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voices

POLITICS

COALITION chaos

Instead of bringing a diversity of interests to govern under a common theme, SA political parties seem to have a rent-a-vote approach, writes **Modidima Mannyha**



The removal of the DA speaker and mayor in the City of Joburg in Gauteng and a similar act in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro in the Eastern Cape where an ANC mayor was removed confirm that the public is being misled to believe that political parties in fact formed coalition governments.

In both the City of Joburg and Nelson Mandela Bay, there are allegations of arrogance by the party having the most votes and what is clearly some sophisticated form of blackmail by the smaller parties that hold the votes that determine the majority.

From the outset, one must say that it is hard to find any principle/s on which the so-called coalitions are based. This is amply demonstrated by what the opposition parties stated as their primary objective - which was to remove the ANC from power.

The entire thesis of the opposition campaign was to oust the ANC. In the aftermath of last year's local government election and with no political party having a clear majority, minority parties came together under one slogan, in pursuit of their election campaigns to prevent the ANC from forming a government.

Some of the parties made it abundantly clear that their primary objective was to keep the ANC out of power. What they missed though is that forming a government is not about keeping your opponents out of power or preventing them from regaining power but governing and delivering quality services to the electorate.

Without even engaging with the ANC, most of the parties stated publicly that they wanted nothing to do with the party. The DA and the ANC got the most votes and, between them, hold the majority of votes. In a logical situation, it would be expected that the two parties with the most votes would come together to form a coalition government.

This was not to be as the DA, which got the most votes after the ANC, declared that it would not work with the party. In the DA's understanding, the electorate rejected the ANC and working with the party would defy the wishes of the electorate. What the DA missed was that a sizeable percentage of the same electorate rejected the DA and preferred the ANC.

In logical terms, the electorate wanted both the ANC and the DA to govern - except that the electorate deprived both parties of a clear majority. This in turn means the electorate may have wanted the two parties to co-govern.

The DA's interpretation that the electorate that gave it and the ANC the majority of the votes wanted a one-council-seat party to govern, borders on the ridiculous and is a distortion of democracy. This is but a rent-a-vote project to retain power at all costs.

FALSE IMPRESSION

Both the DA and the ANC created false impressions that they were forming coalition governments. In Nelson Mandela Bay, the ANC cobbled together an arrangement with various smaller parties, including a party with one council seat. The councillor, for his support, earned a position as a member of the mayoral committee (MMC).

Just a reminder that, in its past life, the councillor of the UDM (as a one councillor seat political party) donned the mayoral chain. In the City of Joburg, it was a one council seat party - Cope - which upset the so-called coalition government and ultimately took over the speaker position.

After taking that position, the mayoral chain also changed hands with the support of several parties that are supposedly party of the coalition government. This led to cries of betrayal by the DA, the supposed leader of the coalition. The DA's supposed coalition partners have stated publicly that their main reason for ditching the party was its arrogance and its refusal to renegotiate the coalition arrangement.

One party categorically stated that it wanted more MMC positions in exchange for its continued support. In Nelson Mandela Bay, the one-council-seat party now dons the deputy mayor chain after ditching the ANC, clearly for a better deal.

There are two important questions about these so-called coalitions. The first question is whether these are

indeed real coalitions and the second is whether those supposedly entering these coalitions are doing so for the right reasons and in the public interest.

Ivan Doherty, of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, sets out the several ingredients of a successful coalition. These are:

- Benefit to all of its constituent parts;
- Mutual respect and understanding; willingness to compromise; and
- A sense of partnership.

Other than the stated desire to keep the ANC out of power, it does not seem there is any other benefit to the various parties except the positions. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that the coalition hardly appears to have a common programme for the delivery of services. Some of the parties have publicly stated that they felt the DA muted their voices, did not respect them or gave them a fair say in decision-making.

The other side of the coin suggests that the smaller coalition partners saw an opportunity for self-advancement and not the advancement of the collective of the coalition or the public interest. This has in turn reduced the coalition arrangement into a power play of self-interests.

NO PUBLIC INTEREST

These coalitions have already proved that there is no public interest involved and that the coalition partners will never hold each other accountable as long as they benefit from each other.

When allegations of irregularities amounting to R26 billion emerged in the City of Tshwane, involving the mayor, the noise started by some coalition partners quickly died down in circumstances the public must conclude were a cover-up. Instead of an open and public debate of the issue, the coalition partners agreed to discuss the matter behind closed doors.

There is no doubt that part of the discussion involved removing the matter from the public domain in the interest of the coalition. It is clear that, behind the scenes, there are demands and counter-demands and the principle of the highest bidder may be at play.

It is significant that some of the parties which are not part of the coalition and have publicly stated their clear agenda to unseat the ANC previously, voted with the DA and now with the ANC, to recover the mayoral seat.

While these parties have never pronounced that they are party to a coalition with the ANC, one wonders what's it in for them to lend their votes to the ANC. As the saying goes, there is no free lunch.

It stands to be seen what the demands, whether publicly or behind closed doors, will be made to the ANC. Nothing says they will not at some point turn against the ANC and return to the arms of the DA.

Nelson Mandela Bay has shown us what a one seat party can do. Abantu Integrity Movement, which was part of the ANC arrangement and for which it was rewarded with an MMC position, got a "better offer" of deputy mayor and ditched the ANC for the DA.

The DA, the supposed leader of the coalition in that metro, has been at pains to explain how its supposed coalition partners cheated on it.

The DA, a supposed champion of good governance, transparency and a representative of those who do not want the ANC back in power, has hardly taken its constituency into its confidence by making public the so-called coalition agreement. The DA previously had a relationship with Patricia de Lille and her party, Good, in Cape Town, which ended acrimoniously with allegations of corruption. The DA has still not taken the public into its confidence about what really transpired and what agreement they made with De Lille.

This makes the DA a party that cannot be trusted with transparency. Only the political parties know what they agreed on and what led to the fallout which led the DA to lose the City of Joburg. But when they fall out, they run to the public for sympathy, as did the former Johannesburg mayor last week, asking for prayers.

It is clear that the coalition was dominated by the DA, that there was no common objective other than being anti-ANC and there was no shared decision-making. The DA in particular seems confused about the real meaning of the local government election outcome, which did not give any party a majority.

A coalition is meant to bring together a diversity of interests to be managed under a common theme. It is not a rent-a-vote approach. It seems the DA was not prepared to compromise with its coalition partners in the City of Joburg, hence the accusations of arrogance.

The enemy of the DA ran a coalition government in the City of Ekurhuleni for an entire term without the instability presented by the coalition the party led.

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