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Delicate and Slow – the Process of Building Coalitions

South Africa's putative Government of National Unity consists of rather more parties (ten) than are usually found in a coalition, and it aspires not just to govern but to recapture the shared purpose that animated the nation in the immediate post-democracy period, getting us back on track after a period of misgovernance and loss of direction. But for all that, it is a coalition between parties that remain in competition with one another, and which are quite legitimately seeking to maximize their influence and the opportunity to pursue their policies. If we are surprised at how long it is taking to reach final agreement, or frustrated at all the politicking and grandstanding, it is perhaps because we are not used to the intricacies of the process. The following articles, by way of comparison with our situation, cover some other recent coalition negotiations and outcomes around the world.

Belgium – 500 days of bargaining

In the federal elections of May 2019 no party achieved more than 16 per cent of the vote. A long and drawn-out negotiation process followed, with the involvement of King Philippe, but numerous deadlines were missed. Eventually, in October 2020, some 18 months later, a seven-party coalition government was formed.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/belgium-parties-agree-on-coalition-500-days-after-vote/1990955>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Belgian_federal_election

The 2024 federal elections were held on 10 June this year, with a roughly similar outcome – again, no party got above 17 per cent. Coalition negotiations have started...

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Belgian_federal_election

The Netherlands – six months

Dutch voters went to the polls in November 2023. The right-wing populist Geert Wilders emerged as the biggest winner, but even he could only manage 23.5 per cent of the vote. Initial attempts were made to put together a coalition excluding his party, but without success. In May this year a four-party coalition was settled upon. Interestingly, the 2023 elections came early due to the collapse of the previous coalition government – something to bear in mind if and when our GNU is finalised.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/geert-wilders-far-right-coalition-talks-netherlands-cabinet-dick-schoof/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Dutch_general_election

Germany – time, trust and transparency

Like many European countries, Germany has a long experience of coalition governance. In this article the German Ambassador to South Africa, Andreas Peschke, offers some insights into the lessons his country has learnt when it comes to getting parties to work together and creating a stable basis for coalitions.

https://southafrica.diplo.de/sa-en/04_News/-/2652424

Israel – mutual mudslinging

Israelis voted on 1 November 2022 after the collapse of the country's fourth coalition government since 2019. It took seven weeks for a new government to be formed after a process which, according to the *Times of Israel*, was "mired in mutual mudslinging".

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-protracted-impasse-progress-said-made-in-netanyahu-smotrich-coalition-talks/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Israeli_legislative_election

Kenya – grand coalitions and 'the handshake'

In this interview, the Kenyan political scientist Peter Kagwanja explains how coalitions worked in that country after the violence-ridden 2007 elections and the highly-contested 2017 polls. He also gives his views on the current South African coalition options.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YD01L-hurZc>

Coalitions are here to stay

Lastly, there seems to be broad consensus among commentators that the days of single party dominance in South Africa are over; the chances of the ANC regaining an outright majority nationally are negligible, as is the likelihood that any other party will grow to more than 50 per cent of the vote. (This does not take into account the possibility that two or more of the larger parties may merge at some stage in the future – but even if this happens, a clear majority seems out of reach.) This is in line with our proportional representation system, which is designed to ensure the widest possible participation by parties representing various sectors; it encourages diversity, and it is something of an anomaly that up to now one party has so dominated the electoral landscape. The Institute for Security Studies' Jakkie Cilliers considers some of the ramifications of the new age of coalition politics in our country:

<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/elections-2024-south-africa-s-journey-to-coalition-government>

For those who have access to *Business Live* material, the University of Johannesburg's Steven Friedman weighs in on the same topic:

<https://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/features/cover-story/2024-05-23-welcome-to-coalition-country/>

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