

KGALEMA MOTLANTHE FOUNDATION
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PANEL DISCUSSION: CREATING CONDITIONS OF STABILITY UNDER COALITION GOVERNMENTS AND FORGING A NEW MODEL

HAVING A COMMON PROGRAMME THAT DRIVES THE NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY INTEREST

I have been asked to reflect on a common programme that drives the national and community interest, in relation to coalition governments.

To start off, let me refer to storylines in the latest iteration of Indlulamithi Scenarios for 2035 which are soon to be released:

- The first storyline is a kind of noisy Hadedea Home. In the politics of this scenario, there is a steady decline in popular trust in political parties. The pernicious effect in the build-up to 2035 is to create greater uncertainty, as a weak government clammers from one approach to another in search of quick fixes, which are ineffective patch-works. Everything is unhurried and by 2035 a 'speed up' mass campaign gains momentum.
- The second scenario is about a scrap-feasting Vulture Culture. Here, the political problem starts with a right-wing coalition that adopts a law-and-order approach. This then spawns its antithesis in the late 2020s in the form of a professed 'left' coalition which campaigned on reversing the *skop, skiet and donder* of the previous era. However, most of the allies in the 'left' coalition are motivated by power. Profligacy and pork-barrel politics rule the roost. And so, as the party barons revel in their time to eat, the South African political economy deteriorates towards a real failed state.
- The third storyline is on Weaver Work. Despite its seemingly positive spin, the politics leading to the early 2030s is not pretty. It all starts with a decline of the major parties leading to a wobbly coalition in 2029. But because the coalition partners fear being booted out in the next election, they set out to implement sustainable socio-economic and environmental programmes that generate strong economic growth. The big players increase their support – and a grand coalition is formed, as the brinkmanship of smaller parties is rejected by the electorate.

The municipal Coalitions Barometer released about a month ago by the Mapungubwe Institute (MISTRA) confirms these political traits. It points to governance instability; near-collapse of service provision; illegal parcelling out of bureaucratic positions; and secret agreements among coalition partners. Interestingly, though, the Barometer also identifies a few islands of coalition good performance.

And so, is stability under coalition governments possible; and can a new model be devised? There are many proposals on how coalitions should be managed.

These include issues of a political culture anchored on strategic acumen among political leaders as well as co-operative rather than destructively competitive politics. It has also been proposed that our political system should provide for sufficient time to form governments, after an election, so as to

allow for thorough deliberation; that the details of coalition agreements should be made public; and that South Africa should identify or create a neutral agency similar to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) to help guide the formation and management of coalitions. Other proposals include the regulation of no-confidence motions; a threshold for participation in legislatures or executives; reverting to the collective municipal executive system in instances of deadlocks; and the Constitutional common-sense of a professional public service insulated from undue political interference.

These are some of the major interventions canvassed at the Deputy President's July Coalitions Dialogue. Many of them can assist in improving the praxis of coalition politics.

But, lest we forget, all politics – coalition or otherwise – is about more than just political stability. The *raison d'être* of governance, as management of social relations, is the improvement of the human condition.

It is therefore apposite that the focus of this session is on substantive issues that should underpin coalition governance, in pursuit of the national and community interest.

In my view, the starting point should be fidelity to South Africa's foundational vision, which is the national Constitution. This may sound trite. But we need to remember the strategic assumptions that inspired the political compact of the 1990s: that the political leadership would counsel patience on the part of the marginalised, and engender preparedness to contribute to restitution by the privileged.

It is in this context that the Constitution deals with more than narrow political freedoms. It enshrines social, economic, environmental and other generations of rights that are fundamental to social stability and progress.

Parties may argue about the pace and the how in relation to these generations of human rights. But, in devising coalition agreements, parties should, above everything else, outline how they intend to pursue the Constitution's injunction about fundamental social change.

Since 1994, various programmes have been introduced in pursuit of that vision: the Reconstruction and Development Plan, the National Development Plan, and now the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, among others, all aimed at attaining that common national vision. There have of course been ebbs and flows; but as Census 2022 has demonstrated, massive progress has been made. We also need systematically to review some of the timeframes of NDP targets taking into account the man-made and natural disasters of the past decade that slowed us down.

Some of the speakers in earlier sessions elaborated on the reasons behind the current weaknesses, including state capacity and the terrible era of state capture. And so, professionalisation of the public service and enforcement of ethics would be fundamental to a common programme.

But, should the development of such a programme be left to political parties?

I would argue that, as in the 1980s and 1990s, the business of politics should not be the sole preserve of politicians. Civil society should be involved in fashioning the content of coalition agreements.

It is commendable that, while consultations continue on a grand social compact, business has put shoulder to the wheel to help address problems of electricity generation, logistics and crime. I'm personally convinced that these interventions and the multitude of economic reforms are steadily but surely raising the country's growth trajectory – that we are moving onto a higher growth path.

Another excellent example of activism is The Interfaith Forum of South Africa (TIFSA) which recently came up with concrete proposals from its conference on what it calls 'the nation's response to ... prevailing circumstances'. The Forum identifies economic, social and ethical interventions as well as what they refer to as a 'national psychology infrastructure [which identifies] ... South African values – that define our character'. (TIFSA, *Our Country, Our Responsibility: A Conference Statement*, 11/10/2023)

And so, political coalitions should be built on the foundation of social compacting involving more than just the political elite. All the social partners should see it as their responsibility to act proactively as The Interfaith Forum has done – by identifying the practical foundational content of government programmes, whether there are coalitions or not, after next year's elections.

The salutary lesson of the Indlulamithi storylines referred to earlier is that we must reject a false left radicalism that in fact masks greed and venality. At the other end of the spectrum, we must avoid a false liberal colour-blindness that would have the effect of perpetuating apartheid social relations. Both these extremes are a sure guarantee for 'a doomsday scenario'. What the country needs, if coalitions were to become inevitable beyond the municipal sphere, is a political expression of the dynamic of a social compact.

To recapitulate. Fundamental for political and social stability is more than just the mastery of the praxis of coalition politics among political parties; but also deliberate and proactive input by the social partners on the substantive issues. This would help inject rationality into party programmes and coalition negotiations; and contain raw impulses and egos often found in party-political engagements.

Against the backdrop of a South African patient that has been over-diagnosed and under-treated, and the self-flagellation that has become a national sport, I would argue that it is possible – even under coalition governance – to develop a programme that drives the national and community interest.

It depends on what all of us do!

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