



An Exploration of Political Polarisation and Coalition Governance in South African Local Government: Stability and Service Delivery Considerations

Xolisa Makubalo¹, Tando Rulashe², Nosipho Nondumiso Gwala²

¹University of Fort Hare, P/B X1314 Alice, 5700, South Africa

²University of Mpumalanga, Cnr R40 & D725 Roads Mbombela, 1200, South Africa

*Corresponding Author Email: Makubalo.x98@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the 2016 local government elections, South Africa's municipal system transformed profoundly. The system is shifting from a singular dominant party structure toward more complex and fragmented multiparty systems, which prioritise governance coalitions. Some observers celebrate this change as a move toward deeper democratisation, but many municipalities paint a different picture. The pursuit of inclusiveness and sharing responsibilities has brought about stagnation, strife, and inactivity in many coalition arrangements. This paper delineates some fundamental, persistent structural and behavioural difficulties using consociational theory and analysing policy documents alongside relevant academic literature. These are disputes among coalition partners, insufficient institutional structures to address conflicts, and ambiguous boundaries between the political sphere and administration. Collectively, there is an absence of political sophistication and an unwillingness to move beyond divisive politics and create effective governance. Such circumstances give rise to policy stasis, administrative paralysis, and interrupted public services. To ensure local democracy, this paper argues for more inter-party frameworks, targeted mediation frameworks, and an environment of unconditional goodwill to intra-party relations. Without such frameworks, rampant dysfunction may hinder coalition effectiveness. Furthermore, the paper's findings reveal that there are destabilising effects of political polarisation on municipal governance, fragile coalitions and the absence of conflict management mechanisms, political infighting and administrative dysfunction, and undermined policy development and deteriorating service delivery affecting the implementation of service provision.

Keywords: Coalition Governments, Consociationalism, Municipal Administration, Political Polarisation, Political Stability, Service Delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Even though South Africa is still transitioning into a democracy, municipalities struggle with service delivery. These issues reflect the socio-political inequities resulting from apartheid's spatial planning and governance. The country has important legislation like the Constitution (1996), the Municipal Structures Act (1998), the Municipal Systems Act (2000), and the Batho Pele White Paper (1997); however, access to water, electricity, sanitation, and housing services remains erratic. These laws were intended to form a local government system to provide transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. Unfortunately, weak institutional frameworks, political interference, and struggles over leadership often derail these objectives. The 2016 local government elections marked the end of a political era dominated by single-party rule, which resulted in coalition governments in major cities, including Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, and eThekweni (Jolobe, 2018; Chigova & Hofisi, 2023; Rulashe et al., 2025).

Some may perceive this change to coalition governance as a democratic development, but it also exposed the structural and systemic gaps in local government relations within the governance framework. Municipalities are trapped in uncoordinated strategic inertia because rules preserve order for creating and operating coalitions (De Vos, 2021; Beukes & De Visser, 2021). Non-formal agreements, frequently

negotiated informally, often fail due to the effects of ideological divisions, leverage tactics such as bargaining, and widespread distrust of coalition allies. These tensions are rooted in political polarisation, which goes beyond ideological disagreements and begins to signal intense, entrenched hostilities within the identity framework: history, war phobia, and systemic inequality (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). The post-1994 settlement may have ensured some understanding, but confrontational politics still mark the political climate in South Africa. Feminist power dynamics, disruptions in service delivery, and community unrest often lead to governance paralysis at the local level (Masuku & Jili, 2019; Olver, 2021). The perception of unequal service provision in certain municipalities, such as claims that the Democratic Alliance favours wealthier, historically advantaged wards, highlights how race, class, and political affiliation still impact public sector performance (Chiwawara, 2021; Nleya, 2011).

This paper investigates the intersection of political polarisation and coalition governance in South African municipalities. Using a consociational approach, the analysis emphasises structured power distribution between political actors (Lijphart & Waisman, 2018; Reynolds, 2002), highlighting how ideological disagreements, factional manipulation, and administrative segregation hinder efficient service delivery. Instead of emphasising empirical results, the paper critically analyses the existing body of knowledge and contributes to general debates on coalition governance in transitional and divided societies. Finally, it emphasises the urgent need for institutional reform and principled leadership to protect local government from destabilising the dynamics of political division.

Numerous studies have been conducted on coalition governance in South Africa, examining its impact on political stability and municipal service delivery (Saul & Maleka, 2025), coalition governance and government of national unity in South Africa: Implications for nation building and reconciliation (Makhanya & Thulani, 2025), and politicisation and patronage in the South African public service: from apartheid and democracy (Cameron, 2025). Although literature has been conducted, few studies have systematically examined the Interplay between political polarisation and coalition governance, more especially how ideologies divide and the influence of factionalism on the stability and functionality of coalition governance at the local government level. Furthermore, minimal empirical research has been conducted on the extent to which coalition governance affects the efficiency and quality of municipalities in terms of service provision in a sustainable manner. This study, therefore, seeks to address these gaps by assessing how political polarisation shapes coalition governance arrangements and their effects on municipal stability and service provision in South Africa. By placing greater emphasis on recent elections and case studies of key municipalities, the research contributes to a broader understanding of the institutional and political factors that identify coalition governments, offering policy-relevant information that seeks to enhance local governance effectiveness in a fragmented political environment.

The literature review explored secondary sources to construct a qualitative framework designed to explore the intersection between political polarisation and coalition governance in the context of the local government of the Republic of South Africa. The use of secondary sources proved an efficient method of theoretical work. This procedure allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth review of literature and policy sources without the necessity of primary fieldwork (Johnston, 2017; Snyder, 2019). The repository of evidence was sourced from peer-reviewed academic literature, performance reviews of the municipality, and influential texts, such as the Constitution (1996), the Municipal Structures Act (1998), and the Mayoral Code (2000). Searches of literature were conducted with the assistance of Google Scholar, Sabinet, and Scopus, utilising search terms that included the keywords “politicisation,” “coalition governance,” and terms that combined “municipal service delivery.” Priority was given to sources published after 2016, demonstrating the maturation of the location's coalition governments. Thematic analysis was applied to the chosen sources to identify recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The observed themes included ideological division, institutional volatility, and their consequences for service delivery. Consociational theory proved an interpretive paradigm, offering a systematic procedure to address governance dilemmas in the context of political breakdown. Since the research used exclusively public sources and did not necessitate the involvement of human subjects, it avoided conventional conflicts of ethics (Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017). However, the paper ensured academic rigour with diligent sourcing, rigorous analysis, and objective interpretation.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical construct has the added role of being an exogenous support structure but, more importantly, an interpretive device used to comprehend complicated socio-political realities (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Consociational theory explores the relations among political actors in politically fractured settings, accentuating the contentious nature of coalition governance among the many locally bifurcated municipalities of South Africa. Arend Lijphart first introduced the concept of consociationalism in the 1960s, offering an explanatory account of how societies presenting cleavages, such as ideology, ethnicity, or political party, may achieve stability despite inclusive power-sharing arrangements. The precursor to the consociational theory lies on the grounds of four related principles: grand coalition governance, mutual veto powers, segmented autonomies, and proportionality (Reynolds, 2002). Besides merely securing representation, these instruments are designed to actively prevent dominance and majoritarian incursions in situations where unity is impossible. Here, governance, although legitimate, will be asked to promote deliberate inclusivity, structured cooperation, and the nurturing of shared political will, despite the cleavages that pervade the setting. The study, therefore, uses the grand coalition dimension under the above theory, which relates to challenges of coalition governance and political polarisation. In such situations, there are usually no outright winners during the elections, different political parties come together to form a government, which seeks to stabilise governance within a particular country. The grand coalition dimension links to the article by highlighting a theoretical approach that seeks to mitigate the challenges posed by polarisation and a practical lens that seeks to assess the effectiveness and sustainability of coalitions in providing service delivery towards communities.

Studies have revealed that the governance process at the subnational level in South Africa has become crucial. Since 2016, many municipalities in the country have seen the establishment of coalition governments, which are mainly based on electoral necessity instead of ideological agreement (Beukes & De Visser, 2021). However, these kinds of governments often lack the needed institutional arrangements and political experience important in sustained collaborative performance, typically marked by fragile, personality-based coalitions defined by short-term thinking, policy volatility, and intergovernmental conflict. The diagnostic utility of consociationalism is to investigate these problems. It helps explain why coalitions can break down during ideological polarisation and institutional fragility. The reasons behind coalition formation, whether motivated by seeking office or seeking policy, are of great importance, as pointed out by Maneng (2022). When political actors are primarily interested in controlling governance or taking tactical control of services, instability is likely to occur.

The absence of shared objectives can lead to coalitions collapsing, as Bäck (2008) warned, particularly when polarisation is deeply pervasive. Consociationalism may be helpful in South African local government scholarship, but it also provides critical insights into the intersections of institutional design, political culture, and democratic resilience. This leads to an increased interest in questioning whether current government forms of coalition governance are truly conducive to inclusion and stability, or if they unknowingly contribute to division through representational policies. According to Van der Walldt (2017), public administration theory should encompass both explanatory and preventative measures, enabling us to identify problems while also providing fortified models of democratic practice. In this respect, consociationalism holds great promise. Although the study identifies the consociational theory as the lens, it is also critical to highlight the limitations of the Lijphart theory in this study. In the South African context, particularly at the local level, coalition agreements are often based on shared values or policy objectives, which frequently lead to fragile alliances and conflict (Kanjere & Matshabaphala, 2025). While the theory focuses on democratic stability and political inclusiveness, it overlooks the impact of coalition governance on municipalities and the delivery of services. In South Africa, the instability of coalitions is linked to disruptions in issues such as budgeting, the politicisation of appointments, and poor service delivery outcomes (Rulashe, 2025), highlighting a critical gap in applying the theory within this context.

The governance theory encompasses various frameworks and provides an understanding of the complexities of coalition governance in local government, particularly in light of the increasing polarisation of politics. Key principles, such as inclusivity, accountability, transparency, responsiveness,

and effectiveness, are in place to promote good governance and ensure the delivery of public services (Kanjere & Matshabaphala, 2025; Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022). One of the key challenges when applying governance theory, especially in the South African context, lies in the weak institutionalisation of coalitions. Although this theory emphasises the importance of robust formal and informal institutions in structuring political behaviour that provides accountability (Pierre & Peters, 2000), many coalitions within the country continue to operate on an informal basis, which sometimes lacks precise mechanisms for conflict resolution. Such informal arrangements have led to coalition breakdowns, leadership changes, and governance instability, which directly impact service provision outcomes (Mdlalose et al., 2024; Johnson & Powell, 2024; Jam et al., 2024).

Additionally, the theory also has assumptions where differences in political ideologies and factionalism often affect the achievement of good governance. Another limitation of the theory, when applied within this context, is the lack of administrative dimensions of governance and the practical challenges of providing services under coalitions. While the theory has key principles, instability is often attributed to polarised coalition politics, which often leads to disruptions in budgeting (Johnson & Powell, 2024). In conclusion, governance theory provides a valuable lens for analysing the dynamics of coalition agreements and political polarisation in South African local government, offering key principles. Nonetheless, its application has been affected by the fragile nature of coalitions, deep-seated political polarisation, weak institutional frameworks, and the results it has in municipal service provision. These limitations necessitate the need for proper governance reforms that aim to enhance institutional resilience and promote more stable and effective coalition governance, thereby improving service delivery outcomes.

Conceptualising Coalitions in South Africa

Beukes and De Visser (2021:7) describe a coalition government as a governance arrangement involving “two or more political parties that gather to cooperate to govern together as a ruling coalition.” They distinguish among different coalition types, including bare-majority coalitions, grand coalitions, governments of national unity at the national level, and minority governments. While political coalitions have existed in South Africa since 1994 (Booyesen, 2021), the 2016 local elections marked a turning point. What emerged was a growing pattern of minimum-winning and minority coalition arrangements at the municipal level (Jolobe, 2018), driven by the country’s proportional electoral system, which permits smaller parties to gain legislative representation and play influential roles in government formation (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023). Following the 2016 and 2021 elections, the African National Congress (ANC) lost its majority in several key metros, Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, and eThekweni, creating space for coalition-led administrations. While on the surface this shift may indicate a broadening of democratic representation, in practice, many of these coalitions have emerged from tactical alliances rather than principled consensus (De Vos, 2021).

Unlike well-established democracies like Germany and Sweden, where coalition agreements are formalised and legally enforceable, South Africa's municipalities rely on informal, ad hoc arrangements with limited safeguards (De Vos, 2021). Due to a lack of legal and procedural rules, local governments can face instability, elite bargaining, or competition. The influence of smaller political parties in this landscape is notable. Even with weak electoral support, these parties can still lead coalitions. By using their power, kingmakers can secure important appointments or concessions. They can also threaten to withdraw support, which may destabilise governance if their demands are not met (Makgale, 2020). Political manoeuvring often skews municipal priorities. This leads to fragmented administrations that struggle to deliver services effectively. The lack of stable and inclusive leadership, according to democratic theory, has resulted in coalition arrangements in South Africa that are unstable and short-term focused. De Vos (2021) points out that political elites prioritise factional interests over public service, causing much of the dysfunction. Their behaviour deviates significantly from consociationalism. It lacks structured negotiation and shared responsibility, yet still upholds institutional strength. Instead of cooperating, individuals often choose reactive solutions over working together through electoral logic and survival tactics.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) does not have clear rules for managing coalition governance across the three branches of government. As coalitions become more common, they remain mostly unregulated, with no formal guidelines for their formation (Beukes & De Visser, 2021). Institutional shortcomings have made municipalities unstable and unpredictable. Decisions are

often made through secret deals rather than open, citizen-driven governance. Additionally, the stability of coalitions depends on their ability to handle ideological differences, as Jolobe (2018) noted. When values and policy positions are deeply misunderstood, these governments frequently fail. This perspective is echoed by De Vos (2021), who links instability to opportunistic partnerships, weak leadership, and the pursuit of power and resources. The repeated alterations in Johannesburg's mayoral leadership from 2021 to 2023 highlight the risks associated with such delicate arrangements. Nelson Mandela Bay has witnessed several brief coalitions that often resulted in internal discord and governance paralysis (Knowles, 2021). These instances demonstrate the persistent inconsistency between inclusive representation and effective administration. What is needed is more than proportional inclusion; there must be credible mechanisms for managing disagreement, building trust, and ensuring continuity in governance. Without such measures, coalition politics is more likely to weaken institutions than to enhance democratic resilience.

Political Polarisation in South Africa: Historical Roots and Governance Implications

While political polarisation can be an expected feature of democratic life, often reflecting vibrant pluralism and robust contestation, it becomes problematic when it calcifies into entrenched hostility, paralyses institutions, and renders collaboration nearly impossible (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). In its ideal form, political competition holds the potential to drive accountability and sharpen responsiveness. However, in South Africa, polarisation has increasingly come to represent deep-seated fractures between parties, expressed through adversarial posturing, tactical disruption, and a breakdown in inter-party cooperation, particularly within coalition governments. These divisions are neither accidental nor new. They are rooted in the country's historical trajectory, especially the enduring legacies of apartheid. The racial, spatial, and economic inequalities structured under apartheid remain woven into the fabric of post-1994 society (Southall, 2016). Although the democratic transition sought to build a reconciliatory and inclusive governance framework, the failure to meaningfully address entrenched socio-economic disparities has fuelled new forms of exclusion. Rather than advancing structural redress, political actors have often instrumentalised these inequalities, using identity politics and historical grievances to secure electoral support and deepen party divides.

In the early years of democracy, South Africa witnessed an expansion of political tolerance. However, as Southall (2016) notes, this has gradually given way to a resurgence of polarising rhetoric framed in racial and class terms. These narratives not only frustrate social cohesion but also undermine the prospect of cooperative governance. Polarisation today reaches beyond abstract policy debates; it has seeped into the operational core of local government, particularly in municipalities governed through fragile coalitions. Ideological misalignment within such coalitions frequently results in stagnated policymaking, delayed decisions, and weakened institutional responsiveness (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023). This polarisation is most visible on the ground in the open tensions within and between political parties. Councils often become theatres of contestation, where political disputes overshadow service delivery imperatives. One clear manifestation is the politicisation of resource allocation. In the Western Cape, for instance, the Democratic Alliance has faced accusations of disproportionately channelling services to historically affluent and predominantly white areas while neglecting black and working-class communities (Chiwawara, 2021; Nleya, 2011). Whether accurate or perceived, such allegations deepen mistrust, not just between parties, but also between the state and its citizens. These tensions are magnified within coalition arrangements, where divergent interpretations of fairness and accountability often lead to conflict over resource distribution and policy direction. Rather than being areas for negotiation, coalitions could turn into zero-sum games, where each side is focused on strategic rather than developmental interests. There are severe implications for governance in general. Politically compromised systems are less receptive to bureaucratic manipulation, as suggested by Carothers & O'Donohue (2019).

This has weakened the difference between political and administrative roles in South Africa. Factional disputes frequently reach into bureaucratic realms, affecting senior appointments, procurement procedures, and even the execution of oversight responsibilities (Olver, 2021). In South Africa, political polarisation has direct and material effects on the functioning of municipalities. Political differences are not limited to rhetorical or symbolic factors. It distorts institutional arrangements, weakens the coalition's resilience, and undermines critical services. More fundamentally, its growth, particularly in already

vulnerable coalition settings, undermines the development mandate of local government. The solution to this issue goes beyond hidden reforms or regular elections. The key is to put in long-term effort to build an inclusive political culture, reinforce institutional protections, and set clear boundaries between party competition and government operations.

Political Polarisation and Its Governance Effects on Service Delivery in South Africa

Political polarisation has become the biggest obstacle to good governance and service delivery. It has made party politics irrelevant in local government in South Africa. Municipal dysfunction is not just about poor performance; it is due to polarisation. Masuku and Jili (2019) say, "More and more political differences make it difficult to work together across parties, weaken collective responsibility and split decision making". These are most pronounced in municipalities with unstable coalitions or where power is hotly contested. As polarisation grows, it becomes harder to maintain the institutional unity necessary for meaningful service delivery in South Africa. This is worrying because local government is key to reducing poverty and achieving development goals. According to Ibrahim (2024), public service delivery is not just a technical duty but also "one central mechanism for addressing historical and structural inequality". This is more than just bureaucracy; it requires bringing together political leadership, different administrative structures, and community expectations. In divided areas, this coordination often fails. Challenges in planning, ideological differences, factional conflict, and competing interests often block implementation. To promote institutional cooperation, Tomazevic (2019) suggests integrated governance, while Velsberg et al (2020) say collaboration among stakeholders is key to effective and sustainable service delivery.

Also, political incentives for blame shifting and tactical obstruction have replaced cooperative planning in many local councils. Municipalities are supposed to promote inclusive economic development and citizen-centric services as per the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (Xegwana, Mahlasela, & Koenane, 2024). Short-term political strategies constantly undermine developmental goals. Governance continuity is often sacrificed in coalitions to win party gains. Councillors and political functionaries have persistently interfered with the organisational integrity of many municipalities, blurring the line between oversight governance and administrative control, as Olver (2021) noted. These tensions are not isolated incidents but a manifestation of broader institutional fatigue within South Africa's local governance framework.

Internal factionalism is fertile ground for polarisation, which weakens oversight mechanisms and undermines the stability of municipal institutions. According to Reddy (2016), leadership infighting undermines service-oriented excellence by delaying crucial decisions and compromising managerial coherence. Certain councils have witnessed protests or boycotts from opposition parties, either through boycotting meetings or by organising public rallies (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023). The absence of ideological unity in coalitions makes coordination challenging, as their members tend to prioritise electoral tactics over policy alignment. This dysfunction has led to a volatile governance environment, with disillusioned communities, demoralised officials, and unpredictable outcomes in service delivery. Between 2016 and 2019, Municipal IQ data, as reported by Biljohn and Lues (2020), reveal roughly 765 major service delivery protests in South Africa. The rallies are not merely protests but also demonstrate the impact of a fractured government, political immaturity, and unresponsive institutions. Civil unrest has been accompanied by confrontation with elected officials in many instances. Mathonsi and Sithole (2021) describe this wave of protest as a signal of rising public frustration and declining trust in municipal structures. During the 2021 local elections, these tensions came to the fore as senior African National Congress (ANC) figures encountered community-led disruptions and threats, underscoring how political polarisation has penetrated not only institutional arrangements but also the everyday social fabric (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023).

Significantly, the consequences of polarisation extend beyond protest or party politics. Municipal officials increasingly face compromised autonomy, unsafe working conditions, and ethical pressures due to political interference. The environment in which they operate is often charged, fragmented, and vulnerable to manipulation. As these pressures mount, the ability of municipalities to perform their core functions weakens, and the broader developmental mandate of local government is left in jeopardy. Olver (2021) documents cases where senior managers faced intimidation, including threats of violence, to manipulate appointments or procurement processes in favour of politically connected individuals.

Such interference undermines oversight, weakens financial controls, and opens the door to policy capture. The Auditor-General has consistently linked these breakdowns in governance to political contestation at the council level. In extreme cases, antagonism has spilt into physical confrontations within municipal chambers. Incidents involving the removal of Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) councillors in municipalities such as Johannesburg, eThekweni, and Emfuleni exemplify how political conflict increasingly manifests through open hostility (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023). Collectively, these developments demonstrate that political polarisation in South Africa is not just theoretical but is rooted in an actual governance crisis. The consequences are systemic, as it weakens institutional resilience; undermines public confidence; and disrupts basic service provision.

Coalition Governance and Its Disruptive Effects on Municipal Service Delivery in South Africa

Globally, coalition governments have demonstrated the potential to create inclusive governance and policy stability when grounded in clearly defined agreements and institutional safeguards (De Vos, 2021). Formal pre-coalition agreements are typically necessary for coalition arrangements in developed countries with mature democratic institutions, such as Sweden or Germany, which can reduce the risk of internal divisions. The South African scenario demonstrates a starkly different path. Coalition governance in South African municipalities has often been influenced by electoral outcomes rather than as a proactive approach to cooperative governance. The 2016 local government elections were a turning point in the history of South Africa's municipal politics. For the first time in the post-apartheid era, several metropolitan municipalities failed to produce outright majorities, giving rise to a wave of coalition governments. While constitutionally permissible, these coalitions have struggled to convert democratic representation into stable and effective governance (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023; Beukes & De Visser, 2021). What was initially heralded as a sign of a maturing democracy has often introduced layers of political complexity that have disrupted the delivery of basic municipal services.

Instability has emerged as a defining feature of local coalition arrangements. Frequent leadership changes, erratic decision-making, and collapsing agreements have interrupted development planning and weakened the operational stability needed for consistent service delivery. Knowles (2021), in a comparative analysis of Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay, found that even where policy consensus appears achievable, internal competition and leadership rivalries often obstruct effective governance. Political cohesion cannot be assumed simply because parties have agreed on paper. Moreover, Beukes and De Visser (2021) point out that coalitions formed for electoral convenience are more likely to fail than with binding protocols or legislative scaffolding. Adding to the problem, no specific legal or institutional structure currently controls municipal coalitions in South Africa. Municipal coalitions operate in a grey area, unlike the national Government of National Unity (GNU), which is subject to intense public scrutiny and constitutional control. These agreements are often improbable, highly variable, and difficult to enforce; they are also vulnerable to manipulation and bargaining by the elite.

The legal and procedural vacuum has created a political culture in which short-term gains are prioritised over long-lasting development. Municipal governance can be reactive, fragmented, and occasionally pointless without systematic accountability or an enforcement mechanism. Party leaders' preference for factional advantage over institutional continuity results in declining administrative coordination. However, not all coalition experiences have been dysfunctional. Cooperation among coalition partners has produced a few, but important, results. Because of improved collaboration between political leaders and administrative personnel, the City of Tshwane reported notable progress in its municipal debt recovery in 2022. Even if these instances are rare, they show that coalition governments can carry out their duties with clear communication, a single objective, and strong leadership. These conflicting experiences point to a larger reality: South Africa's coalition governance is still in its infancy. Coalitions are vulnerable to political shifts in the absence of official institutional support. They could, however, boost democratic involvement and enhance local government performance with more precise rules, moral leadership, and an emphasis on development.

Still, these cases are more of an exception than a rule. Without structural changes and more straightforward institutional guidelines, coalitions will likely repeat governance issues and functional instability rather than achieve inclusive and responsive local development. However, such successes are not widespread and often short-lived, as they depend heavily on the personalities involved rather than robust institutional frameworks. In most cases, the practical effect of coalition governance on service

delivery has been adverse. Political instability, frequent changes in mayoral leadership, and policy inconsistency have impeded long-term planning and project execution. Administrators are frequently caught between conflicting political directives, reducing their ability to make impartial, evidence-based decisions. As a result, service delivery becomes politicised and inconsistent, further eroding public trust in local government institutions. While coalition governments are often lauded for their theoretical potential to promote inclusivity and broaden democratic representation (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023), the South African experience illustrates that in the absence of robust institutional safeguards, clearly articulated policy frameworks, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms, such arrangements may instead deepen political fragmentation, destabilise administrative continuity, and ultimately erode the capacity of municipalities to deliver essential public services.

Study Conceptualisation

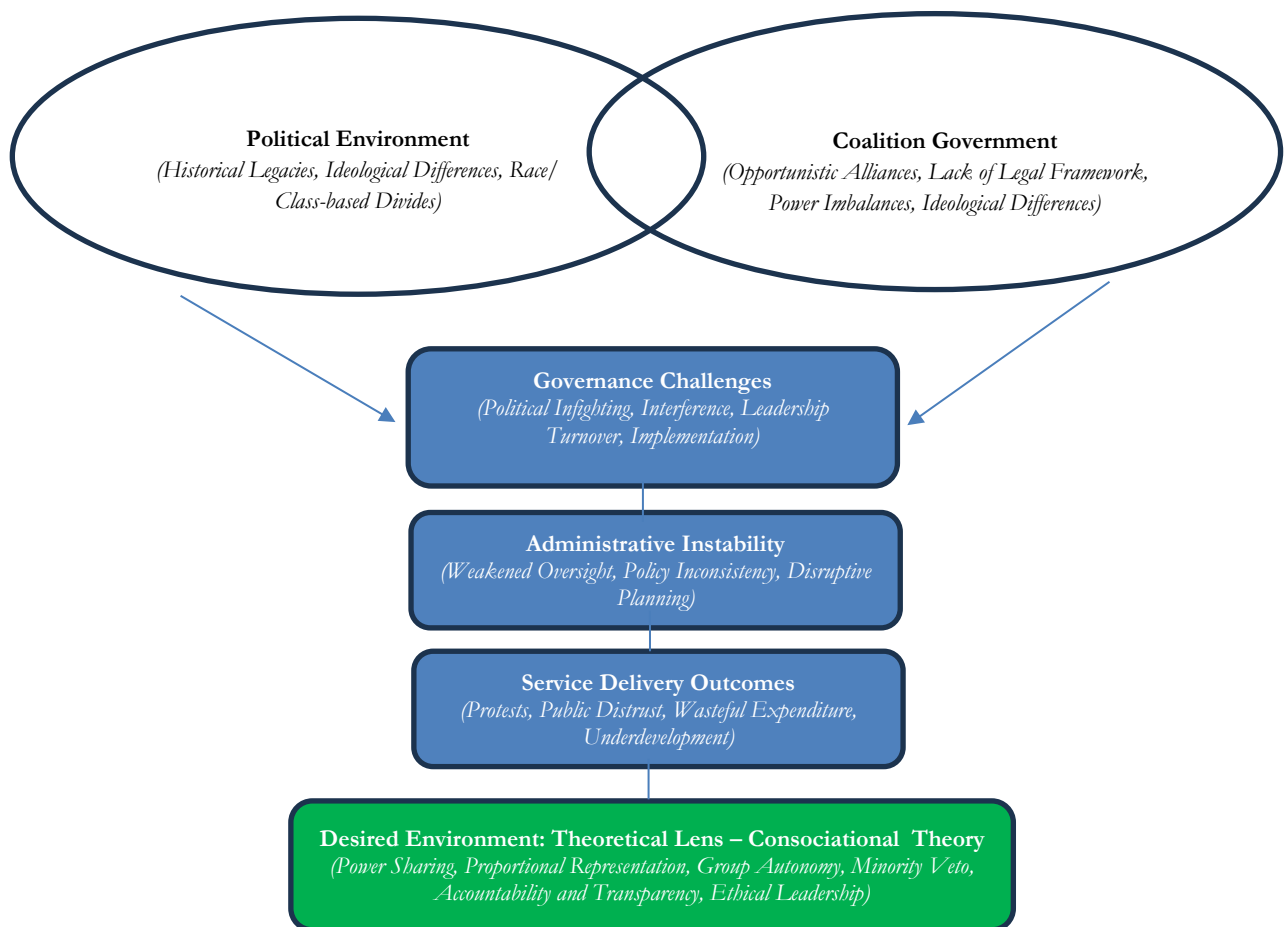


Figure 1. Coalition Government Conceptualisation.

Source – Author Construction (2025)

This study's conceptual framework is grounded in recognising that service delivery failures in South African municipalities are not isolated administrative breakdowns but rather the culmination of entrenched political, institutional, and socio-historical factors. The framework (see Figure 1) illustrates a layered causal pathway beginning with contextual variables, the political environment, and coalition governance, culminating in service delivery outcomes that often manifest as public protests, wasteful expenditure, and deepened underdevelopment. The model is normatively anchored in a consociational approach, which offers a set of principles designed to stabilise fragmented governance systems through inclusive, ethical, and transparent mechanisms of representation and power-sharing. The political environment forms the foundational layer of the framework and refers to the enduring structural conditions that shape governance behaviour and institutional trust. The 2016 local government elections

marked a turning point in South Africa's municipal landscape. For the first time in the post-apartheid era, several metropolitan municipalities failed to produce outright majorities, giving rise to a wave of coalition governments. While constitutionally permissible, these coalitions have struggled to convert democratic representation into stable and effective governance (Chigova & Hofisi, 2023; Beukes & De Visser, 2021). What was initially heralded as a sign of a maturing democracy has often introduced layers of political complexity that have disrupted the delivery of basic municipal services.

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Unorganised accountability or enforcement leads to unstructured, reactive, and occasionally insipid municipal governance. The erosion of administrative cohesion results from party leaders prioritising factional advantage over institutional continuity. However, not all coalition experiences have been free from dysfunction. Collaboration between coalition partners has sometimes been effective, but it is crucial. The City of Tshwane reported notable advancements in municipal debt recovery by 2022, thanks to better coordination between political leadership and administrative officials. Although such examples remain rare, they suggest that coalition governments can deliver on their mandates under the right conditions, clear communication, shared goals, and functional leadership.

These mixed experiences reveal a broader truth: coalition governance in South Africa is still in its formative stages. Without formal institutional support, coalitions remain vulnerable to political volatility. However, with more straightforward guidelines, ethical leadership, and a commitment to developmental governance, they can broaden democratic participation and reinvigorate local government performance. These issues have been widely documented in South Africa's Auditor-General reports and other oversight institutions (Auditor-General South Africa, 2022). Political appointments often disregard meritocratic principles, resulting in the politicisation of service delivery and misalignment between planning and execution. Governance dysfunction inevitably filters down into the bureaucracy. Municipal administrations experience weakened oversight, policy inconsistency, and disruptive planning cycles, undermining their institutional resilience. Municipalities often struggle to maintain institutional memory, especially when leadership changes disrupt established planning frameworks (Miggels & Rulashe, 2022). The resultant administrative instability limits the capacity to implement Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), manage procurement processes, and adhere to legislative mandates such as the Municipal Systems Act and the Municipal Finance Management Act (Reddy, 2016).

The final layer of the framework captures the outcomes that affect citizens most directly: poor or inconsistent service delivery, public protests, and rising distrust in local governance. Studies have shown municipal protests are often triggered by perceptions of corruption, non-responsiveness, and basic service failures (Rulashe & Ijeoma, 2022). Wasteful expenditure, often linked to politically motivated procurement and poor contract management, further entrenches underdevelopment and fuels social unrest, especially in historically underserved communities. This study proposes a consociational framework as a guiding normative lens to navigate the intersecting challenges of political fragmentation, governance instability, and service delivery breakdowns (Lijphart, 1969, 1977). Initially designed to explain how divided societies can maintain democratic stability, consociationalism emphasises principles such as power-sharing, proportional representation, group autonomy (in most cases), minority vetoes, and ethical leadership. The focus on institutionalised inclusion, which encourages governance through negotiated cooperation and structured compromise rather than dominant power, makes this strategy applicable to South Africa (Miggels & Rulashe, 2022). It also emphasises how crucial democratic

governance is to national governance. Redefining local government as a forum for discourse in municipal settings can be facilitated by consociationalism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Systematic review of secondary literature, consisting of scholarly literature, policy reports, and legislative analyses, has revealed four intertwined themes illuminating the complex dynamics between the political polarisation within the Republic of South Africa, coalition governance, and the delivery of municipal service provisions. These events must not be seen as incidental occurrences or contextual factors, but instead represent an underlying paradigm defined by instability, institutional weaknesses, and eroding public trust. The results indicate a ubiquitous governance dysfunction marked by ideological fault lines, fragmented institutional powers, and exacerbated tensions within municipal politics. This is problematic from the point of view of governance, as coalitionally governed municipalities often experience problems with inconsistent policy direction or tenuous administration structures. An in-depth analysis of the individual theme will be carried out in the following sections, with an initial sub-section dealing with political polarisation and another assessing the essential structural weaknesses characterising coalition-administered entities. Further, the influence of factional conflict on the effectiveness of municipal governance is to be evaluated, with the final sub-section commenting on the broader implications of service delivery, especially in areas that have grave developmental challenges and, at the same time, eroding institutional capacities (table 1).

Table 1. Study Themes.

Theme	Focus Area	Key Issues
The Destabilising Effects of Political Polarisation on Municipal Governance	Political instability, interference, and violence	Undermined authority, threats to administrators, and protests
Fragile Coalitions and the Absence of Conflict Management Mechanisms	Lack of conflict resolution, ideology clashes	Legal ambiguity, unstable governance
Political Infighting and Administrative Dysfunction	Factionalism, poor oversight, coercion	Paralysed administration, tender manipulation
Undermined Policy Development and Deteriorating Service Delivery	IDP distortion, politicised planning	Decline in service quality, community marginalisation

Source Author Construction (2025)

The Destabilising Effects of Political Polarisation on Municipal Governance

South Africa's local governance has been affected by political polarisation. This has become a destabilising factor in municipalities led by weak coalitions. At the regional level, there is often more contestation than democracy. Legacies from apartheid, factionalism, and longstanding racial and class divisions are common in this context. These tensions frequently blur the lines between political and administrative roles, which influences the institutional culture within these councils. Instead of promoting accountability, polarisation causes paralysis that weakens institutional legitimacy and complicates service delivery decisions. It can be hard to separate governance from politics, especially in areas like procurement or human resources. Councillors have been found to interfere directly in administrative processes (Olver, 2021). Such actions undermine ethical standards and professional independence. They also reinforce patronage and weaken the foundational rules of local government. Public life is affected by polarisation, which can lead to community unrest and governance failures that serve as political targets. Chigova and Hofisi (2023) note that opposition parties increasingly resort to service delivery breakdowns to galvanize protests, intensifying the conflict.

This conflict is escalating, as evidenced by the removal of councillors, most notably from the EFF in Johannesburg, eThekweni, and Emfuleni (Mavundla, 2023; Mokoena, 2020). These events are not limited to political satire; they reflect the decline of institutional grace and public confidence. In Reddy's (2016) view, communities start to disengage when local governance is ensnared in party conflicts, viewing municipalities not as service providers but as contested political spaces. The trend highlights an important idea in consociationalism theory. Power-sharing can unintentionally lead to instability in polarised environments. Even with efforts to promote inclusivity, coalition agreements frequently result in fragmented governance and administrative exhaustion.

Fragile Coalitions and the Absence of Conflict Management Mechanisms

In South Africa, coalition governments in local municipalities are often weak and lack the depth needed for effective governance, as shown by various studies and reviews of legislation. While coalitions are a regular part of multiparty democracies, their local presence in South Africa is often informal and focused on short-term goals. Coalition agreements tend to be politically driven rather than based on legal frameworks or binding commitments. According to De Visser (2021), the law offers limited guidance on how to form or govern coalitions at the municipal level; it mainly allows for temporary arrangements and fragile partnerships. These coalitions risk falling apart due to structural gaps, especially when disagreements arise over leadership or policy. Beukes and De Visser (2021) observe this instability, which causes disruptions in planning, fragmented leadership, and a growing lack of public trust. Mayors and municipal leaders in Johannesburg, Tshwane, or Nelson Mandela Bay often change roles to maintain continuity in governance.

The misunderstanding of ideology among coalition partners adds to the issue. Although democratic governance typically involves a variety of opinions, the lack of a principled consensus can cause dysfunction due to differing ideologies. Jolobe (2018) points out that unresolved conflicts hinder coalitions from operating as cohesive governing bodies, resulting in policy stagnation and administrative confusion. Smaller parties, despite having limited electoral support, significantly influence coalition outcomes and complicate governance. According to Makgale (2020), the dynamics of kingmakers tend to prioritise political survival over developmental goals. Bäck (2008) notes that consociational theory cautions that without institutional safeguards, power-sharing arrangements can become venues for political brinkmanship rather than platforms for inclusive governance. This is a reflection of these trends. Conversely, coalition arrangements in South Africa are more about making strategic alliances than establishing sustainable governance models.

Political Infighting and Administrative Dysfunction

Political polarisation within coalition-led municipalities undermines the administrative effectiveness, as demonstrated by the results.' Factional tensions within and among the dominant parties have led to paralysis, a lack of accountability lines, and broken political-administrative relationships. Despite their aim to demonstrate democratic inclusivity, coalitions prioritise short-term political gains over developmental responsibility. Research indicates that executive appointments, procurements, and strategic decisions are frequently influenced by internal party dynamics rather than merit or developmental needs. Councillors are urging administrators to conform to factional interests, which can lead to the erosion of professional independence and the instability of municipal systems. Southall (2019) argues that municipalities are frequently seen as conduits for patronage, with tenders and posts acting as bargaining devices rather than tools for service delivery. These dynamics lead to stalled budgets, delayed integrated development plans, and disruption of essential services, especially in vulnerable communities. The study by COGTA (2021) posits that uncertain political contexts in the municipality have been linked with suboptimal performance, undesirable audit results, and significant leadership transitions. Additionally, the inability to articulate accountability with strong internal controls continues to entrench organisational dysfunction.

The administrators face significant personal danger. As cited in Lushaba (2020), administrators who oppose the demands of the warring factions might lose their jobs, have their professional reputations tarnished, or get their employment terminated. This coercive environment is detrimental to the values of ethical governance and inhibits professional conduct. This situation raises important questions about the effectiveness of collaborative governance under the condition of intense political activity. Though the model promotes inclusive decision-making, its success depends on the integrity and institutional values of the stakeholders engaged in the process. In the domestic coalition politics of South Africa, there is an intrinsic zero-sum conflict that inhibits stable governance; instead, it induces intervention, sidelines administrators, and destabilises the relationship between the citizens and the government.

Undermined Policy Development and Deteriorating Service Delivery

South African municipalities face significant challenges in integrated policy implementation and the delivery of decent services, mainly due to patterns of political disintegration and inefficient coalition

governance, as the study's findings indicate. Rather than ensuring integrated planning, coalition-dominated councils often generate fragmented and ineffective policy reactions to prevailing developmental challenges. The transfer of political authority brings ambiguity about the country's future direction, causes the disintegration of the administration, and leads to wavering long-term planning agendas. This volatility directly compromises the coherence of the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). IDPs often get fixated on political exigencies instead of genuine community demands, with the focus being placed on developing data-informed policy designs, thereby worsening the weaknesses of weak coalition governments. Maserumule et al. (2016) posit that the situation conflates priorities, expenditures, and results, eventually making their implementation ineffective. The inconsistent governance pattern continues to maintain its vicious circle, with policies initiated under one regime being abolished under others, leading to public discontent and baleful consequences on the credibility of institutions.

Leadership instability, coupled with continuing change, aggravates challenges in the planning process. This unpredictability interrupts the consistency of strategic efforts and erodes institutional memory, especially among vital positions like mayors, speakers, and committee chairs. According to de Visser, the leadership cycle, frequently prompted by coalition volatility, disallows executive coordination and stalls progress, most importantly in already resource-impaired and service-provision challenged municipalities. Trends defined by short-term thinking and uncertain policy thus dominate the scene. Without stable contexts, marked regulatory regimes, and mutually agreed-upon developmental agendas, the municipalities get trapped in policy immobility. This argument is consistent with the main critique based on the theory of consociation, which posits that too little institutionalisation and fostering an ethos of cooperation based on the division of powers may entrench inequality instead of promoting inclusivity. Political volatility, not the inadequacy of policy instruments, clarifies the weaknesses in the South African local governance regime. This volatility inhibits the effective operation of the systems. The weakness of the governance institutions impedes the realisation of developmental ends in the relevant setting (table 2).

Service Delivery Protests 2004-2021

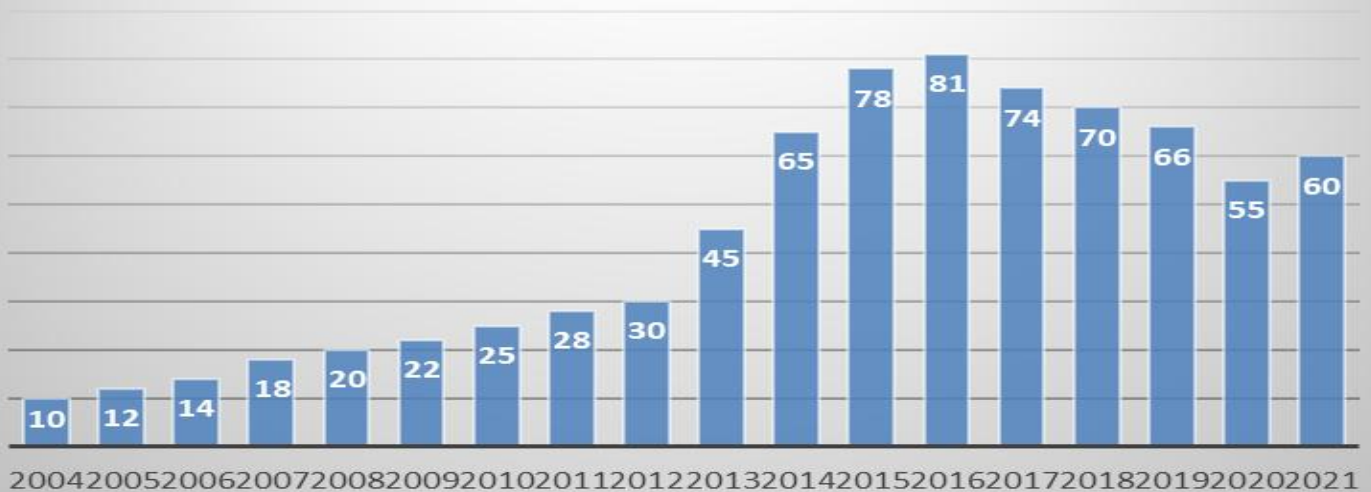


Figure 2: Service delivery Protests

Source: Municipal IQ “Municipal Hotspots Monitor” (2021)

Despite governance failures and unfulfilled developmental commitments, communities have not remained silent. Service delivery demonstrations are on the rise nationwide due to an increasing disillusionment with formal participatory mechanisms and a growing sense that local government structures are no longer in tune with those of ordinary people. These protests, which are often characterised by frustration and confrontation, are not just expressions of dissatisfying sentiments but also a wider display of the state's disregard for public interest. These rallies are now a means of

accountability at the grassroots level, expressing frustration over ongoing neglect, institutional collapse, and the erosion of developmental commitments. Demonstrations of the quality, pace, or lack of basic municipal services (service delivery protests) have increased during periods with significant political instability, according to data from Municipal IQ. Over 800 protests were recorded in the country between 2004 and 2021, with peaks associated with periods of increased coalition instability (Alexander et al, 2018; Municipal IQ, 2022). Protests often stem from frustration over failed sanitation projects, outages with electricity, broken houses, and a general lack of regard for municipal governance. The Auditor-General's reports reinforce those concerns. The cumulative impact of these dynamics is that many municipalities are now structurally ill-equipped to sustain even the most basic service delivery functions. The intersection of inefficient institutions, uncertain leadership, and inconsistent policy enforcement leads to a governance structure marked with chaos and incoherence.

The public sees coalition governments as configurations overwhelmingly the product of elite institutions. This perception is one of the factors driving the erosion of public confidence in sub-national governance, especially in the specific contexts of heightened socio-economic distress. Fakir (2020) observes that the widening gap between the citizenry and governance institutions has exacerbated the country's democratic deficit. Conventional engagement methods among civil society organisations are being steadily replaced by protests, which offer more immediate political expression. These trends indicate that contentious coalition governance is laying bare essential frailties, especially in the specific contexts of developmental necessity requiring unity, stability, and responsiveness. Building strong underpinnings to democratic legitimacy is paramount, beyond symbolic involvement of parties to sustained policy attention, coherent governance, and credible accountability. Coalition governments must have strong underpinnings to function effectively and deliver on their promises of democratic sub-national governance. Without such underpinning, there is a strong likelihood of fragility, which may alienate their core constituency bases.

Coalition Fragmentation and Local Governance Instability in South Africa (2011–2021)

In South Africa, the local government system faces risks from political polarisation and unstable coalition governance. This issue has been looked at in this study. The study employs interpretive analysis of secondary data, policy texts, and academic literature to demonstrate that the developmental mandate of municipalities is gradually being eroded due to increasing ideological differences, frequent turnover of leadership, and growing partisan involvement in administrative procedures. Coalition and multiparty governance are now the norm in South African local politics, with a marked increase in these emerging trends after the 2016 and 2021 municipal elections. While the African National Congress (ANC) retained majorities in most municipalities following the 2011 elections, the 2016 elections marked a turning point. That year, the ANC's support declined to 53.91%, resulting in at least 27 hung councils nationwide. By 2021, this trend had intensified: the ANC secured only 45.59% of the vote, the DA dropped to 21.66%, and the EFF rose modestly to 10.31%, leading to approximately 70 hung councils (IEC, 2021; Municipal IQ, 2022; MISTRA, 2023). This marked the first time since 1994 that no single party secured a majority in most of South Africa's major metropolitan municipalities, including Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, and Nelson Mandela Bay, all of which required coalition or minority arrangements.

Table 2: Municipal Control Overview: 2011, 2016, and 2021 Local Government Elections

Municipality Type	2011 Control	2016 Control	2021 Control
Metropolitan			
City of Johannesburg	ANC Majority	ANC Minority	DA-led Coalition
City of Tshwane	ANC Majority	DA-led Coalition	DA-led Coalition
Ekurhuleni	ANC Majority	ANC-led Coalition	DA-led Minority
eThekweni	ANC Majority	ANC Majority	ANC-led Coalition
Nelson Mandela Bay	ANC Majority	DA-led Coalition	ANC-led Coalition
City of Cape Town	DA Majority	DA Majority	DA Majority
Buffalo City	ANC Majority	ANC Majority	ANC Majority
Mangaung	ANC Majority	ANC Majority	ANC Majority
Local Municipalities			
George	DA Majority	DA Majority	DA-led Coalition

Knysna	DA Majority	DA-led Coalition	DA-led Minority
Cederberg	ANC Majority	ANC Majority	Multiparty Coalition

Table 3: Key Statistics from the Last Three Local Government Elections

Election Year	Voter Turnout (%)	ANC Vote Share (%)	DA Vote Share (%)	EFF Vote Share (%)	Hung Councils
2011	57.64	62.0	23.9	N/A	Data Not Available
2016	57.94	53.91	26.90	8.19	27
2021	45.86	45.59	21.66	10.31	~70

The outcomes of the 2016 and 2021 local government elections signal a decline in support for dominant parties like the ANC and DA and a notable rise in the relevance of smaller parties. While the ANC's national vote share fell from 53.91% in 2016 to 45.59% in 2021, and the DA declined from 26.90% to 21.66%, several smaller parties gained traction, reshaping the coalition landscape. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) grew steadily, positioning itself as a strategic opposition actor, but it is the smaller, regionally grounded parties that have proven decisive in post-election negotiations. Parties such as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and Freedom Front Plus (FF+) saw gains in vote share, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Gauteng. At the same time, newcomers like ActionSA (with 2.34% nationally in 2021) made significant inroads in key metros such as Johannesburg and Tshwane. The Patriotic Alliance (PA), though small in national percentage terms (0.89% in 2021), has emerged as a kingmaker in several hung councils, leveraging its few seats to negotiate influential positions within coalitions. In some municipalities, the United Democratic Movement (UDM) and African Independent Congress (AIC) have gained strategic influence despite having little electoral support. They are a manifestation of the increasing political fragmentation, and they demonstrate how minor parties have become instrumental in maintaining coalition governments. Even so, they frequently cause disturbance. These parties often abandon alliances or focus on limiting interests without formal coalition frameworks, undermining policy cohesion and institutional continuity. The occurrence indicates democratic plurality but also exposes significant structural flaws in South Africa's local governance.

Source - Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) (2011, 2016, 2021), Municipal IQ Reports (2023), MISTRA Coalitions Barometer (2021–2023)

Politically fragile municipalities in South Africa are becoming more diverse, as evidenced by recent electoral trends. This may signify greater democratic maturity, but the absence of formal frameworks for coalition governance has led to institutional instability. Many alliances are established without a shared ideology or binding agreements, making them vulnerable to failure. Frequent leadership turnover, unpredictable policy decisions, and weakened supervision threaten service delivery. There has been a rise in public anger as well. From 2004 to 2021, there was a rise in over 800 service delivery protests, particularly during coalition downturns (Alexander et al, 2018); Municipal. More than infrastructural grievances, these protest movements reveal more profound governance failures stemming from political dysfunction. Moreover, the urgent requirement for a formal legislative framework for coalition governance is to establish conflict resolution mechanisms, promote ethical behaviour, and maintain continuity in leadership and service delivery. We need to limit political meddling in staffing, estimating costs, and purchasing for the sake of administrative integrity (Jam et al., 2025). If accountability is restored, legislation such as the Municipal Systems Act should be more strictly enforced. Restoring confidence and preventing unrest is crucial by reinvigorating community engagement platforms like ward committees and IDP consultations.

To solve the increasing instability and inefficiencies that are attributed to political polarisation within fragile coalitions in South African local government, several practical governance mechanisms should be introduced and institutionalised. One of the most challenging factors is the formalisation of coalition agreements. Currently, most coalition arrangements lack binding commitments. There is a need for legally recognised coalition agreements that outline shared policy priorities and power-sharing arrangements. These agreements can be institutionalised through amendments to the Municipal Structures Act, which mandate that coalition contracts can be submitted and approved by the municipal speaker and made public to enhance transparency.

Another essential mechanism can be the establishment of an independent coalition oversight structure. This body could be mandated to monitor coalition performance, mediate internal conflicts, and ensure that coalition partners stick to their agreements. Such oversight bodies can assist in building existing functions within the Municipal Public Accounts Committees (MPACs) or can be established at the provincial government level under the supervision of the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. Such an initiative could increase and manage the coalition-related instabilities.

Capacity-building mechanisms for councillors and coalition partners are also critical. Most elected leaders often lack training and capacities in coalition management, negotiating, and conflict resolution (Sidiya, Rulashe & Conradie, 2022). This initiative could be undertaken by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) to develop coalition governance and provide training. Partaking in such training can be linked to access to specific grants, such as the Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG), to increase the incentive for uptake.

Lastly, stability and sustainability become integral within local government institutions and can assist in limiting motions of no confidence. This would help in removing attempts that are politically motivated to remove public office bearers, which are commonly associated with the coalition-run local government institutions. Structures such as the municipal council could adopt standing rules that would allow one motion of no confidence within 12 months.

In summary, while coalitions are likely to be the future of South African local government, their dysfunctional approach could be addressed through a well-designed and institutionalised mechanism. Such interventions must be supported by legislative reforms, political commitment, and an active citizen to ensure they are not just implemented but also sustainable.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that intensifying political polarisation and unstable coalition governance have progressively eroded the developmental mandate of South Africa's municipalities. Since the 2016 and 2021 local government elections, the proliferation of hung councils and fragmented party systems has coincided with leadership churn, partisan interference in administration, and inconsistent policy direction—each of which undermines service delivery and institutional continuity. The evidence suggests that coalition governments often emerge without binding, transparent agreements or shared policy platforms, heightening the risk of breakdowns and public distrust, as reflected in recurrent service delivery protests. Strengthening municipal governance therefore requires formalising coalition agreements, establishing independent oversight for coalition performance and dispute resolution, investing in capacity building for councillors and coalition partners, enforcing existing legislation more consistently, and adopting clear rules to limit destabilising motions of no confidence. Reinvigorating community participation platforms can also help rebuild accountability and legitimacy at the local level.

Building on these findings, future research should: (1) conduct comparative analyses of coalition governance across African contexts, systematically contrasting institutional arrangements and outcomes with South Africa's experience; (2) evaluate how electoral system design shapes coalition formation and durability at the municipal level, including the effects of proportionality, thresholds, and district magnitude; and (3) interrogate institutional architectures for managing coalition tensions, with attention to the design and enforcement of legal frameworks, inter-party councils, and public coalition agreements intended to stabilise governing arrangements.

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