

MARRIAGES OF INCONVENIENCE

The Politics of Coalitions in South Africa

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Preface

FOR ALL THE CRITIQUE OF INTERPARTY COALITIONS, they become inevitable – and essential instruments of governance – when absolute majorities are not realised in an election. Such governments are, in a sense, a product of the people’s will in that the electorate asserts a lack of overwhelming confidence in any single contestant in the polls.

Marriages of Inconvenience: The politics of coalitions in South Africa is a research-based volume that collates and interprets lessons that South Africa should take to heart in managing such eventualities. It draws from domestic experiences as well as from case studies on the rest of the African continent and generic instances further afield.

Coalitions in various iterations have been a part of the South African polity since the attainment of democracy in 1994. This started, nationally, with a ‘grand coalition’ in the form of a Government of National Unity as mandated in the interim constitution. Coalitions have also found expression in some of the country’s provinces. After the transition, multiparty governments were sustained at national and provincial levels either as a matter of necessity due to election outcomes or for other political considerations.

At local government level, coalitions have been relatively commonplace in South Africa from the onset of democratically elected municipalities in 2000, with many situations where no single party attained an absolute majority. This gained prominence from 2016 when many metropolitan governments and some large towns became sites of coalition politics. The coalitions have taken a variety of forms, including co-governance arrangements and confidence-and-supply

agreements where minority governments are propped up by other parties on an issue-by-issue basis.

This volume seeks to distil the factors that leverage successful coalitions, along with those that occasion drawbacks. On the whole, it would seem that South Africa is poorly equipped for coalition politics. While instability in coalitions is not unique, this is not an inevitable product of multiparty governance. In many countries, and indeed in some municipalities in South Africa, there is appreciation of the need to govern cooperatively, constructively and in the popular interest when coalitions become inevitable. In some jurisdictions, the culture of coalition politics has become ingrained.

Relevant to all these experiences are critical issues such as electoral and party systems, political culture and the quality of political leadership.

There is recognition of the stabilising effects of coalitions when political parties co-operate and deliver effective governance, through mature consensus-building. But there is also acknowledgement of co-governing arrangements that evince debilitating competition during various phases of the electoral cycle. Some fall apart and get reconstituted. In these instances, governance and service to the public are severely compromised.

Across various chapters of this volume, critical questions on how to stabilise coalition governance in the South African setting are identified. The first pertains to whether there should be post-election workable coalition agreements that are lodged with, and assessed (but not vetoed) by, a competent authority. The second is whether, at local level, the option of a proportional collective executive system – as distinct from an executive mayoralty – should become mandatory when a single party or coalition of parties is unable to attain an absolute majority. Thirdly, strict observance of the laws on the appointment of bureaucrats and on the role of politicians in administrative decisions, including procurement, is even more crucial under coalition government.

There are, however, limits to constitutional and legislative regulation. Interparty goodwill and cooperative and constructive relations cannot be legislated. The maturity of party leaders and citizen

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activism are both critical in ensuring stability. And so, engendering a culture of stable coalition politics in South Africa may take time and more practical experience; but it is in the nature of party politics that this cannot be attained in a linear fashion and for all time.

The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) hopes that *Marriages of Inconvenience* will help inform the exercise of coalition politics in South Africa. Understanding the determinants of positive and negative experiences, we hope, will nudge parties towards constructive and sustainable coalitions. At the core of this is a commitment to serve the people's economic, social and political interests.

MISTRA wishes to thank the authors and the teams across the publication chain, as well as those who contribute to the Institute's sustenance. May the insights in this volume promote rigorous discourse and prudent coalition practice!

Joel Netshitenzhe
Executive Director