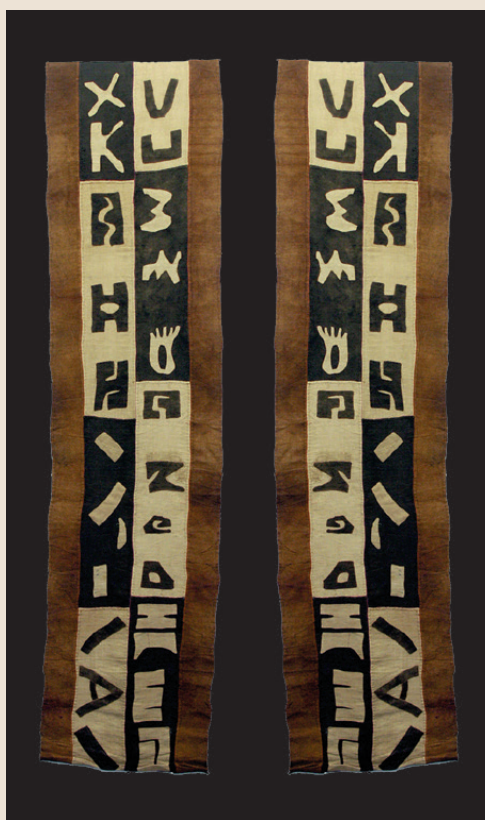


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***Marriages of Inconvenience: The Politics of Coalitions in South Africa*, edited by S. Booysen, Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), Johannesburg.**

While coalitions are not new to the South African political landscape, the 2021 Local Government Elections yielded five of the eight metros as hung councils and a total of 66 municipalities without a party in the majority, thus thrusting coalition politics into the political limelight. This was nearly double the number of hung councils in the 2016 local elections. Since its first democratic multiparty elections in 1994, South Africa's party politics has been characterised by a dominant party system, with the African National Congress (ANC) winning five consecutive national elections. Provincial elections, but even more so, those in the local spheres have been increasingly competitive. The results have compelled political parties to consider coalitions and post-election co-operation for a joint exercise of political power.

Marriages of Inconvenience: The Politics of Coalitions in South Africa, commissioned and published by independent think-tank, the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) and edited by University of the Witwatersrand Emeritus Professor Susan Booysen, is thus a timely publication. The 528-page volume, published in 2021 (before the Local Government Elections outcomes were known), was intuitively motivated by the expectation that coalition politics would become a more prominent feature of South Africa's political landscape.

A fifteen-strong author team spans academia, research-based think-tanks, and political practitioners, bringing together the theoretical, practical, comparative, and critical. The work comprises five parts: Part One is a contextual positioning of coalitions in South Africa historically as well as in terms of regional foundations and global trends. Part Two focuses on deriving learnings from African case studies. Part Three is a return to South African contextual issues, namely the legal-constitutional and the political-administrative. Part Four considers the practice of coalitions in South Africa's metropolitan municipalities, and Part Five considers future possibilities, while reflecting on the lessons learnt. While the chapters are informative, insightful and accessible, the logic of the chapter divisions between the five parts is at times elusive. However, the book includes useful features such as a glossary of relevant terms as well as a comprehensive index for easy reference.

The point of departure is 'the new politics of instability' (p. 1) that the book seeks to contribute towards understanding. It is rather pessimistically framed, as is the apparent presentation of South African politics as a choice between dominance (bringing stability), and coalitions (embodying instability) (p. 14). The chapters,

covering both local, regional, and global experiences, point to a complex, nuanced record of coalition politics. A key takeaway from the book is the relevance of the motivation for entering into a coalition. Where there is ideological or at least policy agreement, alliances tend towards more stability and better governance outcomes (p. 90). But where the motivations are of 'opportunistic machines' (p. 177) that are essentially rent-seeking, and accessing power and resources for narrow or personal ends, coalitions tend towards disintegration and have poor governance outcomes (pp. 146 & 356).

Scholarship thus notes the basis of coalitions as being driven either by ideology and policy, or position and power, finding that the former tends to create longer-term stability, while the latter tends to faster disintegration. Even so, coalitions with 'programmatically diverse' may also have a 'democratising effect' through including previously excluded groups and engendering a democratic culture of deliberation and compromise (p. 90). In South Africa, five of the twenty best performing municipalities, identified by Good Governance Africa, were governed by coalitions (p. 272). The inevitability of coalition politics for South Africa is not necessarily a move towards dismal politics.

Concerns are highlighted regarding the predominant tendency in many African countries to reduce elections to a zero-sum game of winner-takes-all, which can then translate into coalitions being about patronage and rent-seeking (p. 128). A further concern regarding the case studies in Kenya and Malawi, for example, was a lack of intraparty democracy (pp. 177 & 229). The colonial legacy and post-colonial trajectory are of initial multi-party elections, followed by one-party systems, then one-party dominance, and finally the current trend towards no clear-cut winners. This is well set out; but it would be interesting to understand what influence the pre-colonial political landscape might have, in particular on how opposition is perceived and engaged, the viability and acceptability of cross-cutting ethnic collaboration, and the prospect of governing in the broader national interest as opposed to narrow personal or ethnic interest.

The ANC's nearly three decades of dominance has not been characterised by good governance, accountability, responsiveness or quality service-delivery (especially at the local level). Governing on the basis of partisan interests, it has arguably contributed to citizens opting out of the electoral system, together with the growth of radicalism and violent protests: not the substance of a stable democracy. Furthermore, the predominant narrative in South African scholarship that opposition parties are weak, fails to recognise that they operate within the context of an uneven playing field, where access to resources, policy-making and office has been skewed, creating a weakened opposition. This contextual reality points to the potential coalition politics has of providing a fairer playing field.

A more competitive electoral landscape could give space and opportunity for smaller parties to be kingmakers, to gain governing experience, have deliverables (the opportunity to bring their issues to the fore) to show their voters and thus to grow their voter base. To mature as a democracy, South Africa needs to deepen its political culture in terms of inculcating democratic norms and the values of negotiation, concession, compromises and power sharing – lessons provided by coalition politics. For successful coalitions, parties need policies with ‘national reach and resonance’ (p. 177), and motivations need to move away from the ‘spoils of office’ (p. 208). Political parties need to be sure of where they cannot bend so as not to ‘sell their soul’ for positions and power. Sometimes an opposition voice is also important, especially for accountability. Even so, coalitions provide a maturing opportunity for the political actors in South Africa’s democracy.

Marriages of Inconvenience provides timely insights not just for South Africa and the wider African region, but all countries that have engaged or will engage in coalitions. In the South African context coalitions have become a ‘necessity’ (p. 477) and an inevitability in an increasingly competitive political landscape: hence the need to better understand this political dynamic.

But the resonance of the book goes beyond coalition politics to interest those who seek a better grasp of local South African politics, African politics, party politics and electoral systems. As such this book is set to become a key reference for academics and practitioners alike.

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