

Exploring Public Trust in South Africa's Coalition Politics: The Case of the Government of National Unity

ZOKO Mxolisi Israel¹

Abstract

South Africa's coalition politics have become popular as the country navigates a changing political landscape marked by dwindling support for dominating parties. This study examined public trust in coalition governance, using the Government of National Unity (GNU) as a case study. The study employed a qualitative approach to investigate aspects impacting public views, such as public trust and accountability, stability, and policy consistency. Game theory was used as the theoretical basis for this investigation. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to obtain a sample of six individual participants from the Chris Hani District. Data was gathered using a semi-structured interview, and the findings were analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings suggest that coalition governments can enhance diversity and broad representation. However, they frequently confront obstacles such as internal strife and dwindling public trust in their ability to govern efficiently. This study emphasizes the value of transparent governance and unified leadership in building public trust. These findings have important implications for forming and managing future coalition governments in South Africa and other multiparty democracies. This study adds to the existing literature regarding coalition politics and governance discourse by giving a more sophisticated understanding of trust dynamics in transitional democracies.

Keywords: *Coalition politics, public trust, Government of National Unity (GNU), South Africa, transparency, governance stability.*

Introduction

Numerous African nations frequently encounter crises during and following election campaigns, stemming from a lack of confidence in electoral bodies to administer free and fair elections. In many cases, election results are manipulated to the point that there is no obvious winner, necessitating the formation of a government of national unity (GNU) or coalition governments in which political opponents are sometimes forced to work together. This occurs after great bloodshed, misery, and displacement (Mapuva, 2011). African nations such as Zimbabwe in 2008, Kenya in 2008 and 2017, Uganda in 2021, the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2023, Gabon in 2016 and 2023, and Angola in 2017 and 2022 exemplify instances of electoral disputes, wherein specific factions contended that the elections were neither free nor fair and lodged disputes resulted in the formation of GNUs (Chigora, Guzura, & Mutumburanzou, 2011; Cheeseman, 2008 & 2020; Bhattacharya, 2023 and Roque, 2021; Kagoro, 2024). Likewise, nations like the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy have seen coalition governments (Gross & Krauss, 2021; Bergman, Back, & Hellström, 2021; Conti, Pedrazzani, & Russo, 2022).

After 30 years of democracy in South Africa, the most contested national and provincial elections in 2024 culminated in the formation of the Government of National Unity. These elections resulted in the African National Congress, which had been in power from 1994 to 2024, having to share power with other parties after receiving 40% of the vote. The outcomes of the 2024 general elections in South Africa were an indication of voter discontent with issues such as poor service delivery and unkept promises by the ruling party, resulting in a fragmented public mandate and a shift in both voter behavior and South African political dynamics (Mafumo, 2024). With the unprecedented election outcome, different voters have held different views on the formation of a coalition or government of national unity; others argued that the GNU would result in a strengthened unity resulting in a watchdog against social injustices, racism, and corruption, while other voters perceive the GNU arrangement as something that undermines their electoral mandate as they did not vote for a coalition government and concerned about the conflicting party policy and ideological positions (Newsroom Africa, 2024 & Sikhakhane, 2024).

¹ 12 Jansen Street Sandringham Komani 5320, Walter Sisulu University, 0000-0001-5245-6155, mzoko@wsu.ac.za, 0784115393

Post GNU formation in SA, there have been various conflicts. Some of these disagreements were initiated as a result of the enactment of the National Health Insurance Act 20 of 2023, aimed at achieving universal healthcare services for South Africans, where the Democratic Alliance (DA), which is the second biggest party in the GNU, has continuously opposed the Act both in public and in the constitutional court with organizations such as the SA Private Practitioners Forum (SAPPF), Solidarity and the Board of Healthcare Funders already having a lawsuit against the act. On the other hand, NHI received a warm reception from organizations such as COSATU and the SACP (Makinana, 2024). Other issues such as Expropriation Act 13 of 2024, Basic Education Laws Amendment Act 32 of 2024, and the postponement of the 2025 budget speech are reasons South African citizens are gradually losing trust in the GNU. Against this background, this paper explored public trust in coalition governance in the Government of National Unity of South Africa.

Aim of the study

The study aimed to examine the public trust in South African coalition politics through the government of national unity. The objectives of the study were to:

- i. To examine public perceptions of the GNU's effectiveness and transparency.
- ii. To evaluate the role of trust in influencing the GNU's legitimacy.
- iii. To recommend how the GNU can enhance public trust.

such as public trust and accountability, stability, and policy consistency

Research questions

- i. How do South Africans perceive the accountability and transparency of the Government of National Unity (GNU)?
- ii. What are the key challenges affecting trust in the GNU?
- iii. What strategies can strengthen public confidence in coalition governance?

Literature Review

This study reviewed the existing body of knowledge regarding coalition politics and governments of national unity. It considered the local, regional, and international literature to identify the existing gaps in the body of knowledge. The reviewed studies focused on the government of national unity, public trust in governance, public perception, and political legitimacy.

The government of National Unity is defined in various ways depending on the context and perspectives. GNU is a form of government established when no single party has independently won elections by the absolute majority (Matebese, *et. al*, 2024, cited in Ngubane, 2025). GNU is a coalition government that integrates all political entities, including civil service, cabinet, diplomatic positions, judicial, military, police, and intelligence, to promote stability, integration, and prosperity (Chigora & Guzura, 2011). The GNU is a coalition of all parliamentary political parties aiming to promote inclusive participation in resolving political issues and advancing national stability (Thinane, 2023, cited in Thusi, 2024). With various definitions of what makes one government to be referred to as the GNU, this in the South African context has resulted in various political parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the uMkonto weSizwe Party (MKP) continuously challenging the use of GNU term for the newly formed government. The MKP, in its court papers, argued that the use of GNU by the South African Broadcasting Commission (SABC) is incorrect as parties such as EFF and MKP, comprising 25% of the total votes, are excluded from the national unity government, including other minor parties making the current government to have no features of unity (Mafisa, 2025).

Scholars such as (Mapuva, 2010; Chigora & Guzura, 2011) write that it has often been the case that GNUs in Africa are used as a shortcut to keep power and foster election irregularities, and this results in bringing together political parties with significantly differing political ideologies and interests which in the end undermines the democracy. Ngubane (2025) in his writings further raises an important question: “Whose voice or whose interest the national unity is serving? Does it serve the interests of the majority or the minority?”

The Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe was established as a compromise to avert electoral violence. In 2008, Tsvangirai won the elections but could not secure enough votes to form a government. A re-run was held, but violence led to Tsvangirai withdrawing from the presidential race. Mugabe won uncontested, the international community rejected him as the winner, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) intervened. The intervention led to the amendment of the constitution, allowing the formation of a national unity government, with Zanu-PF retaining the president's first and second president positions. At the same time, MDC-T occupied the newly created positions of the prime minister and the deputy prime minister (Ngubane, 2025). In the Zimbabwean GNU arrangement, some people believed that sharing power was unfair as Zanu-PF was perceived to have retained all the powerful positions. The sharing of power resulted in the creation of a new cabinet position to accommodate the new arrangement, and the outcomes of this process resulted in confusion and delays in the decision-making processes and service delivery processes (Nhede, 2012, as cited in Ngubane, 2025). The Republic of Lesotho is one of the African states that have experienced GNU three times, and the first two of the three only lasted for not more than two years, while the third one started showing instability earlier than the first two (Nhengu & Murairwa, 2020; Mashinini, 2020 as cited in Thusi, 2024).

Thusi (2024) insinuates that the GNU government in South Africa has the potential to put to an end cadre deployment and lead to improved service delivery as qualified individuals will be employed in the public sector, as parties like the ANC can no longer make decisions alone as it was the practice for more than 30 years of democracy. However, this remains a point to be proven, as some of the already discussed literature in Africa indicates that the situation worsens instead of improving services when there is GNU.

The trust in the GNU was first questioned by some opposition parties who are not forming part of the GNU, claiming that this is an act of betrayal of the general voters and black Africans in particular (Ngubane, 2025). Moreover, public conflicts between the ANC and DA on issues such as BELA Act 32 of 2024, NHI Act 20 of 2024, Expropriation Act 13 of 2024, and the 2025/25 annual budget speech have now added more reasons for the public to have trust issues on whether the current government can govern to the best interests of South Africans in a united front as they claim to be. When several parties opposed the budget speech, the DA leader, John Steenhuisen, on record indicated that if the ANC gave them concessions on other issues such as BELA, NHI, and expropriation, they would consider their position on the value-added tax (VAT) increase (Newsroom Africa., 2025). This indicated that contrary to the previous public belief that the DA was standing with the public and the poor on the increase of VAT, this was nothing but a political stance to benefit the DA and not general South Africans.

This is also part of the extreme differences in terms of policy positions between the two political parties, which have the potential to compromise the state in delivering its mandate.

Ngubane (2025) highlights the advantages of GNU. In one of them, he states, "*It is likely to promote social cohesion since parties working together may be representing divergent segments of the population*". Some of the disadvantages he states include:

“Having many parties with conflicting and sometimes contradicting election manifestos and political positions (philosophy) may result into political instability”.

“Some political parties can have unreasonable demands such as demanding certain key portfolios for their own (political party) narrow interests; others can even demand repeal of certain laws”.

“There is likely to be deadlocked on particularly important issues such as the passing of the budget, not

because there is anything wrong with the budget, but in some cases because of certain demands that

are not met”.

From Ngubane’s viewpoint, the contradictions in the advantage of social cohesion based on different political parties having to work together in delivering services are then nullified by the realities mentioned as the disadvantages, as this is the case with the South African GNU nine months later after it was formed.

Part of what is always a challenge for the government of national unity is that it becomes difficult to formulate or merge policies of different political parties as they have differing policy and governance positions and having competed individually in the elections with the hope they would win with the majority (Bergman, Angelova, Back & Müller, 2024). The cumbersome negotiations that must take place before any policy position can be adopted add to the difficulty in formulating state policies that would benefit the state's public, leading to reduced trust in the GNU’s ability to lead the government successfully.

Theoretical framework

Game theory can be defined as the analytical tools designed to support us in understanding the phenomena observed when decision-makers interact. It provides the basis for the analysis of interactive decision-making processes. It offers instruments for forecasting potential outcomes when agents with different interests interact (Osborne, 2004). Game theory is often used in the economics, psychology, and political sciences and applied in studies with competitive scenes; in this case, the stated problem is referred to as the game, and the participants are referred to as players (Norozpour & Safaei, 2020).

Game theory originated in 1713, with applications by scholars such as Camerer, and was further developed in 1838 by Cournot. In his study of polar games, John Neumann highlighted the theory's application in the 20th century with the first published work authored by John Forbes Nash in 1949. Game theory is broken down into two categories: non-cooperative and cooperative game theory. Non-cooperative game theory examines decision-making in economic interactions where individuals operate autonomously to optimize their own advantage. Each player strategically makes choices without considering the interests of others, prioritizing self-interest in a competitive setting. Cooperative game theory applies analytical tools in studying the behaviour of rational players where there is cooperation. In the cooperative game theory, the aim is to have decision-makers who better position all players in the game, and as such, scenarios with the decision-making process satisfy group and individual rationality (Norozpour & Safaei, 2020).

This study utilizes game theory to elucidate political parties' interactions, negotiations, and decision-making processes within a coalition government as they pursue their objectives. The GNU has multiple parties with different ideologies and policy interests, making coalition governance a complex strategic interaction. Political parties may struggle between cooperating for national stability or advancing their individual interests. Bargaining in a coalition often involves parties trying to balance cooperation and party interests to maintain stability. Regarding the Rational Choice Perspective, parties and leaders within the GNU decide based on expected benefits, weighing public perception, power retention, and policy influence.

Game theory in this study elucidates the significance of trust for coalition stability. Trust erodes if the public perceives parties engage in self-serving strategies rather than prioritizing governance. The application of game theory allowed the study to assess how political negotiations and decision-making affect governance efficiency, whether the GNU fosters cooperation or increases policy deadlock, and the extent to which coalition stability or internal conflicts influence public trust.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research approach using a case study design since it emphasizes a full contextual analysis of fewer events or conditions and their interrelations. A sample size of 6 participants from the Chris Hani district in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The participants were drawn from a population of all genders aged 18 years and above, employed and unemployed. The age preference was based on the age eligibility for one to participate in elections in South Africa, which is from the age of 18 years. The small sample size was relevant to ensure data saturation and quality of results. The sampling method used was purposive sampling. The study adhered to ethical considerations. Structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants. The study adopted thematic content analysis as the relevant tool to analyse collected data from the participants.

Findings and recommendations

The study rigorously examined and analysed the interview results. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, themes and sub-themes were identified by examining the data. The study employed thematic content analysis to interpret the collected data, carefully examining the comments to explore views shared by the study participants.

Table 1: Biographical data of study participants

Age group	Education level	Occupation	Political activism
26–35	Tertiary	Government employee	Actively involved
26–35	Tertiary	Academic	Occasionally follows political developments
26–35	Tertiary	Academic	Actively involved
36–45	Tertiary	Academic	Actively involved
26–35	Tertiary	Unemployed	Occasionally follows political developments
26–35	Tertiary	University employee	Actively involved

Table 2: Public perceptions of GNU's Governance Effectiveness

Theme	Sub-Themes	Possible Problems Identified
To explore Perceptions of GNU's Governance Effectiveness	Do you believe the GNU is an effective form of governance? Why or why not?	Effectiveness / Ineffectiveness Improved service delivery Accountability Transparency Stalemate Instability
	What factors influence your trust or distrust in the coalition government?	Clean governance Transparency Shared responsibility Decentralized power Inclusive governance Partisanship Communication

This section of the interview schedule explored the general views of participants in relation to the government of unity (GNU) with two questions, with the first question focusing on investigating the participants' beliefs on whether they believe that the GNU is an effective form of governance. The second question explored factors influencing their trust or distrust in the coalition government.

GNU as an effective form of governance

Participants shared varying views on the GNU being an effective form of government. Some suggested that they viewed GNU as an effective form of government, others argued against it, and others indicated that, from their viewpoint, everything remained the same as before.

Some responses were:

Participant 2: “No, power dynamics are always at play, which makes it difficult to achieve unity and effectiveness.”

Participant 4: “Yes, it helps as no single party gets to take the blame for failure, but rather failures are attributed to all parties in the GNU.”

Participant 6: “GNU proves to be effective as it presents confluence representation from several interest groups, therefore inspires hope and trust from those interest groups and the public.”

The contradicting views from the participants are in accordance with the available body of knowledge, which indicates that GNU as a form of government in both African and international countries where it has been practiced has shown some elements of effectiveness as well as elements of ineffectiveness. Ineffectiveness at times has led to the collapse of governance in some countries.

Factors that influence trust or distrust in the coalition government

Participants shared their views on what influences their trust or distrust in coalition government, and many of the issues that the participants shared were issues that they hope the newly formed South African GNU would like to address and improve on.

Some responses were:

Participant 1: “GNU Founding Principles are linked to the founding principles of my affiliation party (ANC), which are clean governance, fighting poverty, eradication of unemployment, and clean governance.” Therefore, this makes me trust the arrangement.”

Participant 2: “Party interest makes me distrust coalition government as each party always tries to impress their voters rather than advancing the national interests.”

Participant 3: “As a citizen of the country, trust can only be where there is a legitimate government, but currently, there is no transparency. Look at how differing ideologies can agree on who must lead us, example is in EFF agreeing with DA to remove ANC yet at political level they are opposed to each other, for this reason I do not trust this arrangement of government.”

Given the shared views from the participants, factors influencing trust or distrust can vary with some influenced by the current and the recent local government coalitions in South Africa where parties take different decisions as and when it favours their party interests rather than those of the citizens. Some views were highly influenced by the founding principles of the GNU which increased the trust of the participants.

Table 3: Performance and stability of GNU

Performance and Stability	Do you think the Government of National Unity has improved governance and service delivery? Why or why not?	No improvement Optimistic Gridlocked Instability Partisan politics Stagnant
	What challenges do you think coalition politics bring to	Indecisive governance Self-serving

	government performance and stability?	Deadlocked Fractured Disunity
	In your view, has the coalition government promoted inclusivity and political cooperation?	Small party integration Divisions No interest group integration Minimal cooperation
	Do you think the GNU is accountable to the public? Please elaborate with examples.	Partisan accountability Unaccountable No public accountability

The Government of National Unity, improved governance and service delivery

This part of the study aimed to reveal how participants viewed GNU's governance and service delivery in South Africa post the 2024 May general elections. Amongst the views from the participants, some indicated that there was improvement in the governance and service delivery, others disagreed and pointed out instabilities, partisan politics at play, gridlocks/stagnation, and more as primary reasons for no improved governance and service delivery while other participants indicated that there was no difference instead the implemented service delivery programs were the continuation of the previous administration.

Here is what some participants had to say:

Participant 1: *“Yes, at the current moment, it has improved service delivery as all small parties included in the GNU are working tirelessly to prove their ability to the government, which translates to better service delivery.”*

Participant 2: *“A big no, parties within the GNU tend to disagree than they agree on ways in which public services must be delivered, which delays the services or results in no service at all.”*

Participant 4: *“I see no difference as of now, rather than the continuation of the programs initiated by the previous administration.”*

Challenges of coalition politics to the government's performance and stability

When participants were asked to share their views on what challenges coalition politics bring to the government's performance and stability, they all highlighted issues around indecisive governance, disunity, self-serving approach, and delayed decision-making processes.

Some responses from the participants were:

Participant 1: *“Indecisive governance, difficult to make decisions, governance based on who supports whom, and this leads to good policies not being implemented.”*

Participant 3: *“Coalition politics problems emanate from the virtue of having no winner, everyone now wants to have a view, whether they are big or small parties.”*

Participant 4: *“Every chance one party gets, they want to advance their interests rather than those of the country.”*

Participant 5: *“Disunity always prevails based on their political interests.”*

Participants' views are supported by the available literature on South African local government coalition politics, and in the recently formed GNU, decisions are delayed, every party campaigns for itself at the

expense of the general citizens, and continued disunity in decision-making processes (Newsroom Africa., 2025)

The coalition government's promotion of inclusivity and political cooperation

The study aimed to uncover whether the public viewed the GNU and coalition government as a form of government promoting inclusivity and cooperation. Participants shared some of their views, indicating that they believed inclusivity was promoted. They cited how all parties were invited to be part of the GNU, which in essence encouraged inclusivity, and those who did not join decided to be excluded out of their own will. On the other hand, some participants believed that although there was a degree of inclusivity for political parties, they felt that inclusivity was lacking in including other civil organizations and interest groups other than political parties with an interest in the government of the country

Here is what participants had to say:

Participant 1: *"Yes, to a certain degree, it has integrated smaller parties into government, giving them a voice and having strategic positions."*

Participant 2: *"No, matters are still subject to voting, which proves the lack of cooperation."*

Participant 3: *"The government is still struggling to include interest groups in the government of the day."*

Participant 6: *"Coalition governments often unite multiple political parties, including those with differing ideologies, to form a majority. This ensures that a wider array of viewpoints and interests are represented in government, fostering inclusivity among various social, cultural, and political groups. Therefore, inclusivity is promoted."*

The participants' views indicate that the public view is that the coalition government promotes inclusivity. However, it is still challenging to get maximum cooperation amongst the very same parties that would have formed the coalition government. To support this view, there have been instances where the DA and ANC parties are in constant non-cooperation with each other.

The GNU as a form of accountable government to the public

The Government of National Unity is a new phenomenon in South African politics; this part of the study sought to obtain public views on whether they saw GNU as a government accountable to the public. Their views indicated that they find the current form of government to be a government that still leans more on party accountability lines than the public, and others argued there was no accountability at all. Below are some views of the participants.

Participant 2: *"The government disregards public opinion, paying little heed to citizens' concerns."*

Participant 3: *"No, every party in the GNU is only accountable to their constituency, even though the cabinet may report to the president."*

Participant 4: *"Since the formation of the GNU, there have been no signs of public accountability from the GNU parties."*

The shared views suggest that the government of national unity has much responsibility regarding public accountability as a united front rather than each party in the GNU accounting to their own constituents individually.

Factors Influencing Trust in Coalition Politics

Factors Influencing Trust in Coalition Politics	How does transparency in decision-making affect your	No transparency Instils credibility Reassuring
--	--	--

	trust in the Government of National Unity?	Uncertain
	Do you think political party conflicts within the coalition influence public trust? How?	Party dominance Party marginalization Trust erosion Blaming game Future uncertainty
	Do you believe political parties in the GNU prioritize the interests of citizens or their political agendas? Why?	Party political agendas Partisan interests Hypocritical
	Have recent policy disagreements among GNU parties affected your perception of coalition governance?	Degraded the trust Power hunger indication Polarized

Factors Influencing Trust in Coalition Politics

This part studied how transparency in decision-making affects public trust in the Government of National Unity. Some of the participants' views indicated that transparency instills credibility in the day's government, bringing about hope for the future. On the other hand, some participants expressed great concerns regarding the certainty of the government of national unity as far as it relates to its ability to make decisions transparently, as they believed that the current GNU was not transparent, and as such, this affected their trust in the current government.

Participant 1: *“Parties playing watchdog roles to each other make us confident that if one party makes an incorrect move, it will be called into order by the others, and the public will know.”*

Participant 2: *“I do not see transparency at all.”*

Participant 3: *“My trust would have improved if there had been transparency. For example, we were told that we have the best military for some time, yet we later learned that this was the opposite when we learnt of budget constraints in our defence force.”*

Participant 6: *“Clear, transparent communication from leaders and a visible, unified leadership structure can enhance trust. If leaders are competent and committed to working together, citizens are more likely to trust the government.”*

Political party conflicts within the GNU

Like any other parties with differing political ideologies and party interests that happen to find themselves in the coalition, the GNU in South Africa has not been spared from these realities. This part of the study explored the participants' views on how the GNU parties' conflicts affected their trust.

Some shared public views:

Participant 1: *“The impact is harmful, as each party always attempts to overshadow the rest.”*

Participant 2: *“They do influence the public into distrust. For example, when load shedding was moving away, everyone claimed victory, but when it came back, the parties attributed the failures to the ANC.”*

Participant 4: *“Yes, it affects our trust as we are never sure what the status of the government could be in the near future in terms of governance.”*

Participant 6: *“Persistent public disagreements within the coalition, especially over significant issues, can undermine the stability and reliability in the government, therefore perpetuate distrust.”*

All views indicate that unresolved GNU party conflicts degrade public trust.

GNU Parties: Public Service or Partisan Interests?

Participants were asked to share their views on whether they believed the parties in the GNU prioritized the interests of general South Africans or focused on their political agendas. Here are some of the participants views:

Participant 1: *“Prioritizes their political campaigns and not that of GNU, everyone is building a political base for the next government elections.”*

Participant 3: *“They do not prioritize the interests of citizens but try to impress their constituencies. Every action is based on constituencies rather than citizens in general.”*

Participant 6: *“While parties masquerade as prioritizing citizens' interests at inception, once they are in government, they advance their own agendas, claiming every triumph and blaming other parties if anything goes wrong.”*

Impact of Policy Disagreements on Public Trust in Coalition Governance

How political parties debate and disagree on policy matters in parliament directly impacts how the public views them, trusts them, and eventually chooses which one of them they would vote for in the next elections. Participants were asked how the policy disagreements amongst GNU parties affected their perceptions of coalition governance, and this is what they had to say:

Participant 2: *“Yes, it proved that there is no GNU but just parties hungry for power.”*

Participant 4: *“Not really, as although they differ, none of them wants to be seen as against progress, and they want to continue to be part of the government.”*

Participant 6: *“Policy disagreements will always arise amid different representations. For instance, a left-wing party might push for higher taxes on the wealthy, while a right-wing party may advocate for fiscal conservatism. However, an imbalance would mean it is only a GNU on paper and never in practice.”*

From the views shared by the participants to a certain extent, it indicates that the public has had reservations on the functionality of the GNU parties since they have different ideologies, and the ongoing conflicts continue to cement the uncertainty that the public has about the government of the day, and negatively impact their trust.

Recommendations

Based on research interviews highlighting key challenges in public trust toward coalition governments, the following recommendations are proposed to improve communication, media engagement, public education, and governance strategies.

Strengthening Government Communications:

A lack of transparency and inconsistent messaging from coalition governments erode public trust and can cause conflict. The government should schedule regular town halls and citizen forums with coalition partners and provide public access to Q&A sessions, including digital platforms, to promote communication and bridge the gap between the public and coalition leaders.

Create a single communication office and website to give partner organizations a unified message. Provide mechanisms (apps, for example) for the public to provide feedback on public policy decisions, including text-based surveys. Internally develop reporting mechanisms that explain and describe to the greater public repeatedly how their input has influenced government decisions through quarterly and annual transparency reports.

Mitigating Media Bias and the Coverage of Political Stories:

Negative or partisan media give life to the notion of the coalition being unstable and erode public trust in coalition governments. The government should promote or advocate for media ethics to cover coalition politics. Support independent fact-checkers to rebut potential false narratives. Arrange quarterly newsroom/media briefings with coalition leaders outlining their policy positions. Create a media rapid reaction unit to counter false narratives in real time.

Learning from Historical Experiences of Coalition Governments:

Repeating failures in governance, policy paralysis, conflict, or ineffectiveness in coalitions means a reduction in public confidence. The government should create best practices, a lesson learned guide, or a handbook documenting successful coalitions internationally, with high success, or South African previous experiences. Possible inclusion of dispute resolution methods and or prioritizing policies to manage the time of coalition partners worked best. Embed Patriotism & Statesmanship by showcasing and promoting civic literacy programs that explicitly highlight coalition governments as a sign of democratic stability rather than weakness. Promote cross-party leadership training aimed at coalescing leaders as culturally normal.

Broadening Public Education on coalition governments:

The public will have unrealistic expectations if they do not understand how coalitions work. The government must undertake National Public Education Campaigns using diverse approaches to demonstrate coalition politics. This could be made via websites, radio shows, or social media with explainer videos. Engagement with public or participative organizations and working with schools to include coalition governments in civic education, with schools to get a greater understanding in communities.

Literacy in the Media to Counter Misinformation:

Misleading narratives about coalitions are spreading uncontested and inaccurately. With school curricula, the integration of media literacy in teaching students to critique, assess, and analyse credible political news while focusing on coalition reporting. Work with media houses to conduct workshops for adults to promote "Know your News" outreach.

Conclusion

The study on public trust in South Africa's Government of National Unity (GNU) finds a complicated interplay of optimism and scepticism about coalition government. While the GNU allows for more diverse participation and inclusive decision-making, its effectiveness is hampered by internal conflicts, policy deadlocks, and a lack of transparency.

The findings emphasize that trust in coalition governments depends on three essential pillars: transparent governance, stability through cooperation, and public involvement. Comparative observations from African and international case studies demonstrate that coalitions can flourish when institutionalized with clear dispute resolution procedures and public-centric leadership. Without these safeguards, they risk promoting insecurity and dissatisfaction. The GNU's credibility depends on its capacity to display consistent leadership and accomplish actual results. While the GNU allows for more diverse participation and inclusive decision-making, internal conflicts, policy deadlocks, and a lack of transparency hamper its effectiveness. The success of the government of national unity will be measured not by its survival but by its capacity to unite rhetoric with action in service of the public good.

References

- Andiswa Makinana. (2024, May). ANC, DA gloves off in GNU dust-up. Sunday Times. <https://times-editions.pressreader.com/article/283480736644091>
- Bergman, T., Back, H., & Hellström, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Coalition governance in Western Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- Bhattacharya, S. (2023). *The promise and peril of Africa in 2023*. Vivekananda International Foundation. <https://www.vifindia.org>.
- Cheeseman, N. (2008). The Kenyan elections of 2007: An introduction. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 2(2), 166–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531050802058336>
- Chigora, P., & Guzura, T. (2011). The politics of the Government of National Unity (GNU) and power sharing in Zimbabwe: Challenges and prospects for democracy. *African Journal of History and Culture*, 3(2), 20–26.
- Chigora, P., Guzura, T., & Mutumburanzou, J. (2011). The challenges facing opposition political parties in rural Zimbabwe within 2000–2008. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 5(7), 358–366.
- Conti, N., Pedrazzani, A., & Russo, F. (2022). Policy polarisation in Italy: The short and conflictual life of the ‘Government of Change’ (2018–2019). In *The politics of polarisation* (pp. 64–97). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003174110-5>
- Fundisi, E., & Atanga, R. A. (2023). Towards strengthening electoral democracy in Africa: A review of trends, challenges, and future prospects. *Africa Insight*, 53(3), 67–83.
- Gross, M., & Krauss, S. (2021). Topic coverage of coalition agreements in multi-level settings: The case of Germany. *German Politics*, 30(2), 227–248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1652535>
- Kagoro, J. (2024). Uganda: Authoritarianism in the age of regular elections—A review of the 2021 electoral violence. In *Research handbook on authoritarianism* (pp. 331–355). [Publisher not specified].
- Mafisa, I. (2025, May). No national unity and parties excluded: MK party tells the court why SABC should not use the term GNU. *The Citizen*. <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/courts/no-national-unity-and-parties-excluded-mk-party-tells-court-why-sabc-should-not-use-the-term-gnu/>
- Mafumo, T. N. (2024). Uncertainties with the Government of National Unity in South Africa. *Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives (JPADA)*, 9(3), 164–176.
- Newsroom Afrika. (2025, February). Steenhuisen reacts to Godongwana budget speech. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkZZqFRVDqw>
- Newsroom Afrika. (2024, November). Prospects of SA seeing formation of a Government of National Unity. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzRwhscc4xw>
- Norozipour, S., & Safaei, M. (2020). An overview on game theory and its application. *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering*, 993, 012114. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/993/1/012114>.
- Osborne, M. J. (2004). *An introduction to game theory* (Vol. 3, No. 3). Oxford University Press.
- Roque, P. C. (2021). *Governing in the shadows: Angola’s securitized state*. Oxford University Press.
- Sikhakhane, M. (2024). Adv Muzi Sikhakhane on ANC-DA Cabinet, ‘GNU’, SA Constitution, MK Party, Zuma, Mbeki, Ramaphosa [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zv7o92hSEGY>
- Thusi, X. (2024). Analyzing the role of the government of national unity in enhancing governance and public service delivery in South Africa. [Manuscript in preparation or unpublished work].