

Coalition Government: A Test for South Africa's Democracy

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Despite the alarming struggle for control and influence among South African political parties, the African National Congress (ANC) headed by Cyril Ramaphosa has finally constituted a broad coalition government, contentiously designed to contain rising tension and to integrate rival opposition forces such as the Democratic Alliance (DA) and Inkatha Freedom Party into its fold.

However, expert analysis and narratives indicated that despite this first step towards advancing the main political and economic achievements of the ANC and the roadmap for sharing power in the next government, and at the same time, given the latest emerging political model in the country there are diverse internal and external implications for South Africa.

In this conversation, Samir Bhattacharya, a research associate at Observer Research Foundation (ORF) discusses importance of the political reconfiguration and aspects of its implications. Bhattacharya also provides insights for understanding the common intricacies in the latest developments after the first parliamentary sitting on 14th June 2024 and South Africa's relations with Southern African Development Community (SADC) and African Union (AU). Here are the interview excerpts:

Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK): Is ANC slippery slope in South Africa's politics is an expected evolutionary process?



Samir Bhattacharya (SB): When the results of the seventh national election in South Africa were announced in May 2024, it was not shocking that the ruling African National Congress (ANC) had lost its absolute majority for the first time since its 1994 transition to democracy. It witnessed a steady decline in its share of the vote since 1999. However, every time, it managed to secure a majority. Last time, in 2019, it got about 57.5 per cent vote share. But this time, the vote share dropped abysmally low to 40.2%.

As of present, the African National Congress (ANC) has called for a coalition of national unity in which all parties are welcome to join and take part in governing alongside the ANC. It is anticipated that the cabinet posts will be distributed according to the number of seats each party won. Currently, the coalition's members include the main opposition party, the centrist Democratic Alliance (DA), and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The vote shares for the DA and IFP were 22% and 4%, respectively.

This may be a boon in disguise since it will force parties on opposing sides of the aisle to cooperate. Since each party represents a different set of electors, it can foster social solidarity amongst disparate elements of society.

Nevertheless, South Africa lacks a legislative or constitutional structure that would dictate the manner in which the proposed unity government must be constituted. Furthermore, the parties radically different and occasionally incompatible points of view may result in ideological conflicts and deadlock in policy. Moreover, if this gap grows, the coalition can disintegrate, leading to political instability.

KKK: As the current situation stands, what signals and implications of the latest development offer for South Africa, and generally for Africa?

SB: President Ramaphosa has undoubtedly received a startling reality check after the election result, as his party was not able to secure an absolute majority in parliament. Furthermore, this setback can have an impact on the stability or course of his government during his second term. The primary reason is that the ruling ANC, despite being way ahead than any of its rival parties, has lost its commanding majority and will depend on other parties to keep the government running.

Truly, the recent election of South Africa was quite chaotic, and it witnessed the proliferation of several new political parties. More than 50 political parties participated, highest number of parties fighting in the election in South African history. While most of them wanted to topple the ANC government, except the four major parties, none even had any national level ambition or vision. They were mostly restricted to highly localised issues and expected to draw some blood from weakened ANC.

There was no shared leadership or agenda among these parties. Additionally, they have incredibly different and frequently conflicting beliefs about governance. For instance, even though DA agreed to join the coalition, it firmly opposes both the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill, which would provide universal healthcare for all, and the ANC's black empowerment program, which aims to give black people a stake in the economy as a response to their exclusion during the apartheid era. Meanwhile radical Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party and newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party endorse nationalising the country's mines and seizing of white-owned land without compensation. The IFP, on the other hand, is a conservative, pro-Israel, pro-West party that is extremely hostile to the migrants.

Within the ANC, there are also internal divisions. The liberal lot, which has been the party's main force since its founding but has now mellowed into a moderate social democrat fraction that currently has the majority, is more inclined to support business interests than to pursue drastic economic reforms. Forming an alliance with the official opposition DA is acceptable to this segment. But, the left wing, which has been historically moulded by the Tripartite Alliance between the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party, will attempt to exert more influence, either under Jacob Zuma's leadership or through the radical leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), should either of them choose to join the coalition.

KKK: And what possible impact do you think this would have on its future foreign policy, and considering at the fact that South Africa is a member of Southern African Development Community (SADC) and African Union (AU)?

SB: Foreign policy is rife with ideological divisions, just like domestic concerns. The agenda that the DA seeks is pro-Western. On the other hand, the recently formed MK party, led by former President Jacob Zuma, is anti-Western and pro-BRICS. MK and Malema's EFF, in contrast to DA, both support Russia.

Moving forward, the next administration will need to give the country's foreign policy issues serious attention, chief among them being the delicate balancing act between the West, China, and Russia. Despite being geographically distant, the metastasising war in Ukraine has had a substantial impact on South Africa, particularly in terms of food security. At a deeper level, the incoming administration must develop a realistic foreign policy agenda that inspires confidence among investors. The main goal of South African foreign policy must still be to revive the country's economy, but it must do it without openly favoring one country over another. Due to its close ties to all of the superpowers and the BRICS countries, South Africa's nonalignment approach to international affairs is unlikely to alter in the current environment.

In response, external actors working with South Africa's coalition government will be required to exercise some patience and remain flexible. In fact, given the extreme ideological division within, it would become increasingly challenging to adopt a coherent

policy stance. However, they need to keep in mind that South Africa still finds strength in its democratic system, which remains a cornerstone of stability and inclusivity. Due to its participation in numerous international issues and membership in groups such as the G20 and BRICS, South Africa is a significant global player. It has lately surpassed Nigeria to become the largest economy on the African continent.

South Africa also plays a major role in a number of international platforms and problems. South Africa received international recognition for its action in January when it approached the International Court of Justice (ICJ), filing a case against Israel. But the DA's alignment with Western perspectives, its backing of Israel, and its strategic uncertainty about the Palestinian cause might have a significant impact on South Africa's foreign policy, especially with regard to Palestine. However, a partnership between the ANC and Malema's EFF would bolster South Africa's opposition to Israel and increase its voice in several international fora.

In conclusion, it goes without saying that the election outcome and its fallout will be closely watched not only in South Africa and throughout the continent but also globally. This uncertainty is primarily caused by the difficulties in interpreting any prospective change in South African foreign policy and whether the coalition government would significantly alter or reframe its stance and policies in light of various global occurrences. The functional elements of the coalition will become more apparent in the days to come. After all, the devil is always in the details. Nevertheless, this would be a test for South Africa's democracy because a stable South Africa would be important for its citizens as well as for the rest of the continent.

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