



# Lessons from metro coalitions

SOUTH AFRICA

While the history of coalitions in the country can be traced back to the early days of democracy, the phenomenon gained some prominence after the 2016 local government elections and became an established part of the political system after the 2021 local government elections. As such, the country's experience of coalitions (at least in recent years) has been restricted to the local government sphere. Given our expectation of coalitions at national and provincial level after May 29, we discuss valuable lessons that can be learnt from the experience of metropolitan municipalities with coalitions. It is evident that written coalition agreements hold no value and flexibility is needed – the failure of DA-led coalitions demonstrate this; smaller parties can easily be swayed by the promise of more powerful positions – the ANC-EFF takeover in Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay supports this point; club deals are more workable – this is demonstrated by the relative longevity of ANC-EFF coalitions in Gauteng metros; and as formerly DA-led coalitions in Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay demonstrate, coalitions with many smaller party partners are prone to instability.

At national level, parties need solid agreements which allocate acceptable levels of power to smaller partners in order to avoid defections. Fortunately, at this level there is enough inconsequential power to distribute among smaller parties who will be keen on joining coalitions given their limited chance of ever winning an outright majority. This will allow the bigger partners, most likely the ANC, to maintain the status quo in the policy space.

[A reminder that you can find our full elections preview published last week [here](#).]

We expect the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to declare the election results on 1/2 June. Thereafter, we expect the National Assembly to sit for the first time on 12/13 June (the president and speaker of the assembly have to be elected here). The days 14/15 June will likely be the last day for a first sitting of the National Assembly. We then expect the president to be inaugurated on 16/17 June. Finally, we expect the president to announce the cabinet on 17/18 June. Given how tight the constitutionally dictated deadlines are for the above activities, there is a high probability of a two-step coalition agreement. That is an agreement to first elect a president and then after that a power sharing agreement. That said, there is too much focus on initial coalitions, and we need to be mindful of difficult hurdles along the way such as the need (from a stability point of view) for coalitions to stay in power for around two years or three years (after which the National Assembly can dissolve itself), and the 2026 local government elections which could destabilise national government coalitions.

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**KRUTHAM 2024 BASELINE**

National

ANC 44.8 (57.5)

DA 22.7 (20.8)

EFF 9.8 (10.8)

MKP 7.7 (-)

IFP 4.0 (3.4)

RISE+BOSA 1.8/1.0 (-/-)

PA 1.5 (-)

Turnout 61.7 (66.1)

Coalition baseline –  
ANC+IFP+smaller party

Provincial

Gauteng – ANC+DA

KZN – ANC+IFP

WC – DA

**TOPICS**

Politics

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## What has worked and what has not?

There are eight metropolitan municipalities in the country and five of these are governed by coalitions.

### Club deals

One of the most striking features of coalitions in metros is that after some time they have come to mirror club deals to some degree. This is evident in Gauteng where the provincial leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) managed to strike a deal with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) through which the two parties took over the Cities of Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg and several other non-metro municipalities with the “help” of smaller parties. The ANC and EFF, together with smaller parties, also preside over two other coalition-governed metros, eThekweni (although the EFF would argue that it is not in a coalition) and Nelson Mandela Bay. This means the only coalition-governed metro whose government does not include the ANC and EFF is the City of Tshwane.

Outside metros, we have seen the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) governing some municipalities together with other parties, including the City of uMhlathuze and Newcastle Municipality. In the Western Cape, the DA and the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) govern several municipalities with smaller and local parties, including the Cederberg Municipality.

While this demonstrates the value of direction from a higher party structure, it may not work in a national government coalition as there will be no higher structure to impose its will. We must also highlight that these mandates from higher structures are not always followed by parties. This is explained in detail below.

### Floor crossing

The promise of powerful positions has proven enough to entice smaller parties to switch coalitions. The Abantu Batho Congress (ABC) in eThekweni has crossed the floor on a few occasions. Against all expectations, the party and other small parties helped the ANC hold on to power through a coalition in eThekweni in 2021. Its leader, Philani Mavundla, was rewarded with the position of deputy mayor. In late 2022, the two parties fell out and Mavundla was removed through a motion of no confidence from the metro's executive committee and as deputy mayor. Mavundla retreated to the opposition benches and even supported a failed motion of no confidence against Mayor Mxolisi Kaunda which was tabled in early 2023. The two parties rekindled their relationship in June 2023 when Mavundla was elected uMvoti Municipality mayor with the help of the ANC. As a result, the ABC voted against a motion of no confidence against Kaunda in January this year. The relationship has once again soured as Mavundla is backing motions against the entire executive committee of the metro and the council whip (an ANC member). Importantly, the latest strain in the ANC-ABC relationship is a result of the March microphone grabbing in KwaCeza which drew strong criticism from Mavundla towards the ANC, as well as the ABC's call for an independent Zulu state. This indicates the vulnerability of coalitions, at least at a local government level, to influence from outside events. On 21 May, Mavundla was ousted as uMvoti mayor through an IFP-sponsored motion which was backed by the ANC.

In Nelson Mandela Bay, the National Alliance (NA) [formerly the Northern Alliance] has crossed the floor on several occasions. In 2021, the party was

part of an ANC-led coalition and as a result, its leader Gary van Niekerk was elected council speaker. In 2022, the NA defected to the DA-led coalition which took over the metro and van Niekerk remained the speaker. Last year, as the ANC-led coalition wrestled back power, the NA switched sides again and van Niekerk was rewarded with the position of mayor, which he still occupies. We have seen similar events unfolding in the cities of Johannesburg and Tshwane, involving the Congress of the People (Cope) councillors and the Patriotic Alliance (PA).

## Coalition agreements

Formal coalition agreements involving the DA have largely not worked. The party signed several coalition agreements with many parties in different metros. However, parties (especially the smaller ones) broke these with impunity. This is largely because these agreements did not have any legal standing and parties that broke them therefore did not face any repercussions. This could change if the recently introduced Local Government: Municipal Structures Amendment Bill, which among other things seeks to provide for binding coalition governments is passed. The Multi-party Charter is likely to suffer a similar fate. In contrast, the ANC has managed to keep coalitions with many parties intact without rigid coalition agreements. We explore the reasons for this below.

## Do coalitions work?

An answer to this question depends on whether one asks it from a political stability or service delivery perspective. Politically, coalitions have been a source of instability. That eThekweni's Mxolisi Kaunda is the only mayor of a coalition-governed metro elected in 2021 who remains in power emphasises this point. This is because parties – particularly those that have never been in power – have largely viewed coalitions as a gateway to accessing power and the spoils that come with it. This is why floor crossing which is at the centre of the instability has been so common. However, since last year when the ANC and EFF took over several metros with the help of smaller parties, coalitions have become more politically stable. We must however state that the bar for stability is low. This perhaps speaks to the possibility that as coalitions become more entrenched, they will become more stable. For many parties, they are a new phenomenon which is being tackled through trial and error.

Municipalities are generally dysfunctional from a service delivery perspective. For the 2021/22 financial year, only 38 (15%) of 257 audited municipalities received clean audits and 21 of those were in the Western Cape.<sup>1</sup> While this is not a conclusive measure of the performance of municipalities, it is indicative of a problem. Important to mention is that theoretically, service delivery in municipalities should be insulated from political leadership instabilities as the administrative side should perform its duties independently of leadership developments on the political side. Given this and that poor service delivery in many municipalities has been a reality even before the current wave of coalitions, we cannot attribute it conclusively and solely to coalitions. Nonetheless, we cannot dismiss the service delivery-related challenges that stem from coalitions. One example is the delay in passing

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament of RSA. 2023. "Standing Committee On Auditor-General Welcomes 2021/22 Local Government Audit Outcomes". *Parliament Of RSA*. <https://www.parliament.gov.za/news/standing-committee-auditor-general-welcomes-202122-local-government-audit-outcomes#:~:text=Out%20of%20the%20257%20municipalities,submission%20of%20their%20financial%20statements.>

budgets. As an example, the City of Johannesburg recently failed to pass its budget due to disagreements between coalition partners – the ANC, PA and EFF. Last year, the City of Tshwane struggled for extended periods to pass its adjustment budget.

## Collapse of coalitions

There are several reasons why many coalition governments have collapsed in metros. Important to mention is that most post-2016 and post-2021 elections coalitions were seemingly designed to keep the ANC out, despite the fact that the ANC remains the biggest party in all metros except the City of Cape Town and Nelson Mandela Bay. As a result, these coalitions have required the participation of many smaller parties to form a majority government. In addition, these parties generally have not been bound by any significant common goals, except the pursuit of and eagerness to stay in power.

The City of Johannesburg serves as a good example. The DA's Mpho Phalatse was elected mayor in 2021 with the help of the EFF, a party which has never had a good relationship with the DA and which the DA publicly stated its unwillingness to work with. This was a recipe for disaster. Subsequently, the DA signed a coalition agreement with ActionSA, the FF+, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), the IFP and Cope.<sup>2</sup> These parties' numbers did not give it the majority it needed to stay in power in Johannesburg. According to reports at the time, they were joined by other unnamed parties which expanded the coalition to 10 parties and gave it 136 seats and therefore a majority. These parties were Al Jama-ah, the African Transformation Movement (ATM), the African People's Convention (APC) and the United Independent Democratic Movement (UIM).<sup>3</sup> The number of parties made this coalition vulnerable to instability. Indeed, in January 2022 Al Jama-ah left the coalition due to disagreements with the DA over the latter's stance on Israel, resulting in the coalition losing its majority.

The Patriotic Alliance (PA) joined the coalition in the same month and was rewarded with a position on the mayoral committee. This took the coalition to 140 seats in council. The PA's move was motivated by access to power. In September 2022, the fall of the DA-led coalition began as a number of its smaller coalition partners voted for Cope's Colleen Makhubele to become the speaker after the removal of the DA's Vasco Da Gama. In the same month, the same parties together with the EFF and ANC voted Mpho Phalatse out and replaced her with the ANC's Dada Morero before she was reinstated by the courts a month later. In January 2023, the ANC-led coalition took over the city officially with parties such as Cope, the ATM, the PA, and Al Jama-ah having left the DA-led arrangement. Central to this was the PA, which in September 2022 had argued for the DA to share power widely (including the speaker's position) and in January 2023 demanded two positions in the mayoral committee. The DA refused to accede to these demands and labelled them "extortion". The ANC offered the PA two positions in the mayoral committee, and this sealed the deal.

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Nicolson. 2021. "Fragile deals: Tshwane, Joburg and Ekurhuleni metros take shape with new coalition mayoral committees in place". *Daily Maverick*. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-12-16-fragile-deals-tshwane-joburg-and-ekurhuleni-metros-take-shape-with-new-coalition-mayoral-committees-in-place/>

<sup>3</sup> Zintle Mahlati. 2021. "DA signs five-year agreement with coalition partners, dreams big for 2024". *Nesw24*. <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/da-signs-five-year-agreement-with-coalition-partners-dreams-big-for-2024-20211216>

Interestingly, the ANC has been able to keep together coalitions with a high number of smaller parties compared to the DA which has struggled. For example, the ANC governs eThekweni with the help of many smaller parties. This can be partly attributed to the ANC's flexibility and willingness to accede to the demands of smaller parties. On the other hand, the DA has been less willing to accede to the demands of its smaller partners and thus to share power more widely. The DA has argued that this is because of its principles. The ANC-led coalitions with the participation of many smaller parties have not been without instability. However, the will to hold on to power has enabled the ANC and its partners to resolve conflicts whenever they arise. For instance, in Ekurhuleni, the disagreements between the ANC and EFF have been widely documented and have now been resolved by the ANC assuming the mayorship.

Also important has been the ANC's treatment of smaller parties as a bloc rather than individually. As a result, in Ekurhuleni, Sivuyile Ngodwana was more of a Super Seven mayor than an African Independent Congress (AIC) one. In eThekweni, the deputy mayorship is more of a smaller parties' position rather than a National Freedom Party (NFP) one, hence when Mavundla (ABC) was ousted he was replaced by another small party councillor Zandile Myeni (NFP). In Johannesburg, Cope's Makhubele was replaced by fellow small party councillor Margaret Arnolds (AIC) as speaker. Clubbing together has helped smaller parties gain more influence.

In addition, the ANC's willingness to entrust smaller parties with important positions such that of mayor, deputy mayor and speaker has protected its coalitions from being toppled. This is because no other grouping would be willing to offer smaller parties what they get from ANC-led coalitions. It is unimaginable that the DA would be willing to entrust such smaller parties with positions of this nature. We say this mindful that Tshwane speaker, the ATM's Mncedi Ndzwanana was a consequence of spoiled DA ballots in the vote rather than a DA choice while Gary van Niekerk who served as speaker during the DA-led coalition's reign in Nelson Mandela Bay was originally elected by the ANC-led coalition. While it has argued that this is based on principles, the DA must shoulder some blame for its coalitions that have collapsed due to its inflexibility. In addition, the party has been very critical of smaller parties.

## Defiance

The continued existence of ANC-EFF coalitions in Gauteng metros and other municipalities is a result of the provincial leadership defying national leadership. The coalitions are a product of the cordial relationship between the ANC in Gauteng and the EFF's national leadership, the ANC's wish to go to the 2024 elections looking strong and to deny opposition parties a chance to demonstrate their ability to govern. Numerous ANC national leaders are on record registering their opposition to the coalitions. Moreover, last year the ANC developed a coalitions framework to guide its approach to coalitions. One of its tenets is that the biggest party in council should lead the municipality (mayoral committee/executive).

However, to this day the coalitions exist. In fact, the Ekurhuleni leadership of the ANC protested the arrangement with the EFF until the provincial leadership of the party (ANC) agreed to amend it. So instead of a smaller party mayor, Ekurhuleni is now led by an ANC mayor. These cases demonstrate provincial leadership defying national leadership and regional leadership successfully protesting against provincial leadership decisions. All



of this is partly because the lower structures of the party hold that they are more familiar with conditions on the ground and should therefore decide who they work with. In 2021, we witnessed the IFP in different KZN municipalities defying an instruction from the national leadership to work with the ANC following a signing of an agreement between the two parties at national level. This was largely due to the IFP provincial (and local) leadership's disdain for the ANC in the province.

## Motions of no confidence

Notices of motions of no confidence, especially against a mayor or speaker, are submitted and seconded by councillors typically to the speaker. From there they are taken to the municipality's programming committee which decides, in line with its standing orders, whether to include them on the (next) council meeting agenda. If the programming committee approves the motion, it is then debated and voted upon in council. The meeting can either be an ordinary council meeting or an extraordinary one called to deal specifically with the motion. Since council meetings are called and presided over by the speaker, speakers who were invested in the outcome of the vote have attempted to delay council sittings to allow for more time for their coalition partners to negotiate. To this, councillors have responded with petitions signed by a majority of councillors, in line with section 29(1) of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act, to compel a speaker to call a council meeting. Speakers have also walked out of council meetings leaving them with no preceding officer or adjourned them. In response, parties who wanted to pass motions in these meetings have invoked section 29(1A) of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act which empowers the municipal manager to call and chair a council meeting if the speaker refuses to do so.

Motions of no confidence in metros have been frequent largely due to the absence of legislation limiting them. Early last year, the Ekurhuleni council amended a standing order which limited the tabling of the same motions, including of no confidence, to once every six months. This ended a limitation that most metros do not have. While motions of no confidence in the president at national level are subject to strict conditions, their frequency is currently not restricted. The conditions perform the function of restricting motions by ensuring that frivolous ones are difficult to table and pass. Section 89(1) of the Constitution empowers the National Assembly to remove the president through a resolution supported by two-thirds of its members on the grounds of a serious violation of the Constitution or the law, serious misconduct and inability to perform the functions of the office. Section 102(2) of the Constitution enables the National Assembly to remove the president through a motion of no confidence supported by a majority of its members. This is one provision that could be exploited for frivolous motions of no confidence. However, given coalition scenarios, we do not expect opposition parties to have the numbers to do this. In the next parliament, we should expect some legislative attempts to limit the frequency of motions of no confidence. This is an area that the ANC and DA agree on.

We must highlight that municipalities have their own rules regarding motions in general and how these are entertained. The above is therefore a summation of how motions of no confidence generally come about.

## Municipal managers – DGs interface

A national department's director general plays a significant role in the performance of that department. Similarly, a municipal/city manager is an integral part of the administration of a municipality. As such, parties prefer that the role of municipal manager be occupied by an individual they (can) have a functional working relationship with.

The controversy surrounding the appointment of Floyd Brink as Johannesburg city manager is a prime example. Brink was appointed on a permanent basis in February 2023. In early November 2023, the High Court in Johannesburg declared his appointment unconstitutional, unlawful and invalid in a case brought by the DA. Since the court's decision was based on the improper process followed in the appointment, the ANC-EFF coalition reappointed Brink in late November 2023. Brink, who was the interview panel's second preferred candidate, reportedly has historical links with the EFF's Julius Malema.<sup>4</sup> Johann Mettler who was the interview panel's preferred candidate and had the support of the DA later withdrew from the race.<sup>5</sup> In a national government coalition, if coalition partners share departments, we can expect similar wranglings about the appointment of DGs, as parties would want to ensure that DGs in the departments they run are amenable to them or their coalition at least.

## Post-2024 elections national and provincial coalitions

Below we touch on some important points for coalitions that we are likely to see after this month's elections.

- The DA's rigidity has been a setback for its ambitions to lead coalitions in metros. Given the high stakes at the national and provincial levels and the DA's stated intention to prevent an ANC-EFF coalition, we expect forces within the party's federal executive (FedEx) to push for a more flexible approach to coalitions.
- The timelines we provided earlier in this note will also apply to provinces, in relation to the first sitting of the legislature, and election of the speaker and premier. Given our expectation of coalitions in KZN and Gauteng, we expect that the national leadership of parties will discuss coalition deals for these provinces concurrent with the national one. This again points to the high likelihood of club deals. Our baseline is that all these coalitions will be led by the ANC.
- Importantly, the ANC in KZN simply does not have a provincial leadership strong enough to carry out such a task maturely and efficiently. ANC national leadership intervention would thus definitely be required. The other option would be for the ANC NEC to deploy a senior politician from the province (eg Zweli Mkhize) to lead those negotiations. However, the probability of this is low.
- While the ANC Gauteng leadership is better equipped to handle the task of negotiations, it will be weakened after a poor showing in the

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<sup>4</sup> Amabhungane. 2022. "DA, EFF, ActionSA – Joburg council set for showdown over city manager appointment". *Amabhungane*.

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-03-09-da-eff-actionsa-joburg-council-set-for-showdown-over-city-manager-appointment/>

<sup>5</sup> Sisanda Mbolekwa. 2023. "Court rules Floyd Brink's appointment as Joburg city manager was unlawful". *Business Day*.

<https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2023-11-07-court-rules-floyd-brinks-appointment-as-joburg-city-manager-was-unlawful/>

polls. As such, national leadership will likely lead negotiations. It is also important to mention that the ANC's coalitions framework – which will be of limited usefulness frankly – gives the responsibility for coalition formation to the secretary general's office.

## Conclusion

It is important to emphasise the differences between local government and national government. Despite these differences, there are some valuable lessons that we can draw from the experience of coalitions at the local government level which may be useful for national government. Based on these lessons, we can conclude that:

- Smaller parties can be easily swayed by promises of more powerful positions, thereby creating instability.
- Coalitions with many parties are prone to instability due to defections. To counter this the bigger parties in a coalition have to give smaller parties spoils that opposition parties cannot counter. The ANC has done this to perfection in eThekweni, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni.
- Finally, it is evident that some form of club deal is more workable than having different coalition partners in different municipalities. ANC-led coalitions are indicative of this.

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