ACCORD
THE AFRICAN CENTRE FOR THE CONSTRUCTIVE RESOLUTION OF DISPUTES

EMCA

REPORT

NATIONAL SEMINAR ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT COALITION DYNAMICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

19–20 August 2026 | Johannesburg, Guateng, South Africa



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

1. INTRODUCTION

The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) convened a National Seminar on **Local Government Coalition Dynamics in South Africa** on 19-20 August 2026 in Johannesburg. Bringing together academics, policymakers, civil society actors, governance practitioners and election experts, the seminar provided a platform to reflect on South Africa's growing experience with coalition governments and to assess their implications for governance ahead of the 2026 Local Government Elections (LGEs).

While the discussions were framed around coalition politics, participants repeatedly returned to a broader question: whether the instability and governance challenges often associated with coalitions are in fact the symptoms of deeper institutional, political and societal problems. Across the two days, discussions explored electoral trends, legislative reforms, governance, service delivery, accountability, gender inclusion and preparations for the next local government elections.

2. OPENING SESSION: SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR COALITION GOVERNANCE

The seminar was facilitated by Ms Lulu White, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Elections Consulting Agency of Africa. The day began with welcoming remarks from ACCORD's Senior Political Advisor, H.E. Amb. Welile Nhlapo and Ambassador of Ireland to South Africa, H.E. Amb. Austin Gormley. These were followed by the keynote address, delivered by Adv. Marna Dunkle-Kock, Chief Director: Municipal Governance at the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG). The three speakers, as well as Ms White, emphasised the growing significance of coalition governments in South Africa's municipal landscape, including the need to address the instability often associated with coalition arrangements.

Attention was given to the importance of examining the legal and policy frameworks surrounding coalition governance and identifying the institutional conditions, governance practices and practical approaches that can strengthen coalitions and enable them to serve communities more effectively. It was observed, however, that the need for coalitions reflects voters' choices in politically diverse societies. As such, conflict management mechanisms are needed to manage disagreements among coalition partners while allowing parties to retain their distinct identities and ensuring that governments remain focused on communities and service delivery. It was also argued that political stability alone is insufficient to ensure effective local governance. What is required, the speakers argued, is capable and resilient municipal administrations, strong accountability systems, transparent governance processes and effective oversight mechanisms that can sustain service delivery regardless of changing political arrangements.

The first day of the seminar concluded with a Fireside Chat with Dr Zweli Mkhize Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA). The discussion, which was facilitated by H.E. Amb. Nhlapo, focused on the importance of developing both political systems and a political culture that are conducive to coalition governance. These opening sessions set the tone for the seminar by emphasising that effective coalition governance requires not only political stability, but also strong, accountable institutions, capable administration, a cooperative political culture and a continued focus on community needs.

3. SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES EMERGING FROM THE SEMINAR DISCUSSIONS

Throughout the seminar, participants engaged critically with the evolving reality of coalition governance in South Africa. Although discussions covered a diverse range of topics, a number of cross-cutting themes consistently emerged. These themes extended beyond coalition politics itself to encompass broader concerns relating to democratic governance, institutional resilience, administrative capacity, political accountability and inclusive participation. Collectively, they provide insight into the conditions required for effective local governance as South Africa prepares for the 2026 LGEs.

- **Coalitions as a permanent political feature**

A central theme emerging from the seminar was the growing recognition that coalition governments are no longer an exception in South African politics. Participants noted that the steady decline in dominant-party control, increasing political fragmentation and shifts in voter behaviour will make coalition governments an enduring feature of local governance rather than a temporary phenomenon.

Several contributors reflected on electoral trends and the increase in hung councils following the 2021 LGEs. Discussions highlighted, inter alia, that coalition politics extends beyond metropolitan municipalities, despite their prominence in media reporting on coalitions, and affects local and district municipalities across the country. Participants argued that political parties, institutions and voters must adapt to this reality rather than continue to approach coalitions as an undesirable outcome.

Participants also pointed to declining voter turnout and growing public frustration with political parties. Some argued that voters are increasingly rejecting majority-party governance, while others suggested that disillusionment stems from unmet expectations regarding service delivery, economic opportunities and governance performance. It was seen as likely that these trends will continue to shape coalition dynamics beyond the 2026 elections.

A recurring observation was that political parties continue to contest elections with the expectation of governing alone. Participants suggested that parties need to begin pre-emptively planning for coalition governance and develop the skills necessary for negotiation, compromise and power-sharing.

- **Coalition instability reflects deeper governance challenges**

One of the most salient arguments to emerge from the seminar was that many governance failures are incorrectly attributed solely to coalitions. Numerous participants stressed that municipalities experienced instability, corruption, administrative dysfunction and service delivery failures prior to the proliferation of coalition governments and cautioned against treating coalitions as the root cause of governance challenges. Instead, discussions pointed to a combination of factors including weak accountability, fragmented political cultures, declining trust in public institutions, poor oversight and weak administrative capacity. In this view, coalitions often expose underlying governance weaknesses rather than create them.

Several participants noted that public discourse frequently focuses on leadership changes, motions of no confidence and political disputes while paying less attention to the institutional conditions that enable municipalities to function effectively. The question, therefore, is not simply whether coalition governments are stable, but whether municipalities possess the administrative capacity and governance culture necessary to withstand political change. International experiences shared during the seminar reinforced this view. Participants observed that coalition governments operate successfully in a number of countries, suggesting that instability cannot be viewed as an inevitable consequence of coalition arrangements. Rather, coalition outcomes are shaped by institutional design, political behaviour and the broader governance environment.

- **Beyond legislative reform**

Extensive discussions focused on new legislative efforts to regulate coalition governance and whether legal reforms can address recurring instability. Participants broadly welcomed attempts to create clearer rules and greater transparency around coalition formation and management. However, there was significant debate regarding the extent to which legislation alone can resolve coalition-related challenges. A number of participants argued that coalition agreements are important not simply because they may create legal obligations, but because they improve transparency and make political commitments visible to citizens. Publicly documented agreements were seen as a mechanism for strengthening accountability and reducing uncertainty during coalition negotiations.

At the same time, participants questioned whether legal instruments can compel political actors to behave differently if broader questions of political ethics and accountability remain unresolved. Discussions repeatedly highlighted the tendency of political parties to avoid responsibility for governance failures, shift blame to coalition partners, or prioritise political advantage over governance outcomes.

Another prominent theme was the effect of the political culture on the success and stability of coalition governments. This came to the fore most prominently in a fireside discussion held with Dr Zweli Mkhize, MP, Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. There was broad agreement that legislative reforms would remain insufficient at ensuring stability if political leaders maintained an oppositional, partisan approach to governance. A culture of cooperation among political leaders, it was felt, would be essential, to ensure that any legislation aimed at stabilising coalition governance could be practically implemented.

Debates also emerged around proposals for electoral thresholds and other mechanisms aimed at limiting political fragmentation. While some participants viewed thresholds as necessary to improve governability, others argued that they may conflict with constitutional principles of political participation and representation. The discussion highlighted the tensions between democratic representation and governmental effectiveness that policymakers continue to navigate.

Overall, participants concluded that legislative reform should be viewed as one component of a broader solution. More fundamental improvements require the development of a political culture based on accountability, cooperation and a commitment to the public interest.

- **The relationship between politics and administration remains a critical challenge**

A theme running throughout the seminar concerned the relationship between political leadership and municipal administration. Participants repeatedly argued that the quality of administration is often a more important determinant of municipal performance than the specific political arrangement governing a municipality.

A number of contributors expressed concern about political interference in administrative processes, arguing that elected leaders frequently seek influence over functions that should remain within the professional domain of municipal administration. Such interference was viewed as undermining institutional effectiveness and weakening service delivery. It was noted that instability may create an environment in which civil servants focus on protecting their positions rather than implementing programmes and delivering services. Frequent leadership changes, uncertainty about political arrangements and recurring motions of no confidence were identified as factors that make long-term planning difficult and disrupt institutional continuity.

Discussions also focused on capacity deficits within local government. While some participants argued that some councillors may lack the skills required for complex governance responsibilities, others suggested that capable administrators are frequently constrained by political leadership. Regardless of where responsibility lies, there was broad agreement on the need for ongoing training, professionalisation and support for both elected representatives and officials.

The overarching message was that South Africa requires resilient municipal institutions capable of functioning effectively regardless of political changes, coalition arrangements or electoral outcomes.

- **Accountability, service delivery and public trust are central to coalition success**

Participants consistently returned to the relationship between governance arrangements and citizen experiences. While communities may have limited interest in the complexities of coalition negotiations, they are deeply concerned with whether municipalities provide water, sanitation, electricity, housing and other essential services.

Discussions highlighted widespread concern regarding declining accountability within South African politics, with some even suggesting that accountability deficits contribute directly to public disillusionment and declining voter turnout.

The seminar also explored mechanisms for strengthening accountability, including active ward committees, stronger oversight structures, civic education initiatives and improved citizen engagement. Participants stressed that accountability cannot depend solely on elections but requires continuous interaction between elected representatives and communities throughout a governing term.

Importantly, participants argued that building public trust is essential for coalition governments to function effectively. Citizens must be able to understand coalition arrangements, hold leaders accountable and evaluate governance outcomes based on performance rather than political rhetoric.

- **Women's inclusion must extend beyond numerical representation**

The gender dimensions of local politics and municipal governance were discussed under the various themes as well as in a dedicated session on women, leadership and coalition politics. Participants acknowledged a need for greater representation of women and for more attention to be paid to gender specific issues. However, there was also an acknowledgment of the persistent barriers facing women in politics, including exclusion from decision-making processes, political violence, intimidation, antiquated patriarchal norms and unequal access to leadership opportunities.

While many contributors cited examples of positive outcomes associated with women's leadership, others cautioned against assuming that women are inherently better leaders than men. Instead, participants argued that the strongest case for increased representation lies in the principles of inclusion, democratic participation and equitable decision-making. Several participants noted that women are often assigned secondary or ‘soft’ portfolios, excluded from major decision-making spaces, or judged more harshly than male counterparts when mistakes occur. Concerns were also raised regarding violence and intimidation targeting women in politics, particularly at local government level.

The discussion generated a number of practical proposals, including gender audits within coalition governments, stronger mentorship programmes, increased political education for women and young people, enhanced protection against political violence and harassment, and greater attention to gender equality within coalition and electoral reforms. Participants emphasised that meaningful inclusion requires not only representation but genuine influence over decision-making processes.

- **Looking ahead to the 2026 local government elections**

Discussions on the final day considered how political parties, municipalities, civil society and citizens should prepare for the 2026 LGEs. A recurring message was that parties should prepare for coalition negotiations before elections rather than after results have been declared. This includes developing clear coalition principles, prioritising competence in leadership appointments and avoiding arrangements driven primarily by competition for positions.

The need for continuous capacity-building for councillors and officials, stronger voter education programmes, and greater public understanding of coalition governance was emphasised. Emerging issues such as migration, urbanisation, personality-driven politics and increasing party fragmentation were identified as factors likely to influence local government politics in the years ahead. In closing reflections, participants argued that coalitions should no longer be viewed as an inconvenience or anomaly within South Africa's democracy. Rather, they represent a political reality that demands new approaches to leadership, governance and public accountability.

- **Conclusion**

The seminar revealed a broad consensus that coalition governments are now firmly embedded within South Africa's democratic landscape. However, discussions suggested that the country's governance challenges cannot be understood through the lens of coalitions alone. While legislative reforms may help address specific coalition-related challenges, participants stressed that lasting improvements will depend on stronger institutions, more responsible political leadership, active citizen engagement and a governance culture that prioritises service delivery over political contestation. As South Africa approaches the 2026 LGEs, the seminar underscored the need to move beyond debates about whether coalitions should exist and instead focus on how to ensure effective, inclusive and accountable coalition management and governance.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

While participants approached coalition governance from different perspectives, several areas of consensus emerged over the course of the seminar. These recommendations are intended to inform policymakers, political parties, municipal institutions, civil society organisations and other stakeholders leading up to and beyond the 2026 LGEs.

1. Strengthen municipal institutions and administrative capacity

Participants emphasised that coalition instability often exposes underlying weaknesses in municipal administration as opposed to causing them. There was broad agreement on the need to professionalise local government, insulate administrative processes from undue political interference and build resilient institutions capable of functioning effectively despite changes in political leadership.

2. Improve accountability, transparency and oversight

The seminar highlighted concerns over declining public trust, weak accountability mechanisms and inadequate oversight. Participants called for greater transparency in coalition agreements, stronger monitoring and evaluation systems, and more active citizen participation through local accountability structures such as ward committees and public engagement processes.

3. Support legislative reforms that promote stable coalition governance

Participants welcomed ongoing efforts to regulate coalition governance but stressed that legislation should be complemented by political commitment and ethical leadership. Reforms should provide clearer rules for coalition formation and dispute resolution while balancing political stability with the constitutional principles of representation and participation.

4. Invest in leadership development and civic education

Participants emphasised the need for continuous capacity-building programmes for councillors, municipal officials and political leaders, particularly in areas such as governance, negotiation and coalition management. They also highlighted the importance of voter and civic education to strengthen public understanding of coalition politics and democratic accountability.

5. Advance inclusive participation in local governance

The seminar underscored the need to strengthen the meaningful participation of women and other underrepresented groups in local governance. Participants called for measures to address barriers to participation, strengthen mentorship and leadership opportunities, and create safe political environments free from intimidation and violence.

6. Foster a political culture of cooperation and public service

A recurring message throughout the seminar was that coalition governance ultimately depends on the willingness of political actors to negotiate, compromise and prioritise community interests above partisan considerations. Participants therefore stressed the importance of cultivating a political culture grounded in accountability, ethical leadership and a shared commitment to effective service delivery.