

## **How to protect coalition governments against sabotage**

**By Cilliers Brink, DA Shadow Minister of Cooperative Governance & Traditional Affairs (CoGTA)**

Of all the problems that constitutional negotiators foresaw in 1993 and 1996, unstable coalition governments were not one of them.

The system of proportional representation was meant as safeguard against the abuse of a dominant party.

The only coalition that Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer contemplated was the ephemeral government of national unity.

It probably didn't occur to them that proportional representation would sow the seeds of a European-style system of negotiated coalitions.

But less than three decades on this is now the political realities of most of urban South Africa, and it will probably be a reality in this Parliament after 2024.

It falls to this Parliament to ensure that democracy outlives the dominance of the African National Congress, or any other party.

When people vote for change, and when circumstances demand change, our constitutional system must be capable of facilitating that change.

This is incredibly difficult in situations where power is fragmented between scores of small parties, and government can be brought down at any time by a motion of no confidence.

Mayors do not have the time and power to land their manifestos in government, and the outcome of democratic elections can readily be reverse.

This is what has happened in many of the coalition and minority governments that were formed after the 2016 and 2021 local government elections.

After 2016 ANC mayors or administrations were brought back to power when smaller parties were persuaded to reverse the change they had helped to bring about.

Mayor Athol Trollip survived one motion of no confidence after the other, until he was finally brought down in the third or fourth attempt.

At the time there were accusations that coalition councilors were bribed to vote against the mayor.

The same accusations arose when Vasco da Gama was recently removed as the speaker of the Johannesburg council.

In Tshwane, the will of the people was flouted in 2020 when the ANC, the former governing party, intentionally prevented the council from having quorate meetings.

This gave the ANC provincial government in Gauteng the pretext to dissolve Tshwane's council and place the city under administration.

This financially ruinous period of ten months was only ended by court order, but Mayor Randall Williams and his now majority coalition government is still repairing the damage.

And so, I can cite many more examples of how the success of coalitions were sabotaged, in part because our laws were not written with coalitions in mind.

In every instance, the pattern is the same:

- People vote for change, and the ANC mayor and majority are replaced by a DA mayor and a coalition.
- The ANC councillors and deployed cadres inside the municipal administration refuse to accept defeat, and continue to fight back, often by unconstitutional means.
- Eventually one of the smaller parties who brought the DA mayor to power relents and brings the ANC back to power.

And, in each of these instances, the arguments for why the mayor is removed are completely bogus.

It is never about service delivery or better value for ratepayers' money, always about jobs, tenders, and so-called power-sharing.

This is how coalition politics becomes king-maker politics, and how coalition agreements are transposed by blackmail and bribery.

And while the mayors are fighting for their political lives, the officialdom get away with murder.

The DA has proposed several reforms to stabilise coalitions and ensure that they can deliver on their democratic mandate.

One of those changes is to reduce the disruptive power of kingmakers by introducing a threshold of representation.

The other is to limit the frequency of motions of no confidence to one or two a year, a change that can be made to the Municipal Structures Act, possibly without requiring a constitutional amendment.

These changes will not eliminate instability all together or take the dynamism out of politics. But it will give governments the time to deliver improved services to residents.