



No one-size-fits-all for coalition governments

Evidence over the past five years shows that such deals have collapsed

A MONTH before the recent local government elections I sat down with Johann Mettler, the former city manager of the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, and Clarence Johnson, the former mayor of the Cape Winelands District Municipality, to talk about the intricacies of coalition governments on my Great Governance ZA Podcast.

Just to remind ourselves, coalition governments come into being when no single political party obtains 50% +1 of seats following an election.

This is sometimes referred to as a hung council – something we heard a lot about in the past few days. This is now the reality, with hung councils having all but doubled from the 26 in 2016.

In such cases, parties making up at least a majority of the seats on offer enter into an agreement to co-govern a municipality. The purpose of such arrangements is to share political power between the coalition partners on the assumption that they at least share certain political principles and objectives.

In our talk, Mettler argued that effective and efficient government is dependent upon a fair degree of stability at both political and administrative levels.

The main job of a municipal manager is to manage expectations. In other words, what can work in certain circumstances. By focusing on that, it doesn't really matter which political party or grouping is in charge of the municipal council. Managing expectations also means that both the mayor and the manager stay in their lanes, as envisaged in legislation and council policies.

A municipality is like a train (the community) running on two tracks – the political track and the administrative track. Should those two tracks

COMMENT



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converge or diverge, the train will derail.

Evidence from the past five years suggests that the coalition governments have in fact derailed, resulting in unstable and unpredictable governments which had adversely hampered service delivery across the land as witnessed in Tshwane, Kannaland, Nelson Mandela Bay and Oudtshoorn municipalities.

Under such circumstances, planning, budgeting and execution became extremely politicised and challenging within such a highly regulated environment of local government.

Collapsed meetings resulted in extended delayed time frames where often such time frames are legislated and the non-compliance attracts adverse audit findings from the office of the auditor-general with a negative impact. The result is an entire execution value chain being compromised to the detriment of the people.

But Mettler suggested that the winner-takes-all governance model of the mayoral executive system does not sit well in coalition governance. Let me explain. Under the mayoral executive system, the executive leadership of the municipality is vested in the executive mayor who exercises those powers together with the members of the mayoral committee that is selected by the mayor.

In this system the executive mayor has considerable powers and functions and sole discretion to select and appoint members, and even to dismiss members.

The principle of proportionality does not apply to the composition of the mayoral committee.

The sole purpose of the mayoral committee is to assist the all-powerful mayor.

In my view this system politicises service delivery, leaving communities vulnerable.

The governance framework gaining traction and favoured by a growing army of local government practitioners is the collective executive system (a grand coalition).

The system was successfully applied in the Western Cape at the onset of the new local government dispensation in the year 2000, but changed when the ANC and the now defunct New National Party took over to follow the rest of the country other than KwaZulu-Natal.

What makes the collective executive system more attractive is that the exercise of executive authority lies with an executive committee in which the executive leadership is collectively vested – a forced coalition.

The municipal council then elects from among its members a number of councillors proportional to the seats in council. From this collective executive system, the mayor and deputy mayor are selected.

Vish Govender, a long-standing local government practitioner in KZN, argues that the system works.

Yes, one party may have more seats than the other, but the voices of smaller parties are heard and included in the collective decision-making, instead of a powerful individual.

The executive committee system of government provides a framework for

parties and interests to be represented proportionally in the committees of council, resulting in a more democratic dispensation at local level, compared with the current scenario where a single-seat party can be kingmaker or, even worse, decides who becomes the mayor of a particular municipality.

Communities are frankly sick and tired of the political mud-slinging, self-righteousness and arrogance of political parties which sometimes impose their will on a local context.

How else do we explain the exponential rise of smaller community-based parties?

Some people have whispered for a long time that politics has been the death blow of service delivery in the local government sphere.

Aristotle said that politics is the art of the possible.

And the Structures Act makes it possible for the MEC in a province to decide the governance system per municipality.

In the short term, instead of the one-size-fits-all approach, the collective executive system should be the preferred system of local governance where no party wins an outright local majority.

In this, the mayor plays a more ceremonial role with political oversight and is supported by qualified, competent, ethical professional public servants who are loyal to the Constitution, instead of the party, to manage the affairs of local government.

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