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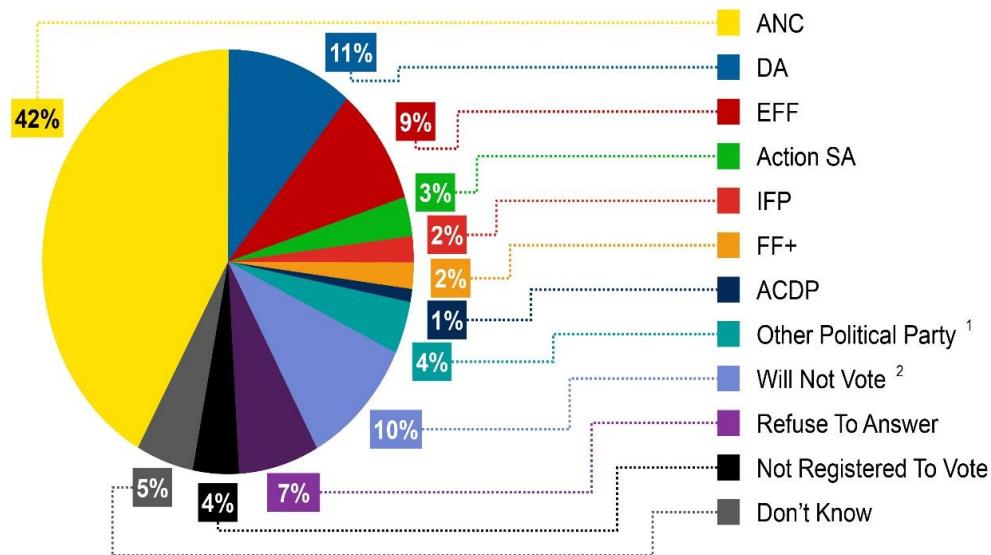
COALITIONS - STRONGER TOGETHER OR DIVIDED WE FALL?

Three Decades In, a Former Liberation Movement Fades

The only certainty about coalitions in South Africa is that, should current trends in party support continue the way it has in the past decade, future elections will result in more coalitions, and more uncertainty.

Last year's local government elections confirmed two trends: electoral support for the former liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), is on the decline, and fragmentation amongst opposition parties is increasing. The most convincing signs that the ANC was irreversibly in decline started when the opposition mustered enough votes in the 2016 local government elections to take important metros like Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela off the ANC (albeit by means of unstable coalitions).

Q If there were national elections tomorrow, which political party or organisation will you vote for?



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Support for political parties, two years before the next National Election (15 August 2022). Results from an Ipsos study



A recent Ipsos poll, conducted between 14 May and 3 July 2022, with a margin of error between 0.5 and 1.67 percentage points on a 95% confidence level, shows that the party

could get 42% of the vote should an election be held now. Although the Ipsos poll usually under-estimates the ANC's support, it seems to agree with the ANC's internal polls (which are not made public), which have recorded the party's support persistently below 50% since mid-2021.

The ANC's low support was also borne out by the local government elections in 2021, when the party only mustered about 46% of the total vote. It usually gets more support in a national election, but with continued power cuts, economic hardships, corruption revelations and a younger, less sentimental voter generation, there is a real possibility that the party will not reach 50% of the votes nationally in 2024.

In opposition ranks there has been fragmentation, with the Democratic Alliance's support falling (to 21.6% in 2021, down from 24.7% in 2016) and ActionSA breaking onto the scene, amassing an impressive 16% of support in Johannesburg.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) grew with a couple of percentage points, while many of the smaller parties - Patriotic Alliance (PA), African Christian Democratic Party (ACDC), African Transformation Movement (ATM), and Good Party showed growth by a fraction of a percentage point.

National and provincial elections are calculated differently to municipal elections, which means the ANC usually scores a few percentage points more than in the preceding local elections. But a possible drop in the ANC's support to below 50% nationally and in a province like Gauteng, and the growing number of opposition parties, seem to point to an era in which the country could be led by a coalition consisting of a number of smaller parties.

An ANC-led coalition could be more stable, but for now most opposition parties are refusing to strike deals with the governing party.

Are Coalitions a Must?

There is nothing in the Constitution or law that forces parties to form coalitions, but for legislatures to work smoothly it is useful to have at least some form of agreement in place in an event that no one party has a majority of seats (or more than 50% of the vote).

This is necessary for the election of a president, premier or mayor, which requires a simple majority vote, and the appointment of the executive, as well as the general functioning of government, including the passing of budgets. The lack of a working agreement between parties could result in instability and repeated motions of no confidence, which are likely to be successful.

Who Works with Who

The seven-party DA-coalition in the City of Cape Town in 2006, by the slimmest of margins, was a breakthrough for the DA as it was the first time that the party had a metro mayor - Helen Zille - and it provided a springboard for the party to win outright control of the city in 2011. It also won an outright majority in the Western Cape in 2009.

The party has failed to replicate this in metros where it took charge after the 2016 elections (Tshwane was the only metro where it retained control for the full five years) because the

party's popularity declined nationally and also because of some mistakes in governance committed in some areas.

The 2006 coalition set the tone for future talks, and for the first time saw parties with diverse constituencies at least negotiating about cooperation. For example, the PAC couldn't immediately bring itself to join the coalition, which also included the FF Plus, but it made an effort to actively abstain, which helped to keep the ANC out of power.

Fast forward to 2016, the DA was forced into another uneasy cooperation - this time with the EFF - to wrest control off the ANC in the Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela metros.

It ended in disaster and chaos for the DA, especially in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro where the EFF turned on DA mayor Athol Trollip, leading to his removal from office. EFF leaders said they would "cut the throat of whiteness" due to the DA's position on land expropriation without compensation, and left Trollip and other DA leaders very bitter.

Six weeks after the 1 November 2021 local government elections, and following complicated and often strained negotiations to constitute agreements to govern in a number of hung councils, a coalition agreement was created between six opposition parties. The parties in the coalition are: the DA, ActionSA, FF Plus, IFP, ACDP, and Cope.

This coalition played a big role in establishing similar multiparty governments in the three Gauteng metros (Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni) and in 22 other municipalities, including Mogale City, Cederberg, George, Thabazimbi, Metsimaholo and Breede Valley.

Some of these agreements also pulled in community-based parties, as well as regional or local parties that don't have a national footprint. In most metros, the DA won the mayoral vote with the surprise support of the EFF after a phone conversation between ActionSA leader Herman Mashaba and the EFF's deputy president, Floyd Shivambu. The EFF hasn't committed to any coalition agreements and the party has been prone to opportunistic flip-flopping in the past, which makes these governments somewhat unstable.

The six-party multi-party coalition agreement attempts to lie a basis for the future, stating: "All the political parties involved are committed to ensure stable and successful governments in the interest of all residents. It is of utmost importance that these multi-party governments serve as proof that the future of South Africa will include coalition governments which will serve the communities, root out corruption, ensure better service delivery and create a conducive environment for South Africans to prosper."

The coalition agreement was based on lessons learnt from previous coalitions agreements and resulted in the creation of a Multi-Party Coalition Oversight Group "which will maintain an oversight role to monitor the health and strength of the coalition relationships across the various municipalities".

In Tshwane, accusations have recently been levelled against DA mayor Randall Williams that he attempted to award an unsolicited power supply tender worth R26 billion and this will test this group's strength in conflict-resolution. The Multi-Party Coalition Oversight Group met within days of the allegations surfacing and said in a statement there would be an independent investigation, but that it, meanwhile, won't support a motion of no-confidence in Williams.

The statement's conclusion is a hint that this coalition is also a test as to how future governments will be managed: "The future of South Africa beyond 2024 include coalition

governments which will serve communities, root out corruption and ensure better service delivery."

The ANC, in turn, is using weaknesses in the three metros in Gauteng to rally its allies - such as Al Jama-ah, the African Independents Congress (AIC), the African People's Congress (APC) and the PAC - to oppose the DA mayors, accompanied by violent riots (such as in Thembisa recently). At the same time, the DA is rallying its partners on provincial level to weaken the ANC's Gauteng premier, David Makhura.

Could the DA and the ANC Work Together?

No and yes.

In the months before the local government election, DA leader John Steenhuisen let slip in an interview with the Sunday Times that the party would work with President Cyril Ramaphosa's 'faction' of the ANC in Parliament. He had to speedily retract this in the face of criticism from within his own party. The practicalities of such a move in the national legislature, where the ANC ultimately unites behind its leader, would be complicated and difficult to sell to voters.

Interestingly though, the DA is currently not supporting the pushing of a motion of no confidence by seven opposition parties (the EFF, UDM, Cope, PAC and ACDP) in Parliament against Ramaphosa (related to his alleged attempts to cover up the theft of cash dollars on his Phala Phala game farm). Instead, it wants an ad hoc committee to be set up by Parliament which would pursue a Section 89 impeachment inquiry that will both be more transparent and that would, perhaps, also slow the process down somewhat. "Ultimately, we need to ensure that we take the people of South Africa along with us in all we do," the party's spokesperson and chief whip Siviwe Gwarube said in a carefully-worded statement that is possibly also aimed not to burn bridges with the ACDP and Cope.

For now, this move indicates that the DA's voters would not be happy about the removal of Ramaphosa in a scenario where he could likely be replaced by his deputy, David Mabuza - who is a far less acceptable presidential choice to these voters.

The DA might, however, also have difficulty selling active cooperation with a Ramaphosa-led ANC to its voters. Perhaps if such cooperation is the only way to keep a worse evil - such as an ANC-EFF coalition - out, the DA might be able to sell this to its supporters.

Also, should the ANC split and the pro-Zuma Radical Economic Transformation (RET) faction run as a separate party, the DA and its coalition partners might want to align with centrists in the ANC to keep the RET party out of government. This would, however, depend on whether the DA's voters would be amenable to such an arrangement, and whether the DA could prevent being swallowed by the ANC, as the National Party was two decades ago.

The huge risk, however, is that the DA's white voter base might rebel and shrink even further. The party has been consolidating its base, unapologetically, since the aftermath of the 2019 elections (it lost a number of white voters to the FF Plus then) at the expense of expanding the voter base into a non-racial one.

Could the EFF Work with Anyone?

ActionSA's Herman Mashaba has worked well with the EFF since his days as the DA's Johannesburg mayor. He is still one of the EFF's closest allies, but coalition negotiations could be complicated by Trollip's abhorrence of the EFF after what happened in Nelson Mandela Bay. (Trollip resigned from the DA in 2019 and went on to join ActionSA.)

Businesslive columnist and former DA insider Gareth van Onselen, noted the following about the EFF's ability to work with the DA: "There are good practical reasons for the DA not to work with the EFF. It cannot be trusted. It will align with the ANC just as soon as it will the DA. Whatever works best for it. Ironically, this is exactly what happened in Ekurhuleni, where the EFF voted for a DA mayor, then suddenly for itself, when it came to portfolio chairpersonships."¹

He went further by saying the ANC cannot be removed from power - a common objective of all the opposition parties - by simply putting the EFF in power. "Do that, and you are really enabling and augmenting ANC hegemony, practically and policy-wise. All ActionSA is doing is giving credence to a farce, and facilitating an agenda as destructive as it is chaotic."

But Mashaba can prove a useful way for the DA to both distance itself from cooperating with the EFF and benefit from such cooperation. Many of the DA's disgruntled black leaders have reportedly been leaving for ActionSA. This could either give the DA access to negotiate with ActionSA leaders, as they know them well, or lead to such a hostile situation that the two parties ultimately cannot cooperate at all. Their common loathing for the ANC might mean that cooperation is the lesser evil.

Any Other Mediators?

The UDM's Bantu Holomisa in previous years convened a forum of opposition parties on a national level and led early coalition discussions, but Trollip had a fall-out with him when the UDM went into coalition in the Nelson Mandela Bay metro to oust Trollip in 2018. Trollip argued that the UDM did this for corrupt reasons, and after the UDM's mayor, Mongameli Bobani, had a fall-out with his new coalition partners in the ANC and the EFF, he was voted out a year later.

The DA's national leadership under the chairperson of the federal council, Helen Zille, has played a big part in negotiating coalitions in that metro, and recently we have seen the DA line up with its known allies, the FF Plus, the ACDP, but also those it doesn't usually work with - the PAC, the AIM and the AIC, as well as the UDM - in an attempt to unseat the ANC in the metro.

Holomisa, who has been a guest at EFF events, such as its recent birthday celebrations, might be able to get the EFF onboard for such a coalition.

On this score, Stephen Grootes wrote in the Daily Maverick² that a new coalition in Nelson Mandela Bay could set a fresh precedent for future coalitions. "If this coalition is somehow able to take power in NMB and is then able to govern, opposition leaders may hope this

¹ <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2022-02-09-gareth-van-onselen-the-destructive-naivete-of-actionsas-eff-infatuation/>

² <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-08-02-stronger-together-opposition-coalitions-to-unseat-the-anc-may-mix-surprising-flavours/>

provides a blueprint for what could happen in some provinces or even in the national government in 2024. They would hope this provides people with a way to combine parties with very different ideologies from the extremes of the political spectrum, to remove a political party which is in the middle of that spectrum and resented by everyone."

Holomisa has pushed for gazetted guidelines to improve coalition politics in South Africa.³ With the UDM's share of the vote declining, and with good relations across the board, he might find a meaningful role to play as a coalitions broker of sorts.

Who Would the ANC Work With?

As the majority party the risks of being swallowed by another party are small for the ANC, and it can afford not to be too picky. Ironically, the ANC might have more natural allies if it has an RET president and much of its future course will depend on what happens at the party's elective conference in December - and how badly the party is bruised afterwards (and whether it is still in one piece).

Opposition parties that have come out against Ramaphosa and in favour of Zuma include the ATM, the Abantu Batho Congress and the African People First (both in KwaZulu-Natal), the APC, the PAC and the EFF. Should the EFF prove to be a kingmaker, it might drive a hard bargain for positions in the executive in exchange for supporting the ANC, although it is questionable whether it would ever fully commit to a formal coalition. Its position might also depend on the leadership dynamic of the EFF in future, with deputy president Floyd Shivambu being much more receptive to coalitions than its president, Julius Malema.

However, some of our ANC contacts claim that during "private discussions", Malema has made it clear that he and the EFF would be willing to join the ANC in a national coalition, as long as the ANC commits fully to land expropriation without compensation, and certain ministers are removed, specifically Pravin Gordhan. And according to media reports on 24 August, despite being at the forefront of the motion to remove President Ramaphosa from his position over the Phala Phala scandal, the EFF and the ANC might find themselves working together in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. In this regard, Malema revealed that his party had been approached by the newly elected ANC provincial leadership, requesting a meeting to discuss the possibility of forming coalition governments in the two provinces, including governance of municipalities.⁴

The Good, the Bad (and the Politics)

"The future alignments may bring parties with radically different agendas to attempt to work together. One of the key questions will be whether the partners' diametrically opposed agendas could lose them support from their core constituencies." - Stephen Grootes

³ (<https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/fridaybriefing/qa-udm-leader-bantu-holomisa-we-need-gazetted-guidelines-to-improve-coalitions-in-sa-20211014>)

⁴ <https://www.news24.com/citypress/politics/eff-opens-door-to-coalition-with-anc-20220823>

The upside of coalition politics is that parties have been forced to the negotiation table again in order to find ways to work with each other, instead of only practising the adversarial politics that has characterised many recent council and legislature sittings.

Under a Ramaphosa presidency, any coalition arrangement with the ANC in 2024 could be sold to voters and opposition partners as a second government of national transition, such as happened in 1994 when the country transitioned from apartheid to democratic rule. Ramaphosa could position himself as someone with the experience to lead such a government, which is more likely to include parties to the right of the spectrum, such as the DA, than the EFF. That said, the EFF has enough friends amongst Ramaphosa's allies, such as Zizi Kodwa, Fikile Mbalula and Cassel Mathale, to negotiate to be a principal partner in such a coalition too.

Coalition partners are, in some cases, less likely than members of the same party to conspire to commit corruption, and more likely to call each other out - as happened in Tshwane. This isn't a given, however, as Mashaba was alleged to have "bought" EFF support in Johannesburg by means of ensuring that municipal contracts were awarded to businesses favoured by the EFF.

Thus far, coalition politics has been mostly characterised by instability, increased fragmentation, and opportunist politicians working for personal gain rather than for the common good. If current hostility towards the ANC continues, national politics after the elections in 2024 could consist of any of the following scenarios:

- The ANC rules as minority party and turn to tactical, non-permanent coalitions depending on the issue at hand
- An ANC-led centrist coalition government comes into being
- The ANC and small parties form a coalition
- A leftist coalition rules, based on an agreement between core elements from the ANC and EFF
- A new political centre reigns, inclusive or exclusive of ANC elements

Any such arrangement could alienate voters who might feel that their voices are disregarded when coalitions are negotiated. The turnout in the 2021 election was particularly poor, and, unless leaders with the ability to really rally support step up, voters are likely to be even less enthusiastic about the process in 2024.

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