



Coalitions - are they terminally ill or just evolving?

With Nelson Mandela Bay's DA-coalition collapsing under the weight of individual dissent over the past few weeks (www.iol.co.za), and Tshwane's Mayor, Solly Msimanga, surviving from day to day only by the grace of the EFF (www.businesslive.co.za), does the UDM's departure from an opposition alliance spell the demise of coalition governments, or simply a new, more tricky phase in the run-up to 2019 general elections?

Case-by-case prognosis

Perhaps one of the most significant events for local government last week was the UDM's Bantu Holomisa's decision to no longer collaborate with the DA (www.702.co.za). What does this mean for a DA/UDM/COPE./ACDP and FF Plus opposition coalition which many speculated might form a viable government alternative, at least in Gauteng and the Northern Cape (www.businesslive.co.za)?

While the divorce may not seem that significant given that the UDM only garnered 0.62% of votes nationally in the 2016 local government election, the narrow balance of power in hung councils means that single seats can swing votes (even in metro councils like Nelson Mandela Bay and Tshwane), and even more worryingly - for the DA - suggests disaffection (from within) with the opposition coalitions.

Holomisa articulated the long-held view that the DA "dumps" its partners (consider the Patricia de Lille saga), suggesting an arrogance often alleged of the DA:

"We are done with the DA, sorry. We are done with them. And if they were to change [their attitude] now, that would just mean they are panicking and are only interested in using us again... In fact, we were removed by them. They chased us away in Nelson Mandela Bay, so what were they expecting?" (mg.co.za).

So what is the future of coalition-run councils? There are several considerations.

Individual cases

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, arch-capitalist but also pragmatist, Johannesburg's Mayor, Herman Mashaba, appears to be the most successful in winning over the EFF by letting the latter hold sway on policy decisions like insourcing workers and tariff hikes (www.businesslive.co.za).

The DA will need to decide the extent to which it is willing to be dictated to, especially by an ideologically opposite EFF (which won 8.3% of votes in 2016). Clearly, in Nelson Mandela Bay, working with Mongameli Bobani was too onerous a requirement, whereas Mashaba has found - for now - an acceptable set of compromises with the EFF. It remains to be seen whether Tshwane's Solly Msimanga will do the same.

For the ANC, its AIC-swung coalition in Ekurhuleni appears to be the most stable of all Gauteng metro coalitions.

2019 political alignment

It is to be expected that there will be considerable aligning, re-aligning and even rejection of political alliances in the run-up to next year's national and provincial elections. In July, an opposition working coalition (sans UDM and EFF), was established (www.sabcnews.com).

Local government coalitions will be looked at carefully by both opposition parties and voters - have they worked, where are the compromises made, do proverbial tails wag the dog?

It is likely that parties such as the EFF and UDM will work hard to distinguish themselves from larger parties (the ANC or an opposition coalition/DA, respectively) to retain political relevance.

This imperative speaks to why the EFF resisted entering any formal coalition arrangement post-2016 local government elections - ensuring not only its relevance but also ensuring leverage on individual issues. The demise of smaller, opposition parties in Cape Town's coalition reveals just how dangerous it is for smaller parties to be part of an amorphous opposition.

That said, after next year's elections, it is clear from 2016's horse-trading that anything is possible coalition-wise.

Way of the future?

With urban votes, in particular, becoming increasingly diverse and split, coalitions are likely to become more commonplace, if no less complex. It is also possible that Ramaphoria will restore comfortable majorities and local government will become a curious footnote of uncomfortable *real politik* in an era of unstable politics.

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