



Kingdom of the Netherlands



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NAVIGATING COALITION GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE NETHERLANDS





Navigating Coalition Governance in South Africa and the Netherlands

This Brief is based on two events co-hosted by the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in South Africa. The first was a High-Level Roundtable discussion titled 'Coalition Governance in South Africa and the Netherlands', held on 16 February 2026 at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) in Cape Town, conducted under Chatham House Rules. The second, titled 'Navigating Coalition Governance in South Africa and the Netherlands', was also held at the UCT GSB on 18 February 2026 and was co-hosted with the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance. This event was accessible online as well as in person.

These two events brought together policymakers, researchers, political practitioners, legal experts, diplomats and civil society representatives from South Africa and the Netherlands for an in-depth discussion about coalition governance in both countries. The discussions covered topics such as coalition formation and consolidation, institutional design, public legitimacy, civic engagement and the management of ideological difference within coalition governments. Most of the political parties that make up South Africa's Government of National Unity (GNU) sent representatives to participate in the discussion.

Discussion Points

- Coalition governance in other countries offers some useful comparative lessons about how South Africa's politics might evolve, although each country's democratic experience is ultimately unique. For example, the Netherlands has a long history of coalition governance and a strong tradition of consensus-building. However, in recent years, it has suffered from increasing fragmentation, resulting in two recent government collapses and the formation of the country's first minority government. The Dutch experience suggests that even democracies with long-running experience of national coalitions are not immune to the rising pressures of political fragmentation and populism. At the same time, South Africa's unusual historical, institutional and socioeconomic context means that lessons from other countries must be applied with care.
- Coalition governance appears likely to remain a significant feature of South Africa's political landscape for the foreseeable future. Although politics remains robust and competitive, we can no longer assume that most elections will produce a clear 50%+ majority; in any case, this is not an outcome facilitated by the country's proportional representation system. Governance through coalition arrangements has already moved from being a predominantly local government phenomenon to a national one, and South African political parties, institutions and citizens are adapting to this new environment.

- There are diverse views on what coalition arrangements mean for South Africa's democracy: some believe that they facilitate consensus, inclusion and nation-building; others argue that they risk curbing opposition voices and holding government to account, and even result in parties' identities being overwhelmed. There is also disagreement about whether the 'Government of National Unity' is accurately named. Some participants suggested that the current arrangement more closely resembles a 'grand coalition' between the ANC and the DA, although the inclusion of smaller parties also creates a 'surplus majority' well beyond what is mathematically required to form a government. The GNU's oversized majority has so far limited the risk of collapse, even when the relationship between the large anchor parties has been severely strained. However, we cannot assume that this dynamic will necessarily continue.
- Political parties and analysts differ on what the optimal coalition governance arrangements are. Some favour 'minimal' coalitions, in which the strongest political parties come to an agreement about how they will share power. Others favour a situation in which a 'minority government' is formed by the party with the largest number of votes, with the understanding that it will receive the support of allies on some issues. There are pros and cons to each arrangement.
- At the national level, coalition government formation in South Africa is institutionally constrained. The constitutional requirement to elect a president and appoint a cabinet within a very short window after elections severely limits the scope for detailed negotiations between political parties which have secured parliamentary seats. The Statement of Intent (an agreement between the parties that formed the current GNU) is perceived by political parties as necessary but inadequate for the purposes of governing South Africa's complex political environment. It does not specify how disputes will be resolved, does not set out concrete commitments on contentious policy questions, and does not establish workable mechanisms for managing disagreements as they arise. From the perspective of voters, the mechanics of appointing and running coalition governments remain opaque and unaccountable. The GNU has agreed on a 'Clearing House' mechanism for conflict resolution, but how it functions is not well understood by members of the public, or even, in many cases, by party insiders themselves.
- Ideological conflict in South African coalition politics is both real and theatrical, and the distinction between the two is not always clear. Participants noted a persistent tension around genuine ideological differences between GNU parties and the performative nature of much political conflict. There is genuine divergence on contested policy issues such as South Africa's foreign policy choices, Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE), and a National Health Insurance (NHI). However, the public expression of such disagreements sometimes seems to serve as a form of electoral signalling. In some cases, GNU parties have attacked their coalition partners in public while cooperating behind the scenes, a pattern that has the potential to confuse voters and encourage cynicism about politics.

- Foreign policy has emerged as a particularly acute dividing line within the GNU, with different parties at times pursuing independent diplomatic engagements that have sent contradictory signals to foreign governments. For now, this debate is most intense at the elite level and does not appear to be a major electoral concern for most South African voters, but conference participants noted that this could change as global instability intensifies and domestic consequences become more visible.
- Disengagement from democracy is a serious and worsening trend. Voter registration and turnout have declined steadily, with particularly sharp falls among young people. Fewer than 40 per cent of eligible voters participated in the 2024 national elections, and Afrobarometer surveys suggest significant proportions of South Africans are open to non-democratic forms of government. This disengagement appears closely correlated with unemployment and poor service delivery, though the causal relationships are complex. These problems were not created by coalition governance but, depending on how the current government performs, they are ones that coalition governance could either help to address or further accelerate.
- At the end of the day, culture and leadership are likely to matter more than formal rules in the successful establishment and management of coalitions. A recurring theme across both events was that institutional mechanisms such as coalition agreements, clearing houses, and legislative frameworks are necessary, but ultimately insufficient on their own. The durability and effectiveness of coalitions will depend on the quality of political leadership; party leaders' emotional intelligence; the willingness of parties to invest in building inter-party relationships; and the gradual development of norms of compromise and reciprocity. These features will take time to develop; however, the design of institutions can support or hinder their emergence.

Recommendations

1. Extend the timeframe for coalition formation (but not indefinitely!)

The constitutional provision requiring the election of the president shortly after an election appears not to enable meaningful coalition negotiations, and there seems to be broad agreement across parties that it should be revisited. The goal would be to allow sufficient time for member parties to negotiate substantive agreements rather than merely high-level statements of intent, so that all partners go into government with a clearer understanding of which specific compromises they had agreed to. The bar for constitutional amendments is high, but this is one of the areas where the case for change appears strong and the potential for cross-party consensus great. Nevertheless, South Africa should move with caution. In some European countries, such as the Netherlands, coalition negotiations sometimes drag on for many months at a time, creating protracted periods of political uncertainty; South Africa should avoid replicating this problem.



2. Develop more substantive coalition agreements

The Statement of Intent that governs the current GNU would benefit from being supplemented by a more detailed agreement among member parties, particularly on the key policy trade-offs the coalition is likely to face and the fiscal rules that will govern budget decisions. Participants cautioned against ‘over-institutionalisation’, which can make coalitions rigid and unresponsive to changing circumstances. Furthermore, the highly detailed programme documents produced in some European contexts may not be appropriate for South Africa’s developmental context. Nevertheless, South Africa should consider a ‘middle ground’ approach, somewhere in between the thin statement of principles that currently exists and a prescriptive governing document. In particular, there must be more emphasis on developing effective mechanisms for managing disagreements when they inevitably arise.

3. Strengthen and more consistently use the Clearing House mechanism

The Clearing House is the internal forum of the GNU parties for resolving disputes before they escalate into public crises. Member parties should commit more explicitly to using it consistently, and should communicate more clearly to the public about how it functions. The formal incorporation of a provision for member parties to record differing positions on specific issues without triggering a government crisis would provide a useful release valve. This is particularly the case for questions of foreign policy, for which there may be no easy resolution of differences of principle.

4. Develop a more collective approach to foreign policy

GNU parties would benefit from negotiating at least a basic shared foreign policy framework, identifying areas of consensus and establishing some protocols for managing disagreements on sensitive international questions. Otherwise, we risk a situation in which multiple parties signal views that differ from the government’s official positions, and this could have reputational costs for South Africa abroad and exacerbate tensions within the coalition at home. Establishing such a consensus will be difficult, given the genuine ideological and strategic differences between political parties. Nevertheless, establishing clearer norms around foreign policy seems both necessary and achievable.

5. Greater transparency and more investment in civic education

South Africa’s transition from a dominant-party system to coalition politics has created new demands for public understanding of how government works. These demands are understandable: many of the institutional mechanics that now matter — coalition negotiations, confidence votes, clearing house processes — were not previously part of the political landscapes citizens have seen. The 2025 budget crisis illustrated both the confusion this can cause and the appetite among citizens for clearer information about how decisions are made. Parliament, the government and political parties should be more transparent about coalition arrangements as this can promote greater accountability. Moreover, civil society organisations and research institutions should invest in civic education that would help citizens to develop more realistic expectations of coalition governance and of how their votes translate into



political outcomes. This is a long-term investment whose returns will be slow to materialise, but the costs of neglecting it are likely to compound over time.

6. Do not ignore the growing problem of democratic disengagement

The decline in voter registration and turnout raises questions about democratic legitimacy, and the trend shows little sign of reversing. Practical reforms such as automatic voter registration at age 18 are worth considering, perhaps as part of a broader package of electoral reform. On a deeper level, however, addressing the problem of democratic disengagement will require the state to demonstrate tangible improvements in people's daily lives, as discussed in the following recommendation.

7. Keep the material interests of South Africans in the foreground

The durability of the GNU, and the legitimacy of democracy more broadly, will ultimately depend on whether the state is able to fulfil its obligations under the social contract and improve material conditions for South Africans. This will require visible progress on issues such as economic growth, job creation, the provision of basic services, and the ethical conduct of public institutions. Progress on these issues will likely determine whether the current political partnership between the centre-left and centre-right is able to survive and strengthen the democratic centre, or whether the system is overwhelmed by pressure from anti-democratic or extremist forces.

8. Calibrate policy responses to the different realities of local and national government

Coalition dynamics at the level of local government differ in important ways from those at the national level. The consequences of coalition instability in a municipality can be felt almost immediately in the interruption of basic services; this differs from national-level political instability. Any legislative or policy reforms intended to improve coalition governance should be sensitive to these differences. Approaches to coalition management that might be sensible in a national context could have unintended consequences when applied to municipalities, or vice versa.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the development of a mature coalition culture in South Africa will depend, in part, on the accumulation of shared norms and expectations among political practitioners. Structured dialogue between the parties that make up the government can help build those norms, giving party representatives a chance to communicate outside official structures like the cabinet or the Clearing House, and to do so before, as well as during, coalition arrangements. The two events on which this Brief is based were an example of what such dialogue can look like in practice, bringing political practitioners into direct conversation with researchers and international observers. One immediate possibility for fostering constructive coalition governance, then, is to keep making space for dialogues such as these.