

## **DRAFT DISCUSSION DOCUMENT**

### **Strengthening Civil Society in South Africa within the context of national and provincial coalition governments**

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The 2024 election results, which saw the African National Congress (ANC) decline from 57% in 2019 to 40%, mark a pivotal moment in South Africa's democratic history. This outcome signifies the maturation of the country's democratic dispensation, reinforcing the constitutional intent of broad-based representation in parliament. The historical dominance of the ANC since 1994 had inadvertently created a single-party state within a system intended for proportional, competitive multi-party democracy. The decline of the ANC offers new potential opportunities for democratic engagement and governance reforms.

The announcement of the intent to create a Government of National Unity or a grand coalition thus offers a renewed and revitalised political landscape for political parties and civil society. The current window of opportunity to reorientate the role of civil society vis-à-vis the state requires civil society actors to begin an exercise of self-reflection and adjustment to ensure greater effectiveness.

#### **Key Potential Opportunities**

##### **1) Nature of Coalition Government and Political Deliberation**

###### *High-Level Points:*

- a) **Enhanced Policy Influence:** Though challenging to form, coalition governments enable diverse policy discourse by incorporating multiple political actors. This ensures a broader representation of the electorate and necessitates the inclusion of diverse viewpoints to maintain coalition support.
- b) **Civil Society Engagement:** The multiplicity of actors in coalition governments provides new avenues for civil society to engage with the state, leveraging smaller parties' "kingmaker" status to influence policies and the legislative agenda.

###### *Detail:*

The emergence of coalition governments in South Africa, while presenting formation challenges, offers significant potential opportunities for influencing policy and political discourse. Unlike single-party majorities, coalitions necessitate partnerships between multiple parties, which inherently demands broader representation and incorporation of diverse viewpoints. This inclusive approach can lead to more expansive policy discussions and decisions that reflect the electorate's diverse perspectives. For civil society, this shift provides an opening to engage more directly with the government. Historically, civil society's interactions were largely mediated by the ANC-led government, but the current political landscape allows for engagement with various parties. Smaller, opposition or minority parties, often holding a "kingmaker" status, can be pivotal in shaping policies, and civil

society can leverage these relationships to influence legislative agendas. Whether forming a grand coalition or a government of national unity, the 7th administration offers numerous potential opportunities for civil society to participate in political deliberation and policy formation.

## **2) Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms**

*High-level Points:*

- a) **Proactive Oversight:** Civil society can act as a watchdog over coalition governments, enhancing the effectiveness of constitutional accountability mechanisms.
- b) **Promoting Transparency:** By advocating for open and accessible coalition deliberations, civil society can reduce public scepticism and improve government transparency.

*Detail:*

South Africa's constitution enshrines various accountability mechanisms, yet these have often been reactive and limited in scope. The coalition government framework expands the role of civil society in ensuring governmental accountability. Civil society organisations can act as watchdogs, monitoring coalition agreements and actions to provide additional checks and balances. This proactive oversight ensures all coalition partners adhere to their commitments, enhancing governmental accountability. Furthermore, civil society can promote transparency within coalition governments by advocating for open and accessible deliberations and decision-making processes. This transparency enhances accountability and helps reduce public scepticism about the coalition's effectiveness, fostering a more trustful relationship between the government and the public.

## **3) Facilitating Dialogue and Providing Technical Support**

*High-level points:*

- a) **Mediation and Conflict Resolution:** Civil society can assist coalition governments through mediation and inclusive policy dialogues, supporting constructive political deliberations.
- b) **Technical Expertise:** Civil society organisations can provide specialised knowledge, technical assistance, and independent research to aid coalition decision-making processes.

*Detail:*

Coalition governments often call for national dialogues to foster consensus among diverse political actors. Civil society can play a critical role in these dialogues by offering mediation, conflict resolution, and independent platforms for inclusive policy discussions. The political stance of individual civil society organisations and the sector at large will determine their specific contributions. Beyond facilitating dialogue, civil society can provide technical support to coalition governments. This support includes sharing specialised knowledge and expertise on sectoral issues, offering technical assistance, conducting research, and providing

independent policy analysis. These contributions can significantly aid coalition governments in making informed decisions. However, civil society must navigate the potential risks of co-optation, which could compromise their independence and ability to hold the state accountable effectively.

#### **4) Enhancing Public Participation**

*High-level points:*

- a) **Appraisal and Innovation:** Civil society must reassess existing public participation mechanisms and explore new methods (eg. participatory budgeting) to ensure effective engagement in the new political context.
- b) **Creating New Mechanisms:** The shift to coalition governance offers opportunities to develop innovative public consultation platforms, fostering greater civic involvement.

*Detail:*

The shift to a coalition government necessitates reassessing existing public participation mechanisms. Civil society must evaluate whether these mechanisms remain effective in the new political context or if new approaches are needed. This re-evaluation presents an opportunity to innovate and expand public participation methods. For example, civil society and the coalition government could explore participatory budgeting or other inclusive consultation processes. Additionally, existing platforms historically used for state communication can be adapted to facilitate dialogue with multiple actors within a coalition framework. Creating new public participation mechanisms or enhancing existing ones can ensure that citizen voices are heard and considered in governmental decisions, fostering a more inclusive and responsive political environment.

#### **5) Efficacy of Civil Society**

*High-level points:*

- a) **Increased Influence:** The changing political landscape allows civil society to play a more influential role in shaping policy and holding the government accountable, provided it maintains its independence and effectiveness.

*Detail:*

The evolving political landscape enhances the potential efficacy of civil society in shaping policy and governance. Civil society organisations can now influence state actions more effectively, provided they maintain their independence and continue to operate with transparency and accountability. This increased efficacy is vital for holding the government accountable and ensuring that coalition agreements are honoured. Civil society organisations can contribute to more informed and balanced policy-making processes by leveraging their expertise and strategic positioning. The key challenge will be to avoid co-optation and maintain a critical, independent stance while engaging constructively with the government.

#### **6) State-Citizen Relationship**

*High-level:*

- a) Enhanced Representation and Participation: Coalition governments can improve the state's and its citizens' relationship by increasing representation and fostering a renewed sense of participatory governance. Civil society has a crucial role in facilitating this process without becoming politicised.

*Detail:*

The relationship between the state and its citizens is likely to improve under a coalition government. Increased representation of diverse political actors within government can lead to more responsive and participatory governance. This ideal outcome, however, requires active effort from civil society to facilitate and nurture this relationship. Civil society's role is not to become politicised but to provide a platform for citizen engagement and influence in the political process. By fostering inclusive dialogues, promoting transparency, and ensuring accountability, civil society can help create a political environment where the state is more attuned to the needs and aspirations of its citizens. This renewed sense of participatory governance can strengthen the democratic fabric of South Africa, ensuring that government actions reflect the will and interests of its people.

### **Conclusion**

The decline in single party electoral dominance marks a significant opportunity for South Africa to realise the full potential of its democratic framework. By embracing the potential opportunities presented by coalition governments, civil society can enhance political deliberation, strengthen accountability, and foster more inclusive and effective public participation. This moment in South Africa's history is a chance to solidify a democratic system representing and serving all its citizens.

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