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The South African Experiment in Coalition-Building

by Rajen Harshe

INTRODUCTION

Coalition-building is a vital part of governance in many socially plural societies. All coalitions essentially strive to achieve consensus on a common minimum program in order to be functional. Indeed, over the past few decades, the democracies of Western Europe have shown mature modes of forming coalitions. Irrespective of the specific context of such coalitions, they can hardly be perceived in exclusive terms. In fact, patterns that trigger coalition politics do have certain basic similarities around the world.

This paper considers coalition-building in developed European democracies in an effort to place the South African experience in perspective. It argues that in addition to taking a page from the book of developed countries, South Africa has been imaginative in developing a unique pattern of sustaining coalition politics in the pre- as well as postapartheid periods of its contemporary history. Its success can inspire multiethnic and plural societies of the postcolonial states in Africa to form coalitions in the pursuit of consolidating democratic governance in their respective states.

DEMOCRACIES AND COALITION POLITICS

Democracy has become the most acceptable mode of governance around the world because it functions on the basis of diverse forms of legitimacy. In the process, democracy upholds all forms of dissent that find expression under the law. The credibility of democracy as a form of government prompted even the premier communist states, the Soviet Union and China, to define themselves as peoples' democracies. Democracy has continuously grown as an ideology, as evidenced by movements toward extension of franchise, defense of fundamental rights, protection of minorities, promotion of various forms of affirmative action, and notions of the welfare state.

Furthermore, modern states in different parts of the world have been coping with the challenges emanating from the diversity of cultures found within them, including the growth of secessionist movements. For instance, such states as India, Nigeria, the United States, Belgium, and South Africa are engaged in organizing their multicultural and multiethnic societies along democratic lines. At the same time, separatist movements during the last two decades have rocked states including India, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Sudan, Somalia, Spain, France, Canada, and Britain. The gravity of the existential challenges faced by modern states has been compelling enough to recon-

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sider modes of organizing socially plural societies on democratic lines. In this context, the politics of coalition as well as coalition governments are at the forefront. In a way, coalition politics has also been instrumental in stimulating new ways of thinking on federalism, for only federal states are capable of accommodating cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and class-based diversities that trigger politics of coalition in socially plural settings. Such states must reconcile the imperative of national coherence with demands for autonomy and freedom expressed by diverse social groups. To obtain a clear idea of the plural settings, we shall consider briefly the manifestations of pluralism.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF PLURALISM

In general, liberal democracies all over the world have endeavored to incorporate the complex patterns of pluralism. These patterns can be broadly perceived through economic, social, and political spheres that constitute the totality of plural settings.² Pluralism in its economic sense involves the capacity of any state to permit different agents, entrepreneurs, and traders to operate freely in the market. However, such a free play of economic forces at times has led to the formation of oligopolies and monopolies in practice and necessitated state intervention. Pluralism in its social sense is based on the fact that social groups are a natural means of expression. Political pluralism involves recognition of freedom of choice along with the constitutional right of citizens to defend it in an appropriate manner.

Pluralism and liberal democracies have gone almost hand in hand in Western democracies, which, in general, have put democratic processes in action through institutionalization of opposition, separation of powers, and the rule of law. Over the years, the welfare state also has become integral to pluralist democracies. However, this combination of liberal democracy and pluralism has yet to address effectively the problems emanating from the requirements of building an egalitarian society. Such a society would demand a deeper foundation of the conception of social justice along with a compact between state and civil society to guarantee social and economic rights, such as the right to basic education and employment. In this context, it would be worthwhile to examine pluralistic settings and coalition-building in advanced countries as a means of identifying some of the broad social trends that trigger coalition politics.

COALITION-BUILDING IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

The party system is at the root of coalition-building in the Western democracies. With the defeat of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in the Second World War, democratic governance acquired an undisputed legitimacy. A wide variety of political parties have functioned in Western democracies over the past five decades. Countries such as Britain, France, Italy, and Germany over the past fifty years have witnessed the formation of conservative, liberal, socialist, and communist parties. Most of these parties also have emerged on the basis of clearly defined notions about important social issues. For instance, these groupings have differing perspectives on the role of

the state, the relationship between church and state, the role of private property, the role of trade unions, the importance of the welfare state, the significance of family as an institution, and social issues such as abortion.

Apart from these ideologically divided groupings, regionalism has also been strong in Europe. Regional movements often are organized on the basis of territorial identity to promote an agenda of greater autonomy or even secession. This has been well exemplified by regional movements in Scotland and Ireland (Great Britain), Corsica (France), the Basque region (Spain), and the Northern League (Italy). Moreover, right-wing extremist parties have sprung up in different parts of Europe, using xenophobia to achieve their aim of controlling immigration. Also noteworthy is the strength of parties devoted to environmental concerns, particularly the Green Party in Germany.

Considering the wide range of political parties in Western European democracies, it is rare for any single political party to obtain an absolute majority in the legislature. These circumstances have made coalition politics and coalition governments inevitable. The system of multiparty coalitions has also led to the advent of minority governments with constitutional backing. For instance, under the constitution of the Fifth Republic of France, a minority government can survive legitimately if no clear antigovernment majority is constituted on the floor of the house, as was the case with the minority socialist governments in France between 1988 and 1993.

More often, centrist parties with socialist orientation have functioned like prototypical coalition parties by weaving the agendas of liberal and communist groups. Such parties are effective in the government as well as in the opposition. According to Roberto Bobbio, an analyst of European politics, "The socialist party is a median party, that is, a classic party of coalition, be it with the right, the left or the center, either in the government or in the opposition. Like it or not, a median party is a coalition party, that is, it can make its influence felt by entering into coalition."³ In the Fourth and the Fifth Republic of France, socialists have been effective in building coalitions. For instance, during the 1980s, under Francois Mitterand's presidency, the socialist-led coalition had the distinction of accommodating four communist ministers in the French cabinet. In France or Italy, the parties and political formations located at the center or center-left more often have been willing to explore the middle ground by partially incorporating some of the acceptable items from the agendas of the conservative and the radical groupings. Such reconciliatory overtures eventually set the pace of coalition-building.

Developed, industrial countries and their modes of carving out coalitions within their mature multiparty systems do offer an idea of the evolution of coalition politics. The experiences of European countries such as France reveal some of the obvious patterns that trigger the processes of coalition-building. Admittedly, this general pattern of European experience has its own social and historical specificity. Yet, the pattern of forming parties, as well as alignments and realignments among parties, through the coalitions in Europe could hardly be viewed in exclusive terms. Indeed, the patterns of coalition politics all over the world are likely to enjoy certain similarities. In light of this reality, we shall proceed to analyze the experiment of coalition-building in South Africa.

UNIQUE FEATURES OF SOUTH AFRICA'S EVOLUTION

At the outset, one might ask why South Africa was chosen for analysis in the context of coalition-building. First, among the contemporary African states, social pluralism in South Africa is much more replete with complex dimensions. South Africa is a quadri-racial, multiethnic, multireligious, and multilingual society. An average South African negotiates his way through a complex web of social relations due to the multiple identities that are at his command. Secondly, owing to the policy of racism and apartheid (1948–1994) practiced under white minority rule, race as a national and international identity has significantly shaped power relationships and patterns of alliance in South Africa. Thirdly, and as a corollary, even though South Africa had institutionalized racism, its uniraical polity and quadri-racial society was able to create an extraordinarily emancipatory and coalition-based democratic mode of governance in the postapartheid era. Fourthly, in the midst of the dismal record of several postcolonial states in Africa, as it relates to democratic governance, South Africa stands out as a shining example. Many other African states opted to nearly replicate the forms of government of their former colonizers. In effect, they had established democracies by decree that became unsustainable in the long run. Lastly, as a partially industrialized and regionally dominant power, South Africa's democracy is negotiating through a complex mosaic of regional, cultural, and ethnic diversity through coalition politics. Indeed, coalition politics and coalition-building in South Africa are unconventional. This entire experiment, unlike those in conventional European democracies, rests on the initiatives taken by the dominant and largest party in the country and the legislature, the African National Congress (ANC). In view of this unique experience, it is worthwhile to assess the ANC's capacity to initiate politics of coalition in pre- and postapartheid South Africa.

THE ANC IN APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

The ANC developed in 1912 as a moderate, nonviolent, democratic movement fighting primarily for the rights of the oppressed black communities that constituted the majority racial group in the Republic of South Africa. The context of the ANC's struggle changed qualitatively when the National Party (NP) institutionalized the ideology of racism and apartheid in 1948. The ANC initially continued its struggle against racism nonviolently. The Freedom Charter of the ANC,⁴ which came into being in 1955, represented its hopes for a nonracial and egalitarian South Africa.

In pursuit of the charter's principles, the ANC took recourse to socialist measures, such as the extension of the role of public sector, including nationalization of key mineral sectors. However, the ANC abandoned its peaceful struggle against apartheid and racism in the aftermath of the infamous Sharpeville massacres of 1960, in which protesting civilians were killed. The South African government then imposed a ban on such organizations, including the ANC and the Pan African Congress (PAC).

In spite of the ban, the ANC thrived. As an exile movement, it could prosper because a wave of liberation had begun to sweep the southern African region after the mid-1970s. The collapse of the Portuguese empire in 1975 and the emergence of

majority rule in Zimbabwe in 1980 brought about the rise of Afro-Marxist regimes in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. These governments offered their unequivocal moral and material commitment to the ANC in its anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa. The ANC also gathered support from sympathetic governments and movements outside of Africa, such as the Non Aligned Movement and the former Soviet Union and its East European allies. Moreover, it was able to seek support from the leftist and liberal circles in Britain and the black power movement in the United States. The ANC also was able to broaden, widen, and deepen its social base, especially after the proclamation of emergency in South Africa under the regime of P.W. Botha in 1985. Lastly, as a multiracial, multiclass, multiethnic, and multireligious movement, the ANC could attract support from a wide variety of groups such as trade unions and churches.

Building effective coalitions and leaving space for the growth of regions can mitigate secessionist tendencies.

The ANC's success is due in large part to its ability to weave a mass movement by combining several ideological strands. In Tom Lodge's words, "African nationalism, Christian liberalism, clandestinely [sic], technocracy, Communist popular frontism and indigenous working class radicalism and residual elements of black consciousness Movements are constituents in ANC's complicated ideological recipe."⁹ In substance, the ANC is not merely a mass movement but an actively functioning coalition of its own kind. Even while it was preoccupied with launching the anti-apartheid struggle, the ANC's leadership was learning the game of coalition-building within its own ranks. Such a built-in capacity to form coalitions was to help the ANC greatly in later years.

NEW ERA OF COALITIONS

With the release from prison of Nelson Mandela and the lifting of the ban on the ANC in 1990, South Africa entered a new era. Coalitions were formed around opinions regarding the future of the apartheid system. On one side stood the ANC, the progressive elements from the ruling NP led by F.W. de Klerk, and the Democratic Party (DP), in support of the reform and eventual liquidation of apartheid. On the other side was the Conservative Party (CP), along with the far-right elements among the whites, who supported a continuation of the status quo in the hope of protecting the privileges of the white communities. Not everyone fit neatly into this polar model. For example, it was difficult to ascertain the role of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), led by Gatsha Buthelezi. For instance, while functioning within the power structures of Kwazulu Bantustans, with its social base among almost 7 million Zulus, the IFP had aligned itself with white power as well as the capitalist classes. At the same time, it had opposed the constitution of 1983, which prohibited the black races from participating in government. In this manner, it had opted to side with the broad trend of African nationalism as represented by the ANC. Apart from these major parties,

there were white and black extremist groups with their own racist agendas. In the process of ensuring the transition to postapartheid South Africa, the critical mass that had gathered at the center, occupied by Mandela's ANC and de Klerk's NP, was able to carry the white conservatives, as well as the black extremists, through negotiations. Ultimately, the all-white referendum held on March 17, 1992, formally ended the apartheid system.

POSTREFERENDUM POLITICS AND THE STATUS OF MINORITIES

Events since the 1992 referendum in South Africa offer an excellent case study of building coalitions through consensual politics. Here we shall highlight some of the significant issues involving minorities that were resolved through coalition-building.

The relationship between the majority and the minority is an issue in any democratic structure. Keeping this in the background, political parties tend to build their agendas and ideological positions with their social base in mind. In South Africa, the liberation parties like the ANC, PAC, and Azanian Peoples' Congress held the view that an elected constituent assembly should draft the constitution of "New South Africa."

However, the NP, IFP, and DP were apprehensive that minority interests would be ignored in the drafting of a constitution. They therefore wanted all the parties to agree on the content of the new constitution before South Africa went to the polls. This problem was eventually resolved when all the parties agreed to allow the non-elected representatives of various political parties at a multiparty conference to draft the interim constitution on the basis of sufficient consensus. In fact, the Convention for Democratic South Africa (CODESA) that set the pace for the drafting of the new constitution included almost all the major parties and groups in South Africa. The CODESA was yet another mode of creating a successful coalition out of diverse and heterogeneous groupings.

The exercise of coalition-building to draft the new constitution was conceived on the basis of conciliatory politics based on consensus. In fact, the consensus on the thirty-four constitutional principles elaborated in the draft of the interim constitution became a viable link between the interim constitution and the final constitution.⁶ CODESA not merely laid the groundwork for a final constitution but set up a Constitutional Council to certify whether the final constitution complied with these principles. In substance, a majority with two-thirds of the vote in the Constituent Assembly also had to submit its laws for certification from the council. This provision was intended to safeguard the interests of minorities. Based on the interim constitution, South Africa formed its first postapartheid government in 1994.

COALITION-BUILDING IN THE POSTAPARTHEID ERA

After the first democratic elections of 1994, President Mandela formed a Government for National Unity (GNU). As a charismatic and towering African leader, Mandela not merely added personally to the prestige of his office but also took special

care to carry a wide section of social groups and political parties along with him. His tenure (1994–1999) turned out to be a successful experiment in building a coalition on viable lines.

Elections in South Africa are conducted on the basis of proportional representation. Under the list system, voters are given a choice between parties, and party head offices enjoy the privilege of fielding the candidates. Furthermore, according to the interim and the final constitution, all parties that enjoy more than 5 percent of the vote are entitled to that percentage of seats in the cabinet. Due to this novel feature, the three largest parties, namely, the ANC, the NP, and the IFP, assumed power after the 1994 elections, even though the ANC captured 62 percent of the vote. These parties functioned as partners in the government. Thus Mandela had two deputy presidents: one from the ANC (Thabo Mbeki) and one from the NP (F.W. de Klerk). In addition, Buthelezi of the IFP became a member of Mandela's cabinet. During the June 1999 elections, held under the new constitution of 1996, Mbeki and the ANC captured 66 percent of the vote for the National Assembly. The DP came in second with 9.6 percent, and the IFP rounded out the top three by capturing 8.6 percent of the vote.⁷ All three parties share the responsibility of governing.

The question of ties between majority and minority has also been shaping a vibrant debate over the likely forms of federalism in South Africa. Generally, the ANC has been associated with unitary and centralizing tendencies, whereas the IFP, the chief rival of the ANC in the Kwazulu Natal province, has raised a sustained demand for a federal system in order to retain autonomy and thereby safeguard the interests of Zulus. Actually, Buthelezi had aspired for some form of *de facto* confederal arrangement where provinces would be able to maintain their own militia. However, in the final constitution of 1996, federal features were strengthened. For example, in the bicameral legislature, each province was given ten seats in the Senate. Also, each state has ten seats in the Council of Provinces, a unique body with six permanent and four rotating members.

Participation of the provinces in the Senate and Council of Provinces is a device to strengthen federal arrangements. In spite of this accent on federalism, the constitution of 1996 also endeavored to protect certain cultural and educational rights of the provinces through their right of internal self-determination. The federalizing arrangements have not merely kept the notions of provincial autonomy alive but left sufficient space for coalition-building in provinces and the center.

Furthermore, the notions of provincial autonomy can prepare grounds for all-around growth of the regions or provinces. After all, the regional sentiments also need to be incorporated in the process of coalition-building so that even the region-based parties can evolve a national as well as an international outlook. Indeed, the coalitions can consolidate themselves by offering opportunities for the growth of provinces within a federation. The 1996 constitution tried to achieve this objective. For instance, with the concurrence or ratification from the institutions of the central government such as the National Assembly or National Council of Provinces, the South African provinces are building their foreign relations and playing an international role in a rapidly

globalizing world.⁸ Even though the full particulars of foreign economic and commercial relations established by provincial governments are hard to come by, a few concrete examples can illustrate this point. In this context, the following developments that set pace of this trend in the year 1995 are worth mentioning. The Eastern Cape Province established an economic, educational, and friendship link with Scotland. Gerhard Schroeder, then prime minister of Lower Saxony, visited Eastern Cape Province to work out modes of industrial cooperation with the local industrialists. Secondly, the People's Republic of China announced plans to establish ten companies with a total capital investment of 80 million Rand (\$10 million) in the province of Kwazulu-Natal. Lastly, the premier of North-Western Province, Popo Molefe, held talks with government ministers and representatives of parastatal bodies of Malaysia to promote the free flow of trade, investment, technical support, and tourism in the his province.

In fact, as the new constitution is implemented, South Africa is replete with possibilities for coalition politics at the center as well as in the provinces. For instance, the Mandela and Mbeki regimes have been committed to achieving a program of growth, employment, and redistribution (GEAR). Also, in the process of combating such problems as HIV/AIDS, crime, poverty, and unemployment, the ANC has chosen to soften its emphasis on nationalization and instead to encourage privatization programs. Similarly, the ANC is attempting to build up ties with the IFP in the hope of promoting a coalition government in the Kwazulu Natal province. While these stances have already alienated one of the ANC's allies, the South Africa Communist Party, the breakup of existing alliances and the formation of fresh ones in pursuit of changing objectives is consistent with the game of coalition politics.

LESSONS FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIMENT

Generally, successful experiments with coalition-building in one country can seldom be replicated in other countries due to varying social conditions. However, such an experiment can provide both a blueprint and a pathway for rethinking coalitions more creatively. The South African experiment of building coalitions has to be considered in this light. Coalitions in postapartheid South Africa are being carved from a multiparty system that reflects enormous social diversities. The ANC in South Africa, despite its dominance, has to ensure the participation of other important parties in the government according to constitutional requirements. Involving major parties in the project of governance through constitutional arrangements can certainly add to the democratic content of any regime. Plausibly, South Africa has achieved the same. To put it simply, contemporary multiparty regimes in different parts of Africa can consolidate their transition towards democracy through such constitutional arrangements. For instance, with the advent of civil society in the past few years, Kenya is heading toward reforming its "autocratic multiparty system" that grew under President Arap Moi.⁹

Active movements like the Citizens Coalitions for Constitutional Change (CCCC) in Kenya could succeed in reshaping the constitutional framework to accommodate

political regimes formed by genuine multiparty coalitions. However, the constitutional arrangements are merely a formal device of mediating between the multitude of social groups and their interests in plural societies. In the ultimate analysis, the management of multiple social groups with diverse orientations is feasible in the realm of politics. Such management invariably becomes difficult with the rise of separatist tendencies in any polity.

The ANC itself has functioned like a coalition among different ethnic, linguistic, class, religious, and racial groups.

However, the postapartheid regimes of South Africa so far have been able to handle separatist tendencies among both white groups and those represented by the IFP. In the former case, it has been easier to isolate such groups due to their small number. In the latter case, the Zulu-backed IFP has won a measure of autonomy as well as its share of power under the postapartheid regimes.

Like South Africa, practically every other state in Africa is multiethnic. Any disharmony among groups can aggravate ethnic tensions and violence, as witnessed so acutely in Rwanda and Burundi. These ethnic tensions, in their turn, not only accentuate centrifugal tendencies but unleash movements toward secession. The establishment of the Bifran Republic by the Ibo ethnic group during the Nigerian civil war (1966–1970) is a case in point. In fact, regional separatist movements built on racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities have threatened several African states during the past few decades. Such movements at times have been supported by external powers, such as Belgium, in an attempt to serve their neocolonial designs in Africa. For instance, the erosion of central rule due to centrifugal tendencies, as well as external support from Belgium to Moïse Tshombe in his bid to sustain Katanga separatist movement (1960–1963), brought Congo to the brink of disintegration.

In light of the proliferation of varying kinds of separatist movements and relentless ethnic violence in the postcolonial states of Africa, the South African experiment at promoting reconciliatory politics in the hope of building viable coalitions has become all the more relevant. It could be underscored that, in substance, multiethnic states have much to learn from an ongoing dialectical as well as dialogical relationship between the ANC and the IFP. Building effective coalitions and leaving space for the growth of regions, indeed, can mitigate the intensity of secessionist tendencies. Through its 1996 constitution and by deploying mechanisms of ensuring regional autonomy, South Africa has been trying to achieve this objective.

Lastly, coalitions become successful if they function on the foundation of strong civil society. Some of the measures initiated by the postapartheid regimes, such as the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or affirmative action, deserve to be mentioned in this context. Such measures are designed to strengthen the institutions of civil society along nonracial and egalitarian lines. Every African government will have to initiate suitable policies according to its specific requirements to consolidate institutions of civil society that can form a viable basis to sustain multiparty coalitions.

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of coalition politics initially matured under the hospitable social climate provided by the postwar liberal democracies of the West. It was also an offshoot of the imperative of making democratic governance operative in the socially plural context of the West. Over the years, the practice of coalition politics in Western countries led to the creation of some familiar patterns regarding the formation, alignment, and realignment of political parties.

Today, the phenomenon of coalition politics in the democratic context is no longer confined to the West. Nevertheless, there are certainly more viable grounds for any comparative analysis of coalition politics between developed countries of Western Europe, because the experiments of coalition politics in developed and developing countries have much less in common. But some of the postcolonial states, having observed the model of the Western democracies, have undoubtedly added new dimensions to the phenomenon of coalition-building. The South African experience in coalition politics under the ANC offers evidence of the same. As a mass movement, the ANC itself functioned like a coalition among different ethnic, linguistic, class, religious, and racial groups. This was possible because it operated on the basis of a centrist, inclusive ideology.

Consequently, the ANC was able to carry the majority of the population, including the extremist elements, along in the transition to postapartheid democratic government in South Africa. Now, the substance of coalition politics there is being shaped in the shadow of the overwhelming dominance of the ANC in the South African polity. The ANC, in turn, continues to manage a loose coalition of diverse social groups and forces. This unique experiment is full of fruitful lessons for other African countries that face similar challenges in negotiating a complex of social pluralism.



Notes

1 Pierre Avril, *Politics in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 63.

2 Ives Meny and Andrew Knapp, *Government And Politics In Western Europe: Britain, France, Italy, West Germany* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 3–6.

3 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 77.

4 The Freedom Charter of the African National Congress (ANC) was adopted by more than 3000 delegates on June 25 and 26, 1955, at Kilbourn by all the four major racial groups of South Africa. The text of the Freedom Charter can be found in E.S. Reddy, *Oliver Tambo and the Struggle against Apartheid* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1987), pp. 146–152.

5 Tom Lodge, "State of Exile: The African National Congress of South Africa, 1976–86," in *State, Resistance and Change In South Africa*, Philip Frankel et al., eds. (New York: Croom Helm, 1988), pp. 229–258.

6 Bertus de Villiers et al., *Institutional Development In Divided Societies* (Pretoria: Pretoria Human Science Research Council, 1998), p. 14.

7 Vishnu Padayashi et al., "Reflections on Post-Mandela Era," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXXIV, no. 32, August 7–13, 1999, pp. 2223–27.

8 Deon Geldenhuys, "Subnational Governments and Foreign Relations," in de Villiers et al., *Institutional Development*, pp. 299–344.

9 Maina Kiai, "Commentary: A Last Chance for Peaceful Change in Kenya," *Africa Today*, vol. 45 no. 2, 1998, pp. 185–192.