

OPINION & ANALYSIS

# Marriages of inconvenience: the fraught politics of coalitions in SA

A new book exhaustively looks at the nation's track record and what will influence future successes

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**COALITION MISSION** DA calls to UDM national leader Bantu Holomisa to replace Nelson Mandela Bay mayor Mongameli Bobani fell on deaf ears, leading to the collapse of the DA-led coalition. Then there was another coalition collapse and eventually no mayor, putting many day-to-day operations into a tailspin.

*Image: Eugene Coetzee*

The popularity of the ANC has slipped in successive elections from its high of more than 60%. First it declined to under 60%, then to below 50% in Tshwane, Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay in 2016.

Nonetheless, the DA shows no sign of benefiting from the ANC's slack — hardly reaching even 30% of the votes cast. Instead, the ANC's numbers have been absorbed by small, mostly new parties.

Inevitably, SA is in for many decades of coalitions. This is the central theme of a new [book](#), *Marriages of Inconvenience: The Politics of Coalitions in SA*, which takes a forward-looking view of the country's politics, but also an historical one.

Political scientist [Susan Booysen](#) and independent think-tank [Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection](#) have done themselves proud by assembling a team of 15 scholars to publish this authoritative 528-page volume. It shows the nation's track record of previous municipal and provincial coalitions, and what factors will influence future successes and failures in the new round of coalitions that will come after the [November 1 local government elections](#).

South Africans ought, at the least, to remember their former Government of National Unity [between 1994 and 1997](#): this was a grand coalition of the then three largest parties in parliament — the ANC, National Party and IFP — diverse in policies, but united in the intention to defuse the threat of continued civil war.

**“ Nelson Mandela Bay provides readers with a grim lesson of all the reasons to wish to minimise or, best of all, avoid coalitions.**

From 1983 to 89 SA was in a low-level civil war, including rioting, petrol-bombing, assassinations, wildcat general strikes and [massacres](#).

The political future will be markedly different, the authors say. In short, voters face a mix of parties winning an outright majority in some towns, but increasingly requiring coalitions to hold power in other towns. For this reason, SA will increasingly, but variably and intermittently, enter into interparty coalition arrangements in the years to come.

## Lessons from elsewhere

Part of this book examines coalitions in other countries, whose lessons SA could heed. At one extreme, Mauritius had a coalition that lasted 15 years. At the other, Italy suffered 30 prime ministers after World War 2, of whom only four lasted five years or more. Belgium took 13 attempts over 493 days to negotiate a coalition in 2019; after its 2010 election, it took 541 days to succeed in forming a coalition.

SA's political parties would do well to learn from Ireland, where the three largest political parties negotiated a coalition treaty over 100 pages. This stipulated measures and mechanisms for conflict resolution, plus agreed compromise policies on healthcare, education, housing and foreign policy.

## Sobering experiences

[Marriages of Inconvenience](#) examines SA's sobering experiences with coalitions in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal; and in Nelson Mandela Bay, Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Cape Town.

The rarest of all the country's coalitions so far have been short ANC-DA coalitions in Beaufort West and Kannaland, though these parties are adjacent on the country's political spectrum. The most unlikely have been the Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Mandela Bay DA-EFF "confidence and supply agreements". This is political science jargon for a minimalist agreement where one party agrees to vote with the other only on votes of no confidence and on passing the annual budget.

Nelson Mandela Bay provides readers with a grim lesson of all the reasons to wish to minimise or, best of all, avoid coalitions. Two of the authors have each previously written a book about this city's governance. The DA, ACDP, Cope, FF+ and UDM did indeed have a "co-governance agreement" among them both on substantive issues, such as not allocating public works jobs on party lines, through to procedures for consultation.

Eagerness for power left the DA and ANC vulnerable to extortion from the smallest parties. The UDM (with only two councillors) and the Patriotic Alliance (with only one councillor) both, in turn, demanded - and got - the mayoralty.

The UDM's [Mongameli Bobani](#)'s first action on becoming mayor was to demand lists of all contracts up for tender and all vacant managerial positions - flashing red lights. He fired the city manager and appointed a further seven acting city managers in his attempts to get his way.

All DA appeals to UDM national leader [Bantu Holomisa](#) to replace Bobani fell on deaf ears. The inevitable result was the collapse of the DA-led coalition; a collapse of the following coalition; then a period with no mayor. This put many day-to-day operations into a tailspin.

## Dangers of political interference

This is not the only instance where the vulnerability of municipal staff to political threats from their mayor hurt SA. Before 2000, the post of city manager - then called [town clerk](#) - was on permanent staff. This was then changed to a maximum contract of five years, to expire one year after municipal elections.

The city manager is the CEO of the entire administration of a metropolis, where the buck should stop when anything malfunctions or ceases to

work.

Since 2000, the city manager has been appointed on a contract limited to a maximum of five years. This means no city manager may dare refuse an illegal order from a mayor about appointments or tenders for fear of their contract not being renewed, or even being fired from their career job.

In practice, the situation is worse – municipal managers average only three and a half years before they are squeezed out by their political bosses; in the large [metropolitan councils](#) they average a mere 15 months before being purged. The consequences are devastating – the bleeding away of competent leadership and appointment of unqualified and sometimes unethical party hacks to, for example, run the sewage treatment plant.

Political interference in appointments and tenders are the prime drivers of corruption. SA urgently needs to return to city managers as permanent staff as speedily as possible. This will require a statutory revision.

Another lesson from the book is that all political parties in the country centralise power. No municipal nor provincial coalition will survive unless it is supported by the national leadership of all the political parties involved.

This book will be valuable on every bookcase. It could not be more timely – the country is now a mere two months away from the next local government election, in which there are certain to be far more coalitions than ever before.

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<https://theconversation.com/marriages-of-inconvenience-the-fraught-politics-of-coalitions-in-south-africa-167517>



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