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**Coalition Government on the Governance of South
African Municipalities: Opportunities and Challenges**

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Abstract

Municipalities in South Africa play a pivotal role as agents of change and development within their communities. They are mandated at the national level to uphold high standards of performance and professionalism in delivering services to society. In recent years, however, the growing prevalence of coalition governments in municipalities has raised critical questions about their impact on governance. This paper examines the effects of coalition governance on municipal performance, focusing on both the challenges and opportunities it presents. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on a document analysis approach. Secondary data were collected from a range of online sources such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Emerald, JSTOR, and Sabinet, and systematically processed through stages of data collection, processing, and analysis using the Covidence website, which observed exclusion and inclusion criteria. The findings reveal that many South African municipalities have struggled to establish effective coalition governments among leading political parties, resulting in poor governance outcomes that have negatively affected socio-economic activities and the delivery of basic services. While coalition governments can enhance accountability, transparency, and openness, their inherent complexity often undermines stability and coordination. Furthermore, these coalitions are frequently formed out of political convenience rather than shared principles or developmental goals. Consequently, municipal performance

tends to suffer as political actors prioritize power dynamics over fulfilling citizen mandates and community aspirations.

Keywords: *Coalition, Municipalities, Political Parties, Governance, Service Delivery*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, the country's local government landscape has undergone a significant transformation. During the first decade of democracy (1994–2004), multiple governing and opposition alliances shaped the political environment, influencing the party system and consolidating the African National Congress's (ANC) dominance (Booyesen, 2023). For much of the post-apartheid era, the ANC maintained near-complete control over municipalities, effectively establishing single-party dominance since the introduction of local government democracy in 2000. However, over the past decade, South Africa has witnessed a notable shift from single-party dominance toward multi-party governance, particularly in metropolitan municipalities (Kariuki, Reddy & Wissink, 2023). South Africa's eight metropolitan municipalities, home to over 25 million residents, play a pivotal role in ensuring transparent, ethical, and people-centred service delivery. Their performance directly influences national development and the well-being of citizens (Mantzaris, 2022).

The 2021 local government elections marked a critical juncture in South Africa's political history, signalling a move away from single-party control toward coalition governance in several metropolitan municipalities. Coalition governments, though not a new concept globally, have gained prominence in South Africa's local government sphere as no single party has secured an absolute majority in key metropolitan areas (Brand, 2023). In contrast to established democracies such as Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, where coalition governance is common and institutionalized, South Africa's experience remains relatively novel and underexplored (Makole, Ntshangase & Adewumi, 2022). The country's coalition experiments demonstrate the potential for collaborative democratic governance, yet they are frequently hindered by the absence of consensus on developmental strategies, ideological differences, and political opportunism. This complexity has implications for effective municipal governance, service delivery, and broader nation-building efforts (Hanabe & Malinzi, 2019; Makole, Ntshangase & Adewumi, 2022).

The transition from single-party dominance to coalition governance presents both opportunities and challenges for South African municipalities. While coalition arrangements can foster accountability, inclusivity, and checks and balances, they are often plagued by instability, conflicts of interest, and divergent party agendas. These dynamics raise critical questions about the effectiveness of coalition governance in delivering essential municipal services and promoting sustainable development (Pholoma, Lubinga, Masiya & Madumo, 2024). This study seeks to examine the impact of coalition government on the governance of South African municipalities, with a focus on identifying both the opportunities and challenges that arise from coalition arrangements. It aims to provide insights into how coalition governance can be leveraged to strengthen democratic practices, improve service delivery, and foster social cohesion in local government. The study is structured to firstly review the literature on coalition government, highlighting theoretical perspectives and international experiences, outline the research methodology employed to gather and analyse relevant data, present the findings and discussion, examining the challenges and opportunities of coalition governance in South African municipalities. Lastly, it provides the study's conclusion, implications, and recommendations for future coalition governance in the South African municipalities.

2. AIM AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

2.1. Aim

This study aims to explore how coalition governments at the municipal level in South Africa affect governance by identifying the opportunities they offer and the challenges they pose, and to assess how these factors influence municipal performance and service delivery.

2.2. Problem statement

In South Africa, a growing number of municipal councils no longer have single-party majorities, leading to the formation of coalition governments (Nzewi, 2024). While coalition arrangements may present opportunities for more inclusive decision-making and responsiveness to diverse constituencies, emerging evidence suggests that they also bring significant governance challenges: for example, unstable partnerships, delayed budget approvals, compromised service delivery, and weakened accountability mechanisms (Pholoma, Lubinga, Masiya & Madumo,

2024). These problems have become particularly salient in many metropolitan and local municipalities following the 2016 and 2021 local government elections (Zweni, Koma & Ndevu, 2024). Yet, the literature remains limited in systematically examining the dual nature (opportunities and challenges) of coalition governance in municipalities and how these dynamics affect municipal performance. This research aims to fill that gap by assessing the implications of coalition government on governance in South African municipalities.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a document study that adopted a qualitative research method to derive precise and insightful data from a variety of articles. This paper adopted a systematic data processing approach that comprises data collection, data processing, and analysis. The main aim of this paper is to analyse the impact of coalition government on the governance of municipalities as a component of local government, dealing with providing basic services to the people. Through the systematic data processing approach, the researcher reviewed the literature by screening the secondary data from the 26 journal articles and government documentation, analysing the data by grouping it into themes, and writing up the literature. The secondary data of this study were derived from the online websites, namely: Google Scholar, Sabinet, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and Emerald, to respond to the research question of how coalition government impacts on governance of municipalities. The study used the Covidence website to analyse and observe the inclusion and exclusion criteria, taking into consideration the language (English), year of publication (2014-2024), and journal credibility (University online website). However, there were some challenges and limitations encountered when collecting the data, as some articles had locked access, but the advantage is that the university's online websites had easy access to collect data. The literature from different scholars assisted the researcher in deriving data and concluding the findings of the study. To ensure the rigor and quality of the study, the researcher applied trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through thorough engagement with literature and careful data interpretation. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the research context, aiding applicability to similar settings. Dependability was maintained through a systematic approach to data collection and analysis, while confirmability was achieved by documenting the research process to minimize bias.

4. THEORETICAL LITERATURE

4.1. *The Theory of Coalition Formation*

The theory of coalition formation, first introduced by Gamson in 1961 (Le Breton, Ortin, & Weber, 2006), provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of coalition governments in South African municipalities. Gamson conceptualized coalitions as arrangements in which two or more groups combine their resources to achieve a shared goal. In South Africa's local government setting, this translates into political parties forming alliances after municipal elections when no single party secures an outright majority. These coalitions, much like the "social groups" Gamson described, function collectively from their formation until a governing decision is reached, such as the election of a mayor or the allocation of key executive positions.

Luebbert (1983) notes that each coalition participant aims to maximize its share of the rewards of victory—such as access to municipal portfolios or control over budgets and service delivery priorities. This observation resonates strongly with the South African experience, where smaller parties often negotiate strategically to gain influential positions despite limited voter support. However, as coalition size increases, individual payoffs decrease, encouraging the formation of minimum winning coalitions phenomenon visible in several South African metros, including Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay, where coalitions are often fragile and narrowly constructed. Wissink, van Beest, Pronk, and van de Ven (2022) highlight the "Strength-is-Weakness" effect, where dominant parties are sometimes excluded from coalitions. This dynamic has been evident in local politics, where smaller parties act as "kingmakers," determining which major party governs despite having fewer seats.

Coalition theory assumes that actors behave rationally, seeking to maximize their benefits from participation (Browne & Brice, 2009). In the South African municipal context, this rational behavior manifests through strategic negotiations over mayoral positions, committee chairmanships, and access to municipal resources. However, this rationality is often complicated by factors such as ideological differences, ethnic and regional loyalties, and differing interpretations of governance mandates. Riker and Gamson's prediction that coalitions tend toward "minimum winning" configurations aligns with the South African trend

of unstable and short-lived alliances, where coalitions collapse once resource distribution disputes arise.

Ultimately, coalition formation in South African municipalities is shaped not only by party characteristics but also by institutional rules governing local government operations and power-sharing mechanisms (Tsebelis & Ha, 2014). These arrangements create both opportunities, such as inclusive governance and representation, and challenges, including policy paralysis, leadership instability, and weakened service delivery. Coalition formation in South Africa thus embodies both the cooperative and competitive dimensions described by Komorita and Kravitz (1983), as political actors navigate between collaboration for governance and competition for control of limited municipal power and resources.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

6.1. Overview of coalition government in South Africa

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has experienced coalition formations across different levels of government. The country's first formal coalition was the Government of National Unity (GNU), which governed at the national level from 1994 to 1999 and included three political parties (Khumalo & Netswera, 2020). This arrangement reflected an effort to promote inclusivity and national reconciliation during the transition to democracy. For nearly seventy years before this, South African politics had been dominated by single-party rule, first by the National Party (NP) from 1948 until 1994, and subsequently by the African National Congress (ANC) after its victory in the first democratic elections (Labuschagne, 2018).

However, by 2016, this long-standing pattern of dominant-party rule began to shift. Growing challenges such as poor governance, corruption, and maladministration weakened the ANC's political dominance, paving the way for coalition governments, particularly at the municipal level (Reddy, Kariuki & Wissink, 2023). The 2016 local government elections marked a turning point, as the ANC's declining electoral performance signalled the emergence of a more competitive political landscape. The party's loss of support raised questions about the sustainability of its dominance and the feasibility of power-sharing arrangements through coalitions (Breakfast, 2020).

Following the 2016 elections, 27 of South Africa's 278 municipalities were classified as "hung councils," meaning no party achieved the

required 50% majority to govern alone (Pieterse, 2021). These included several major metropolitan municipalities where negotiations between parties were necessary to form governing coalitions (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2021; Nzimakwe, 2023). This development marked the practical introduction of coalition governance at the local level and highlighted both its potential opportunities, such as fostering inclusivity and accountability, and significant challenges, including instability and fragmented decision-making.

The evolving political landscape has also revealed a gradual realignment of voter support away from the ANC toward opposition parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (Labuschagne, 2018). South African politics, historically shaped by majoritarian tendencies, has often exhibited a winner-takes-all mentality, where opposing parties are viewed as adversaries rather than partners in governance (Breakfast & Bradshaw, 2019). This political culture poses a challenge to the cooperative spirit required for successful coalitions. Unlike in many European democracies, where coalition governments are a well-established feature of political life, coalition politics in South Africa remains a nascent and evolving phenomenon (Brand, 2023). As a result, the concept requires clearer institutionalization and understanding to positively influence municipal governance and service delivery (Kariuki, Reddy & Wissink, 2023).

In contrast, South Africa's coalition experience is more recent and still emerging at the municipal level, following the weakening of the dominant party's majorities in 2016 and 2021 (Labuschagne, 2018; Nzewi, 2024). Studies of South Africa highlight that while coalitions may offer improved representation and accountability, they also carry risks of instability, budgetary delays, and governance challenges when parties enter alliances more for access to power than shared policy (Pholoma et al., 2024). In Lesotho, coalition government became a near-constant feature after the 2012 election produced a hung parliament, ushering in successive coalitions that frequently collapsed before completing a full term (Moseme, 2017; Deleglise, 2018). Thus, whereas Lesotho offers a cautionary case of institutional fragility in coalition government, South Africa presents an evolving model in which coalitions must be managed via clearer frameworks and governance capacity to avoid similar pitfalls.

The 2021 local government elections further intensified coalition dynamics. In key metropolitan municipalities, Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Ekurhuleni, no single party won an outright majority, prompting the formation of new coalition arrangements (Mawere, Matonane & Khalo,

2022). These metros, characterized by a large and politically active middle class, contrast with rural areas where voter loyalty to the ANC remains relatively strong due to limited media access and different socioeconomic realities (Breakfast & Bradshaw, 2019).

After nearly three decades in power, the ANC's governance record has been marred by declining public trust, inadequate service delivery, and limited responsiveness to citizens' needs. This erosion of legitimacy has contributed to voter apathy, social unrest, and the rise of more radical political movements (Booyesen, 2022). Consequently, coalition governments have emerged both as a response to the fragmentation of political power and as a potential mechanism for enhancing accountability and inclusivity in local governance. Yet, their effectiveness in promoting stability and improving municipal performance remains uncertain and continues to be a subject of debate in South Africa's evolving democratic landscape.

6.2. The challenges of coalition government in South Africa

Municipalities in South Africa play a central role in promoting democratic governance and advancing national development objectives. However, this sphere of government faces significant challenges that have been amplified by the emergence of coalition politics (Thusi & Ndebele, 2023). The decline in the African National Congress (ANC)'s electoral dominance and the fragmented support for opposition parties have created conditions conducive to coalition governance under South Africa's proportional representation system. Despite this system's inclusivity, South Africa's local government framework was, as Maserumule (2020) notes, "not designed for power sharing." This institutional limitation has complicated the functioning of coalitions and hindered effective governance at the municipal level.

Coalition politics demands complex negotiation and management skills, as it transforms political rivals into reluctant partners. Managing such alliances is inherently difficult because coalition members must balance ideological differences, competing priorities, and the pursuit of political advantage (Hanabe & Malinzi, 2019). Minority governments, in particular, face constant pressure to secure legislative support, rendering them vulnerable to instability and dependence on smaller parties for survival (Labuschagne, 2018). The core challenge lies in determining how coalition partners are integrated into leadership structures, the degree of power-sharing, and the coordination mechanisms for joint decision-making (Labuschagne, 2018).

These structural and relational difficulties often lead to weak internal cohesion and fragmented decision-making. Political parties within coalitions struggle to maintain their individual identities while simultaneously upholding coalition agreements and communicating collective decisions to their constituencies (Mokgotsi, Shai & Ogunnubi, 2017). Consequently, municipalities governed by coalitions often experience policy inconsistency and administrative paralysis. Since local government is the sphere closest to citizens and central to service delivery, coalition instability directly undermines municipal efficiency and development outcomes (Khumalo & Netswera, 2020). When coalition partners fail to reach consensus on key issues such as budgets, policies, and service delivery priorities, the functioning of the municipality and local economic development is severely disrupted (Dladla, 2019).

While some scholars have argued that coalitions could promote accountability and transparency by preventing dominance by a single party, evidence from South African municipalities suggests otherwise (Mdlalose, Ntini, Ndebele, & Yende, 2024). In practice, coalitions have often produced instability, weak governance, and service delivery failures. This instability is largely rooted in the absence of internal cohesion and conflicting political agendas among coalition partners. Parties enter these arrangements not necessarily out of shared vision but as a strategic necessity to remain in power (Labuschagne, 2018). Without cooperation, hung councils become ungovernable, and essential services to communities are disrupted (Khumalo & Netswera, 2020).

The legal and institutional weaknesses of coalition governance further compound these problems. South Africa's legislative framework does not formally regulate coalition agreements, leaving them as informal, non-binding arrangements between political parties (Nzimakwe, 2023). These agreements are often confidential and not disclosed to the public or even council members, undermining transparency and accountability. As a result, coalition partners can easily abandon agreements for political gain, perpetuating instability. The lack of formal rules for dispute resolution within coalitions exacerbates tensions, often leading to frequent votes of no confidence, leadership changes, and administrative discontinuity.

At the heart of these challenges lies a political culture focused on power retention rather than governance quality. Elected representatives frequently prioritize securing positions, accessing resources, and controlling municipal portfolios over addressing public needs (Thusi & Ndebele, 2023; Nzimakwe, 2023). Parties are caught between the need to preserve their independence before voters and the practical necessity of

compromising with ideological opponents to sustain coalitions. This creates policy incoherence and erodes public trust. Furthermore, smaller parties whose flexible structures allow them to switch allegiances easily often act as “kingmakers,” leveraging their limited electoral weight to gain disproportionate influence (Hanabe & Malinzi, 2019).

The consequences of these challenges have been most evident since the 2016 local government elections, when the ANC lost control of major metropolitan municipalities such as Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay (Gqeberha). The resulting coalitions in these metros have been marked by instability, leadership turnover, and governance paralysis, raising questions about the factors necessary for successful coalition management (Mantzaris, 2022; Thusi & Ndebele, 2023). Persistent disputes over the allocation of lucrative contracts and tenders have further deepened public frustration with municipal governance. Ultimately, coalition governments in South Africa’s municipalities have revealed a tension between democratic inclusivity and effective governance. While coalitions offer an opportunity for broader representation and power-sharing, their poor institutional design, fragile political agreements, and self-serving leadership practices have undermined their potential. The resulting instability has weakened accountability, disrupted service delivery, and eroded citizens’ confidence in local democracy. Addressing these challenges requires the development of a formal coalition governance framework, a shift in political culture toward cooperative governance, and stronger oversight mechanisms to safeguard the public interest (Mantzaris, 2022; Thusi & Ndebele, 2023).

6.3. The Opportunities of Coalition Government on Municipal Governance

Although coalition governance in South African municipalities is often criticized for its instability, it also presents valuable opportunities for enhancing democratic practice, inclusivity, and accountability. Coalitions reflect the fragmentation of South Africa’s party system, where no single party consistently commands a decisive majority to control a municipal council (Ndletyana, 2018). In this context, coalition governments provide a framework for power-sharing and collaborative decision-making, fostering a more pluralistic and representative form of local governance. Coalition governance is viewed as an instrument for nation-building and social cohesion, helping to address the enduring racial and socioeconomic divisions inherited from apartheid (Thusi & Ndebele,

2023). By encouraging political parties to cooperate despite ideological differences, coalitions can cultivate a shared democratic ethos rooted in negotiation, compromise, and collective representation. This spirit of collaboration strengthens the legitimacy of local government and reinforces democratic accountability. Furthermore, by bringing diverse political actors together, coalitions enrich governance through diversity management—ensuring that a wider range of perspectives and community interests inform public decision-making (Mokgotsi, Shai & Ogunnubi, 2017).

From a governance perspective, coalition arrangements function as an important system of checks and balances that curbs the concentration of power in a single dominant party. By limiting “winner-takes-all” politics, coalitions can help prevent corruption, patronage, and the appointment of unqualified party loyalists to key municipal positions (Makole, Ntshangase & Adewumi, 2022). In this way, coalition governments have the potential to promote merit-based governance, transparency, and accountability. Smaller parties, in particular, benefit from coalitions as they gain access to decision-making spaces and visibility, allowing them to influence policy outcomes and hold larger parties to account (Khumalo & Netswera, 2020).

Coalitions also offer an inclusive decision-making platform on crucial municipal functions, such as by-law enactment, budget approval, setting of rates and taxes, and borrowing for infrastructure projects. Such collaborative governance conveys a positive democratic message: that political parties, though competitors, need not be adversaries (Nzimakwe, 2023). When functioning effectively, coalitions can harmonize different policy preferences, promote resource sharing, and prevent dominance by a single political group. This inclusivity can strengthen political stability and enhance the responsiveness of municipal institutions to community needs (Makole, Ntshangase & Adewumi, 2022).

The basis on which coalitions are formed significantly influences their performance. Coalitions are grounded in shared ideology, and policy objectives tend to be more stable and effective than those formed purely for access to positions and power. Nevertheless, even coalitions characterized by programmatic diversity, where parties represent varied interests, can have a democratising effect by including previously marginalized voices and encouraging a culture of dialogue and compromise (Booyesen, 2022). Notably, five of South Africa’s twenty best-performing municipalities, as identified by Good Governance

Africa, were governed by coalitions, indicating that coalition politics does not necessarily equate to poor performance.

Importantly, coalition governance enhances political accountability. When multiple parties share power, they must continually justify their participation and policy choices to both their partners and the electorate. Failure to uphold campaign promises or coalition commitments may result in exclusion from future negotiations at national, provincial, or local levels (Makole, Ntshangase & Adewumi, 2022). This competitive accountability mechanism motivates parties to prioritize citizen needs and improve service delivery outcomes. Ultimately, coalition governments, if well-managed and institutionally supported, can become a vehicle for democratic consolidation in South Africa. They encourage inclusivity, promote transparency, balance power, and compel political actors to focus on governance rather than domination. In a society still grappling with inequality, coalition politics represents not only a practical necessity arising from electoral fragmentation but also a strategic opportunity to deepen democratic governance, improve service delivery, and strengthen the relationship between citizens and the state (Nzimakwe, 2023).

6.4. The Future of Coalition Government in South Africa

The growing presence of coalition governments and collaborative arrangements among opposition parties in South Africa's major metropolitan areas suggests the emergence of a new era of governance (Hanabe & Malinzi, 2019). Although coalitions are inherently complex, they are not necessarily destined to fail. In fact, their formation can be interpreted as a sign of democratic maturity. Many advanced democracies, such as Germany, have long maintained stable coalition governments that contribute to effective governance and national prosperity. However, in South Africa, coalitions have not yet demonstrated the characteristics typically associated with developed and stable political systems (Mawere, Matoane & Khalo, 2022).

A prevailing concern in the South African context is that coalition politics, particularly at the local level, often undermine municipal service delivery and weaken the voice of the people due to administrative instability (Thusi & Ndebele, 2023). While introducing new legislation to regulate coalition politics may be neither practical nor necessary, there is broad agreement that elements of South Africa's governance systems require reform. Adjusting these frameworks could strengthen multi-party

leadership and improve the efficiency of service delivery (Nzimakwe, 2023).

The dynamics of coalition politics are closely linked to the weakening dominance of the ANC-led government across all levels of administration. This shift has sparked debates regarding the long-term viability of coalitions and their impact on service delivery. Critics argue that many coalition arrangements are driven more by a shared opposition to the ANC than by genuine policy alignment or a commitment to cooperative governance (Mdlalose, Ntini, Ndebele & Yende, 2024). Such politically motivated alliances often give rise to power struggles and instability. Consequently, coalition agreements must incorporate effective conflict resolution mechanisms such as direct negotiations between party leaders or their senior representatives to manage disputes and sustain collaboration (Brand, 2023).

Despite ideological differences and occasional withdrawals by member parties, South Africa is currently experiencing a form of multi-party governance at the municipal level. Coalitions, by their nature, are unpredictable, as they involve parties working together out of necessity rather than shared vision (Khumalo & Netswera, 2020). The performance of these coalitions varies widely; some manage to deliver sustainable services, while others contribute to administrative failures (Hanabe & Malinzi, 2019). Given the likely continuation of coalition formations in future local elections, it is essential to address the recurring issues that lead to their breakdown. Strengthening political leadership through targeted education and training programs is key to enhancing the functionality of coalition governance (Reddy, Kariuki & Wissink, 2023).

Despite these efforts, major cities continue to face persistent service delivery challenges, including incomplete projects, unauthorized spending, and inadequate infrastructure maintenance. Current evidence does not conclusively show whether coalitions have improved or worsened service delivery outcomes. However, opportunities for improvement are often missed due to poor cooperation, weak adherence to democratic principles, and governance inefficiencies (Pietersen, 2021). Combined with the lingering effects of corruption and political dysfunction, these factors threaten the stability and credibility of local government (Reddy, Kariuki & Wissink, 2023). While coalition governments in their current form cannot yet guarantee effective governance or service delivery, they do introduce an important element of oversight and accountability through the participation of multiple parties (Khumalo & Netswera, 2020).

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the emergence of coalition governments in South Africa was largely a consequence of the 2016 local government elections, during which the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), failed to secure a majority of votes in several key municipalities. This outcome marked a significant turning point in South African local politics, signalling the decline of dominant-party rule. The ANC's electoral setbacks were primarily attributed to widespread corruption, maladministration, and poor service delivery, which eroded public trust and led many citizens to withdraw their support (Reddy, Kariuki & Wissink, 2023). This trend persisted into the 2021 local government elections, when the ANC further lost control of major metropolitan municipalities such as Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Ekurhuleni, compelling the formation of coalition governments as no single party obtained an outright majority. These developments underscore a structural and political transformation in South Africa's democratic landscape, reflecting increasing voter diversification and the maturation of a multiparty system.

Despite offering new possibilities for inclusive and shared governance, coalition governments have also exposed significant challenges and vulnerabilities. The findings suggest that coalition politics in South Africa is often driven more by the pursuit of political power than by the commitment to effective governance or public service delivery. Political leaders, across party lines, tend to prioritize retaining or gaining access to power even at the expense of stability and administrative efficiency. As a result, coalition governments frequently resemble "marriages of convenience," formed to secure control rather than to advance coherent governance agendas. Without a clearly articulated and binding framework for cooperation, disagreements among coalition partners over policies, leadership positions, and resource distribution can easily emerge. Such conflicts undermine decision-making and disrupt essential municipal functions, particularly service delivery and local economic development.

Nevertheless, the study finds that coalition governments are not without potential opportunities. If effectively structured and managed, coalitions can foster inclusive decision-making, reduce political dominance, and promote accountability. By curbing the concentration of power within a single party, coalitions can act as a check-and-balance mechanism within local governance, mitigating corruption and improving transparency. The integration of diverse party perspectives also offers the potential for policy innovation and transformation, as

different ideological orientations contribute to more comprehensive and representative governance frameworks. In this sense, coalition governments can serve as laboratories for political learning and institutional reform.

Furthermore, coalition arrangements by compelling collaboration among political rivals can enhance democratic maturity and citizen representation. When functioning optimally, they encourage dialogue, compromise, and responsiveness to community needs, thus reinforcing the democratic principle that governance should be inclusive rather than monopolized by a single party. The findings also indicate that multi-party systems, through coalition structures, may improve oversight of municipal administration, particularly in financial management and procurement processes, which have historically been prone to corruption. However, for coalition governance to yield these benefits, it must overcome its inherent complexity and instability. The study aligns with Brand (2023), who asserts that conflict within coalitions is inevitable and that sustainable coalitions require clearly defined agreements, transparent coordination mechanisms, and conflict resolution frameworks. The absence of these elements leads to fragile alliances that collapse under political pressure, compromising municipal stability and continuity in service provision.

Lastly, the study concludes that coalition governments in South Africa's municipalities present both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, they hold the potential to enhance accountability, transparency, and participatory governance; on the other, their success is contingent upon the ability of political actors to prioritize the public interest over partisan gain. The South African experience thus far illustrates that while coalition politics can democratize governance, its effectiveness ultimately depends on institutional maturity, political will, and the development of a cooperative political culture anchored in good governance and service delivery.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examines the impact of coalition governments on South African municipalities, highlighting the challenges and opportunities from this evolving political arrangement. Following the 2016 local elections, South Africa entered a new era of coalition governance, indicating a decline in dominant-party rule and a shift towards a more competitive democracy. However, coalition governance remains fragile, often marked by instability, conflict, and interests that prioritize power

over effective governance. These issues can lead to governance disruptions and service delivery failures, emphasizing the need for strong institutional frameworks, legal clarity, and ethical leadership to ensure coalitions serve citizens rather than elites. Despite these challenges, coalition governments offer transformative potential. If managed well, they can enhance accountability, transparency, and inclusive governance, thus countering one-party dominance. By integrating diverse political perspectives, coalitions can improve decision-making and service delivery, fostering democratic deepening. The future of coalition governance in South Africa will depend on establishing a clear legal framework, including formal agreements, conflict resolution, and accountability measures. Learning from successful international examples, like Germany, could help adapt effective models to South Africa's unique context. Ultimately, coalition governance should not be viewed merely as a temporary response to fragmented election outcomes, but rather as an opportunity to reimagine local democracy, one grounded in cooperation, inclusion, and shared responsibility. If South Africa embraces this shift with vision and institutional foresight, coalition politics could strengthen democratic governance, enhance service delivery, and pave the way for a more accountable, transparent, and citizen-centred future.

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