

Minority Government or Coalition?

Minority Governments are uncommon - but not un-heard of in constitutional democracies. And these are distinct from Coalitions, with somewhat similarities.

After the municipal elections in 2016, some opposition parties formed “coalitions” to displace the ruling party. However, one party chose not to join any coalitions but just to promise to support them because of its sheer dislike for the ruling party, and a desire to displace it.

What happens sometimes is that a government is formed without a full majority. It depends on the good graces of smaller parties, although they have not signed onto a formal coalition. The benefit of this configuration is that it keeps the “minority government” on its toes. This is generally good for the quality of its performance, for it cannot afford to get arrogant, the way that majority governments can do.

In some democracies like Germany, it can take months after an election for the various parties to negotiate and agree on a formal “governing coalition”. This is different from the “ruling congress” in South Africa, whereby the three distinct members actually contest elections as one. In Germany, each party contests the elections on its own, and only after elections does the real haggling begin.

EFF decided not to join any coalitions after the 2016 municipal elections, acting instead as a “power broker” with enough votes to bring down a municipal government. They actually did bring one down in Nelson Mandela Bay, removing the DA mayor Athol Trollip.

The 2019 elections in South Africa could result in no party actually winning 50% plus one vote. The ruling alliance has been polling badly (last poll it scored only 54.7%, and that was on the way down from the previous poll). It could be punished by voters. If that happens, some parties may decide to form a coalition – to cross that 50% threshold and remove the incumbent.

Or it could be that one party (or several parties) simply decide to form a “minority government” - without a full majority, but with more (combined) votes than any other party or coalition. This is of course risky, but we have watched several of the big metros being governed like this since the last municipal elections. It keeps the pressure on the minority government to deliver services and to perform with distinction. It may be nerve-wracking for the parties involved, but it is good for the voters.

There are two tactics that voters themselves could adopt to create these conditions. One is to boycott the election, to reduce the overall turn-out. The other is to spoil their ballots, which is a democratic statement of discontent. Both are worth considering in the run-up to election day...

A stay-away vote would be an expression of voters who cannot bring themselves to switch their allegiance to another party. But they do, at the same time, wish to punish their favourite party for performing badly. Some people would cry tears if they cast their ballot for an opposition party, but they are still disgusted with the “rot” that has become very evident in the ruling alliance.

At the last elections in 2014, Ronnie Kasrils (a former Minister) and Madlala-Routledge (a former Deputy Minister) were promoting a “boycott”.

Staying away is what some voters do. But the same discontent/disgust can be stated in even stronger terms by spoiling your ballot. This means that you don’t put an “X” beside any party, but

you put a huge “X” over the whole ballot. What this means is that you turned out to vote, which is your civic duty. But you don’t see any party on that ballot that really suits you. A spoiled ballot is a serious critique of Parties and the way it has become “captured”. But you still believe in free and fair elections, so you are declaring your disgust – democratically.

When the ballots are counted, these spoiled ballots show on the election results. Whereas a “stay-away vote” is never counted, it only shows a dwindling turn-out and thus a sense of disappointment or apathy of the Electorate. A spoiled ballot, on the other hand, says something. It says: “Shame on you all”.

What this does is to shrink the number of votes that can actually decide the final election results. In the end, parties will find that they cannot take any voter for granted. Statistically, the party expecting the biggest vote has the most to lose from spoiled ballots. So it gives a little edge to the opposition parties - without bringing yourself to vote for one. Some voters are just too loyal to “swing” their vote.

For example, some people are saying that they really like the new President, but not the party that he stands for. He is clean, but it is filthy. But voters cannot choose a person on the ballot - they can only choose a party. So one strategy is to spoil your ballot.

Spoiled ballots in the 2019 election would also send a second message to Parliament. Basically, the National Assembly is composed of MPs who are chosen by their party – not by the voters. We call it “cadre deployment” within “the PR system” (i.e. proportional representation). This raises a real problem – that MPs don’t represent their “constituents” as much as their party.

The Van Zyl/Slabbert Commission suggested over a decade ago that it was already time to start moving away for this “PR system” and move in the direction of a constituency-based system. But the ruling party parked this suggestion for the 2014 elections, and again for the 2019 elections.

A private members Bill by COPE has been tabled to try to allow Independents – with no party affiliation – to run in elections. COPE has also adopted this trending in its election manifesto for 2019. This would have the effect of having some candidates on the ballot who were stand for a “riding” not for a party. The suggestion that the Van Zyl/Slabbert Commission made was that half the seats in Parliament should be filled by MPs appointed by their parties, and the other half elected by their ridings or constituencies. (To get the best of both worlds.) There is little question that this would enhance the quality of governance in the legislative branch.

But the tendency of incumbents is to protect themselves. The side-lining of this suggestion by the ruling party can be read as self-preservation.

A lot of spoiled ballots would be one way to send a message to the Electoral Commission and to lawmakers that voters are getting impatient to change the PR system. A spoiled ballot could actually be a vote for change!

Another way to support this trending would be to vote for COPE, as it endorses the move towards a constituency-based electoral system.