influencing political affairs in municipalities. This is confidence that one would not conventionally associate with parties that are among those that have the least number of seats in council(s). The boldness of smaller parties is a direct result of the gradual rise in coalition governments. The transformation that the political system is currently undergoing has made every single seat, and thereby party, in all councils without an outright (50%+) winner extremely important. Knowing that the direction in which they vote can make a difference to a coalition's ability to form a government, minority parties are leveraging their newly found importance.

The newly found valiant posture of minority parties is well exemplified by ANC-aligned parties in the City of Johannesburg, such as Al Jama-ah and the AIC. Since early 2022, these parties have been acting in a manner that is reflective of the ANC's aspirations. In this regard, it is important to recall that the motion of no confidence which culminated in the ousting of the DA's former speaker of Johannesburg, Vasco Da Gama was tabled by the PAC and seconded by the AIC. Similarly, the first motion of no confidence against Phalatse was tabled by minority parties, specifically the PAC in September 2022. Prior to that Al Jama-ah's Thapelo Amad communicated the minority parties' intention to remove Phalatse. Even the motion against Phalatse that was withdrawn in November 2022 was tabled by minority parties. All these motions had the backing of the ANC. This was evident as the ANC briefly took over the mayoral seat before the courts reinstated Phalatse on a technicality on the 25th of October 2022. Fast-forward to 26 January 2023, and Phalatse is once again removed from office through a motion tabled by the ATM.

We must highlight that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with minority parties tabling motions against any elected official. What is important are the reasons behind the motions. All the successful motions in the City of Johannesburg would not have succeeded without the support of the ANC. What is apparent is that minority parties have been buoyed by the backing they receive from the ANC, leading them to act in a manner that is beneficial to that party. Frankly, no party with three or two seats in council would attempt removing the speaker and mayor without the support of a bigger party. Acting in a manner that could easily be confused with doing the bidding of the ANC has also benefited the smaller parties in Johannesburg. The election of Thapelo Amad as the mayor of Johannesburg is a direct result of Al Jama-ah's resilient pursuit of an agenda that is seemingly favourable to the ANC. Amad's election followed the election of Cope's Makhubele as the speaker of council on 28 September 2022. This came after her defection from the DA-led coalition. These events have definitely encouraged smaller parties not to allow their ambitions to be limited by their share of seats in council(s).

In Nelson Mandela Bay, the motion of no confidence that resulted in the removal of the ANC's mayor Eugene Johnson on 21 September 2022 was tabled by the ACDP and seconded by the FF+. These parties have two seats each in council. The motion followed the signing of a coalition agreement earlier in the year by the DA and various parties including the UDM, the AIC, the PAC, the ACDP, the FF+, the Defenders of the People (DOP), the Northern Alliance (NA), and the Abantu Integrity Movement (AIM). It is worth noting that parties such as the UDM, the DOP, the PAC and the AIM defected from the ANC-led coalition.

In eThekweni, the political instability that the city is currently experiencing is partly as result of the power that the ANC had to give to the Abantu Batho Congress (ABC), a party with two seats, in order to remain in control of the metro in 2021. ABC leader, Philani Mavundla, was made the deputy mayor of eThekweni and the chairperson of the human settlements and infrastructure committee and brought a number of other smaller parties to the ANC-led coalition with him. Following his ousting by the ANC, Mavundla joined the DA-led bloc in the city with what appeared to be the intention of overthrowing the ANC with the help of other smaller parties, as well as the IFP.³ Mavundla's plan however was thwarted as Zandile Myeni of the ANC-aligned NFP was elected deputy mayor with 128 votes on 3 February. The IFP's Mduduzi Nkosi came second with 81 votes. For the position of council whip, the ANC's Samukelisiwe Sishange triumphed with 128 votes over the Active Citizens Coalition's (ACC) Imtiaz Syed who received 76 votes. On the same day, mayor Mxolisi Kaunda survived a motion of no confidence tabled by the ACC. A total of 126 councillors voted against the motion, 81 voted for it, and one abstained. Mavundla's survival was aided by the EFF and smaller parties. The role of parties such as the ABC, the ACC and the NFP in the recent uncertainty in eThekweni further demonstrates minority parties' newly found tenacity.

Synergy across different municipalities

One observable facet of coalitions at local government level in South Africa is the ability of parties to be on the same bloc in one municipality and on a different bloc in another. While that is reflective of fluidity and flexibility, it also shows the absence of coordination at national level. While some may argue that such a situation is desirable given the local nature of issues that occupy municipal government, it creates high levels of unpredictability and leads to the formation of coalitions that do not make any ideological sense. The AIC reflects this situation quite well. The party is in an alliance with the ANC in Johannesburg and to some extent in Ekurhuleni. However, in Nelson Mandela Bay, the AIC is part of the DA-led coalition government. A similar situation is observable in the case of the PA. In the Karoo Hoogland Municipality, the PA's mayor and speaker were ousted through a motion of no confidence from the DA on 8 December 2022. The ANC abstained from the vote, enabling the DA and FF+ to take over the municipality. In retaliation, the PA attempted to return to the DA-led coalition in Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni.

The merry-go-round of events in which the PA and the ANC participated in Ditsobotla in January 2023 highlights their unstable relationship. Following the dissolution of the Ditsobotla Municipality council last year, by-elections had to be held in December 2022. The ANC lost outright control of the municipality as it only won 40% of the vote. In January this year, the party formed a coalition government with the PA, the Forum for Service Delivery (F4SD) and the African Heart Congress (AHC). The PA's Elizabeth Lethoko was elected mayor on 9 January. However, Lethoko resigned on the same day, with the PA citing concerns about corruption from the ANC in relation to the appointment of an interim municipal manager. On 12 January, reports that the mayor had withdrawn her resignation surfaced. This followed the coalition partners managing to "find each other".

³ Willem Phungula. 2023. "Philani Mavundla's plan to take over eThekweni from the ANC". IOL. <https://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/philani-mavundlas-plan-to-take-over-ethekweni-from-the-anc-2bcc536b-a1f9-4655-a267-483b4dc71039>

What is important to note is that minority parties exhibit a greater degree of flexibility than bigger parties. For instance, an ANC/DA or even DA/EFF coalition remain improbable for the foreseeable future. Also noteworthy is the difference between parties with centralised and decentralised leadership architectures. The EFF, which is the epitome of centralised leadership in South African politics recently instructed its caucuses in various KZN municipalities to withdraw from coalitions with the IFP. This is after a period of unpredictable behaviour in hung municipalities on the part of the EFF, which has been kept out of DA-led coalitions in Gauteng metros. On the other hand, the IFP has been an integral part of these coalitions. Similarly, the DA, whose national leadership has been heavily involved in coalition talks has remained consistent in rejecting proposals to work with parties such as the EFF. The ANC on the other hand, whose president appears to distance himself from coalition talks, failed to take over Ekurhuleni following the failure of regional and provincial leadership to reach consensus on the type of agreement the party would have with the EFF. However, the party's national leaders such as Thoko Didiza and Jeff Radebe reportedly stepped in to help steer the talks in the recent removal of Mpho Phalatse in Johannesburg ensuring a smooth vote. Perhaps this indicates that more national leadership input may help stabilise coalitions to some extent, as local leadership may be compromised due to the fact that coalitions may determine their career path.

While parties have demonstrated a considerable degree of flexibility, it is interesting to note that each party's position seems to be consistent in the different Gauteng metros.

Looking forward – new parties and 2024

While forecasting election outcomes has never been an easy task, there is a significant probability of the ANC falling below the 50% mark in 2024's national election. That would result in coalitions becoming even more important at both national and provincial levels.

Nationally, managing coalitions may be even more complex than managing local ones, as new political parties have emerged with the potential of winning seats in the National Assembly and even National Council of Provinces (NCOP). In addition to parties such the NFP, Cope, the AIC, the PAC, Al Jama-ah and the ATM which are already in parliament, we need to closely watch the trajectory of Mmusi Maimane's Build One SA (BOSA) and the Rivonia Circle's brainchild, Rise Mzansi. An addition to the mix may be Carl Niehaus' Radical Economic Transformation Movement (Retmo) which is a non-profit organisation (NPO) but could morph into a political party.

BOSA is an addition to the One SA Movement, which according to Maimane, will not be on the ballot as it is a civic movement. BOSA and Rise Mzansi are interesting additions to the political sphere as they are, to different degrees, promoted as (civil) society's response to the ailing state of the country. While these two organisations are unlikely to garner much support in 2024 compared to established political parties, they are bound to benefit from the shedding of votes by the ANC. Importantly, these two organisations are likely to add to the pool of parties that majority parties, especially those aligned to the DA and strongly opposed to the ANC, may choose from if the need to form coalitions arises.

Currently, the pool of clearly ANC-aligned parties, including GOOD, holds 12 seats (1.76%), and the two above-mentioned parties would help strengthen the numbers of anti-ANC parties in the National Assembly. That said, parties' current alignments are subject to change. Events at local government level

will continue to shed light on possible coalition blocs as we get closer to 2024. As has been the case, metros will continue to serve as a platform for parties to demonstrate their positions in relation to coalitions. It is worth noting that forming and sustaining coalitions at national level may be even more difficult as the interests of individual party leaders will be at stake. As such, we must brace for dramatic events in the political space should the ANC fall below the 50% mark.

Conclusion

The importance that coalition governments afford minority parties has made these parties central players in the instability that many hung municipalities across the country are experiencing. With the national and provincial elections taking place in 2024, we must prepare ourselves for more instability at local government level, as parties race to climb up the popularity ladder.

Moreover, local government is one sphere in which many minority parties have influence and can therefore use it to influence political discourse. While there is an ongoing public discussion on legislating coalitions, at present communities must contend with endless political instability at the local level.

However, parties have the responsibility of building the capacity to manage coalitions more effectively in order to minimise instability. That capacity will be acquired over time as parties become more exposed to coalitions and therefore become much more mature in their approach to political alliances.

Unfortunately, until then communities must contend with seemingly ceaseless political bickering. It must be remembered that coalitions are the reason why two parties with a meagre combined four seats currently hold the critical positions of council speaker and executive mayor in Johannesburg.

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