



## What Could Make or Break the Government of National Unity (GNU): Lessons Learnt from a Comparative Study of United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v7i11.2421>

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### **Abstract**

The prevalence of the coalition governments or Governments of National Unity (GNUs) in many countries after the elections is testimony to electoral maturity and some scholars believe that it is a sign that the electorate and communities in general are tired of opposition politics and would rather prefer political parties that can work together for the benefit of their communities instead of political bickering. Whilst many of the European countries such as United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands have mastered the art of coalition governments, experience in coalition does not guarantee success even though it does help in supporting the coalition. Africa as a continent is yet to see a very successful and hassle-free coalition maybe it is the nature of coalition governments that they will never be without challenges. There are African countries that have relatively experienced stable coalitions such as Lesotho but what is apparent is that when coalitions are between the bigger and smaller parties, they tend to be more stable than coalitions of bigger parties. South African reformed Government of National Unity (GNU) is still at its infancy and is fragile which then necessitates that lessons from other forms of coalition governments in other countries should be analyzed so that South Africa can learn from them and not repeat the same mistakes. It is for this reason that a comparative analysis with the other countries that have experienced coalition governments or Governments of National Unity (GNUs) was done. The research findings are such that challenges relating to coalition governments or GNUs are common across all countries studied. This spans from inability to plan for a coalition before the elections, failure to consult the electorate about the negotiations, the absence of a coalition framework, failure to find common ground on the programme of action, contestations about positions, temptations to interfere with the public service, etc. To obviate these challenges, it is important for political parties to have a Framework for Coalitions that will help guide coalitions.

**Keywords:** *Coalition Government, Government of National Unity (GNU), Framework for Coalitions, Coalition Partners, Policy Programme, Coalition Agreements*

## ***Introduction***

Governments of National Unity (GNUs) seem to be a prevalent and a modern phenomenon in developing countries resulting from hung election outcomes. Whilst the practice of GNU has its roots in European policies and seemed to have matured, its prevalence in developing and under developing countries is creating exciting and necessary experimentation in terms of the electoral outcomes.

There are many reasons why countries enter into a GNU arrangement after the elections and these include but not limited to the need to improve the economic growth or outlook; the need to improve service delivery; the need to ensure transparency in the manner in which governance is exercised; the need to develop more inclusive and comprehensive policies to improve the social security system, etc.

There is also a question of whose voice or whose interest is the ‘national unity’ serving. Does it serve the interests of the majority or those of the minority. It therefore becomes important to even define ‘national unity’ as a precursor to the GNU. Amienyi (2005) defines national unity as a process that seeks to unite people of different ethnic culture, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds for reciprocally beneficial goals. It occurs when people from the same nation think, feel and care for another and are willing to sacrifice the individual interest for the nation (Mathew and Ansari, 2012). This definition is very important because it builds the foundation with which the GNU should be founded and conversely if the GNU does not relate to this foundational basis, it then serves other interests other than what it is intended to.

Governments of National Unity in the United Kingdom (UK) date back to after the First and the Second World Wars and has shown maturity over the years benefitting mostly the Labour Party and the Conservative Party which are major political parties in the UK. It is also important to consider how Italy has fared for she is considered as an example of relatively unstable coalition governments. The Italian experience can provide a good learning experience for the emerging and young coalition governments. The Italian politicians can only blame themselves for a fragile nature of its coalition governments for they do not have a framework deliberated on long before elections and it usually is a scramble of uncoordinated ideas put together on the eve of elections and sometimes negotiations going beyond the elections.

The Malaysian perspective provides experience of GNU from the minority and ethnic groups’ point of view. Although many politicians do not see the value in engaging the electorate about GNU, it is proven that the electorate has certain perspectives about coalition governments in general.

A peculiar example of Zimbabwean Government of National Unity after 2008 is worth mentioning in this discussion. What makes it peculiar is that this GNU was not as a result of no party having outright victory of the elections as is usually the case with the majority of the GNU arrangements. Infact Robert Mugabe claimed an 85% victory at the polls, however the Zimbabwean economic crises forced the African Union to recommend an establishment of mediation of the GNU which was led by the then President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki. This resulted into the GNU of Mugabe (Zanu PF), Mutambara (MDC) and Tsvangirai (MDC-T).

The Kenyan experience of GNU from 2008-2013 is also unique because it was established following the disputed presidential elections of 2007 which was marred by violence resulting into the death of 1000 civilians and displaced a lot of Kenyans to neighbouring countries. Kofi Anan, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, obviating further bloodshed, and supported by East African leaders, mediated a GNU agreement that was signed in 2008.

South African GNU is the latest edition resulting from a heavily contested 2024 elections where the African National Congress (ANC) lost the majority and obtained only 40% necessitating that they approach other political parties to co-govern.

## **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The main aim of the study was to do a comparative analysis of the Government of National Unity (GNU) of the United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa. The objectives of the study were to:

- Review literature about the Government of National Unity (GNU).
- Compare countries in Europe, Asia and Africa (United Kingdom, Italy, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa).
- Recommend how the GNU can be improved to be more effective and efficient in the delivery of its mandate.

## **Literature Review**

### **Definition of the Government of National Unity (GNU)**

Many scholars define the Government of National Unity (GNU) from different context or perspectives. Matebese, et. al. (2024) define GNU as a form of government formed when a single party is prohibited from governing independently, often due to election outcomes or crisis induced diversity. The word “prohibited” is used cautiously here because in the first instance it relates to a situation where the electorate deliberately spreads its votes such that there is no single party that gets the majority of the votes. In the second instance, just like in Zimbabwe, GNU can be as a result of a negotiated settlement to avoid further conflicts even if there was a party that received the majority of the votes but for the sake of peace, they are forced to form government with other opposition parties. Mapuva (2010) believes that political rivalries have the potential to bury the hatchet and work together for the common good of the nation in a GNU.

Emerson (2016) defines GNU as a coalition that comprises the majority of political parties and interests represented in the legislature. Many scholars confirm that there is a distinction between the GNU and coalition government, the former being more of a nation-building and creation of peace and stability and the latter (coalition) focusing more on parties getting together to take over power.

### **Characteristics of the GNU**

Matebese et. al. (2024) provide the following characteristics of the GNU:

- A broad representation of political parties: GNU tries to internalise as many political actors as possible, which often entails reaching out to both the incumbent and opposition parties. This representation implies that all possible political groups within a specific state might be interested in the governance process.
- The allocation of ministerial positions in GNU arrangements is a product of negotiation among the participating parties: These positions are intended to reflect the power balance of the respective parties involved in the GNU.
- Consensus-based decision-making processes: The majority rule is not applicable in the GNUs since they adopt a consensus in all situations.

- Frequently, temporary ad hoc governance structures are created with particular and restricted terms of reference to tackle issues like national reconciliation, legislative processes, or economic revitalisation.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of the GNU

It should be pointed out that the GNU is always a makeshift and a form of government based on some kind of compromise, therefore bound to have some advantages and disadvantages.

### Advantages of the GNU

The following are some of the advantages of the GNU:

- It allows and forces the political parties that did not win the elections with outright majority to work together.
- It increases transparency because such parties are able to share and compare their manifestos.
- It is likely to promote social cohesion since parties working together may be representing divergent segments of the population.
- GNUs have a potential of resolving political crises such as the electoral disputes and electoral violence.
- It can also help in entrenching and deepening democracy and consensus building,
- It also helps in promoting positive investor confidence.

### Disadvantages of the GNU

The following are some of the disadvantages of the GNU:

- 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 deadlocks on particular 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.
- Some electoral constituencies can perceive the GNU as betrayal of their mandate that they gave to different political parties during the elections.

Bergman, et. al. (2024) maintain that one of the primary challenges encountered by parties in GNUs is the dilemma of formulating policies collectively and mitigating the risk of policy stalemates. It becomes very difficult to merge policies of different political parties in countries such as South Africa where political parties are still aligned along different racial or tribal groups or class. It then becomes very difficult for an urban political party for the elite to support pro-poor policies. In many cases congruence of policy positions is attained through coalition agreements however many scholars characterize these agreements as mere verbal commitments due to their lack of legal enforceability (Bergman, et. al. 2024).

## Framework for Coalitions

Modern politics has proven that the major political parties that have been enjoying the majority votes during elections have experienced dwindling support and the electorate seems to be voting more with their heads than their hearts and this has increased chances of coalition governments at all levels of government. The South African local government elections of 2016 resulted in many hung municipalities which then necessitated that the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) assisted by

Beukes and de Visser (2021) develop a Framework for Coalitions in Local Government. Whilst this Framework maybe more relevant to local government it is equally relevant and applicable in the provincial and national government elections hence the need for its discussion here.

## **Coalition Agreements**

Before any coalition discussion, there should be a draft agreement to be adopted by coalition partners and that will be the point of reference when engaging on the coalition negotiations. It should set out procedures that will be followed for decision-making and also pave a way for draft policy positions broadly. It should also, most importantly, provide for resolution of conflict and must provide the terms and conditions for behaviour and conduct of coalition partners.

## **Structuring the negotiation process**

Ideally negotiations for coalitions should start way before elections. After the elections, parties should be finding a common ground in terms of their election manifestos and the programme of action once in government. It is at this point that parties should also present what concessions and compromises they are prepared to make. It is always advisable that there should be a mediator who will facilitate the negotiations and help narrow down differences. Once the political parties agree in principle to get into a coalition arrangement, they should then agree on a policy programme, agree on how the positions will be distributed and also agree on the mechanism to resolve the disputes.

## **Consideration of the Local Input**

There is generally an outcry that when parties start engaging on coalition talks, they do not consult communities or the electorate that voted them into power. This then creates animosity with the electorate and coalitions end up not being supported by the people on the ground. Parties should preferably start talking about possible coalitions whilst they are campaigning and delivering their manifestos to their supporters and also should give feedback to the electorate during the coalition negotiations. Equally, members of the political parties should also be consulted, and party leaders should ensure that they get a mandate from them. More often than not, coalition talks are done by party leaders leaving out the views of the party members.

## **Development of a Policy Programme**

The Policy Programme should be the first document to be discussed by the coalition partners and should set out what the coalition government sets to achieve over the coalition period. It should be based on the negotiated integrated manifestos of the coalition partners and be aligned with the challenges faced by communities in general. It is important as well that coalition partners should consider the unfinished business of the previous administration and incorporate it in the new programme of action.

## **Distribution of Political Positions**

Contestation of political positions has proven to be one source of disagreements amongst coalition partners and in most cases the number of positions will be increased to accommodate the interests of the coalition partners. This challenge is also exacerbated by the fact that some political parties would want certain portfolios that they think are strategic for them. For example, in the South African context, a political party that campaigned very strongly in traditional areas would want a Ministry of Cooperative Government and Traditional Affairs to fulfil the promises they made during the campaign. When distributing political positions, political parties should consider knowledge, skills and experience of their incumbents.

## **Public Servants and Coalitions**

Coalition partners may be tempted to include staff matters in the coalition agreements and this includes the appointment of staff. Whilst it is understood that there could be deployment in some positions, it will not be appropriate to include discussions on the appointment of staff. In fact, it will be illegal to include the subject in a political discussion because such is regulated, and the process is very clear. There is also a very unprofessional conduct by some public servants to begin to position themselves by being closer to the politicians during the times of negotiations so that they could benefit from promotions or appointments to new positions. Public servants should always be apolitical and just focus on doing their job during and beyond negotiations. Equally the act of purging of public servants by some politicians to pave way for their preferred staff is highly unacceptable and should be condemned.

## **Governments of National Unity (GNUs) and Coalition Governments across the world**

Many countries around the world are governed by coalition governments and many of these coalitions are so matured that their governments have mastered the art of co-governing. There are several political reasons for coalition, including but not limited to the need for an interim government after a national crisis, the lack of a single political party with a majority in parliament after national elections (Thinane, 2023).

### **United Kingdom (UK)**

The United Kingdom is perhaps the most prominent (and oldest) example of countries which had to form a coalition or Government of National Unity (GNU) at the time of national crisis of 1930-1940 (Newson, 2011). The Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition has been in existence from 1945 and it is very apparent in the UK that these two parties, being major parties, need each other for coalition since there is a decline of the individual party support. This coalition has always been characterised by what parties termed 'new economy, social renewal and social mobility'. Like most coalitions, political parties have been unable to compromise between each other's favoured options for political reform. It should be pointed out that during the 2019 general elections the Conservatives surprisingly won the elections with a majority shattering the dreams of coalition by taking over several traditional Labour seats.

### **Italy**

Italy is considered an example of relatively unstable governments even though it demonstrates an experience of the Government of National Unity. The Italian coalition government dates back to 1946 where the cabinet was formed by four parties of diverse ideological backgrounds: the centrist Christian Democrats, the centrist Republican Party, the centre-left Socialist Party and the left Communist Party. After the election of 2022, discussions took place between various political parties on forming electoral alliances and distributing seats. What is remarkable about the 2022 elections is that parties had agreed on manifestos beforehand and even though the ballot papers still required voters to vote for their favourable parties within the wider blocs, seats would go to the agreed candidate of the electoral alliance.

It should be noted that within a few months of the electoral pacts there were break-aways even before elections some of which caused by ideological differences such as membership to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In 2022 elections the centre right coalition won 237 of the 400 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 115 out of 200 seats in the Senate. This then marked the shift of the balance of forces and the centre right controlled 18 out of the 20 Italian regions. Meloni (the leader of the centre right) was congratulated and supported by many of the European statesmen because of her support to Ukraine. There were fierce fights about the appointments of ministers which resulted into the new talks post elections after which ministers were equitably distributed.

## Malaysia

The Malaysian experience presents a different perspective in the definition of the Government of National Unity. This is within the context of Amienyi's (2005) definition of national unity as a process that seeks to unite people of different ethnic, culture, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds for reciprocally beneficial goals. Correspondingly, it occurs when people from the same nation think, feel, and care for one another and are willing to sacrifice individual interest for the nation. The question therefore is how many of these Governments of National Unity have the interests of its people at heart. Despite the reality of having a unique multi-ethnic Malaysian society representing different cultures and religions, ethnic diversity has always posed a challenge to national unity. Tajuddin et. al. (2017) looked at how Malaysians constructed or viewed 'national unity' and what they found is that people of Malaysia interpreted 'national unity' as continuous engagement, negotiation, and rejuvenation with them. The conclusion of the study is that the ideal representation of the nation (people of different ethnics) rests on the construction of 'imagined community' where people are ideally projected as practising a harmonious relationship, a living interaction between each other and 'unity' through diversity. The most important lesson from the Malaysian experience is that it cannot be a national unity if it is only for politicians and leaves people behind.

## Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwean Government of National Unity is a good example of a form of government formed as a truce to quell electoral violence. In 2008 Tsvangirai of MDC-T won the elections but could not get sufficient votes (less than 50%) to form government and there was an election re-run. The re-run was going to be between Mugabe and Tsvangirai and the election campaigns were marred by violence which forced Tsvangirai to withdraw from the presidential race which was eventually won by Mugabe uncontested. Both Tsvangirai and international community did not accept Mugabe as a winner. The stalemate led to Southern African Development Community (SADC) to ask former South African President, Thabo Mbeki, to mediate. Talks resulted into the drafting of the new constitution and a new Government of National Unity was formed where Zanu PF retained the positions of President, First Vice President and Second Vice President. The MDC-T occupied the newly created positions of a Prime Minister and Deputy Minister while the MDC-M was provided the second Deputy Prime Minister (Nhede, 2012). This arrangement inevitably favoured Mugabe. The unequal power structure resulted in a government that generated functional problems (Masunungure and Mutasa, 2011).

One contentious issue was the allocation of ministerial positions. There were ministries that were created to balance the equation and there were fierce contests about certain ministries they believed were strategic such as Ministry of Information and Publicity. The administrative structure became blurred and a source of confusion and resulted into delays in decision-making and service delivery (Nhede, 2012). There was no opposition party in Parliament which could provide checks and balances. The quality of debates had deteriorated and only politicking was happening in Parliament and there was no regard of the people of Zimbabwe. The GNU failed to deliver on the election promises because of political polarization. There were accusations and counter-accusations and ministers spent more time on trivial issues which resulted into ill-conceived policies.

The other glaring challenge was that political parties that formed the Government of National Unity were of different political and ideological persuasions e.g. the Zanu PF was pro-Marxist and the MDC-T was more inclined to Western capitalism and Mugabe began to accuse them of being the agents of the Western imperialism.

## Kenya

Kenya is also a very bad example of a country that was forced into coalition government because of the violence that erupted after the 2007 elections and this was worse than that of Zimbabwe, since violence claimed more than 1200 lives and more than 350 000 people were displaced, the majority of them fleeing Kenya. Violence was between the supporters of Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga after the unwelcomed announcement that Kibaki had retained the Presidency. To obviate any further bloodshed a power-sharing agreement facilitated by the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Anan, was reached between the two leaders in 2008 and this was known as Grand Coalition.

On the main, challenges in Kenyan coalition centred around four broad categories or issues. The first one, which is usually characteristic of many coalition governments, was the inability to reach an agreement about composition of the cabinet. The practical interpretation of the agreement was that positions were to be split 50/50 however the mistake made was that the size of the cabinet was not pre-determined but left with the parties to decide. The second area that created uncertainty is coordination across ministries bearing in mind that some ministers were from the opposition, and it became extremely difficult to resolve on matters of common interests. The third area that was a challenge is reaching consensus on policies that would guide the work of the cabinet. In the absence of a strong unifying agenda, ministers would always deadlock and that would affect decision-making. The final challenge was the absence of the script to hold ministers accountable, especially because it was difficult for opposition ministers to support each other's policies.

## South Africa

The South African national and provincial elections of 2024 saw a dip in the votes of the African National Congress (ANC) which failed to amass more than 40% (a decline of 17% from the 2019 elections) of the votes thus necessitating that they could only govern through support of the other parties. Because the ANC had got the majority of the votes, even though they did not get more than 50% of the votes, the ANC President Cyril Ramaphosa invited parties interested in joining the GNU. The ANC, Democratic Alliance (DA) and Patriotic Alliance (PA) published the Statement of Intent (to form the GNU) before the election of the Speaker, Deputy Speaker and the President in the first sitting of Parliament. The position of the Speaker went to the ANC, that of the Deputy Speaker went to the DA and the President was given to the ANC. Other parties such as Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), GOOD, Pan African Congress of Azania (PAC), Vryheidsfront (FF+), United Democratic Movement (UDM), Rise Mzansi and Al Jama-ah later joined the GNU.

According to Beukes, et. al. (2024) the GNU parties committed to the following principles:

- Respect for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights in its entirety, a united South Africa and the rule of law.
- Non-racialism and non-sexism.
- Social justice, redress and equity, and the alleviation of poverty.
- Human dignity and the progressive realisation of socio-economic rights.
- Nation-building, social cohesion and unity in diversity.
- Peace, stability and safe communities, especially for women and children.
- Accountability, transparency and community participation in government.
- Evidence-based policy and decision-making.
- A professional, merit-based, non-partisan, developmental public service that puts people first.
- Integrity, good governance and accountable leadership.

The GNU committed to focusing on the following nine (9) principles:



- Rapid, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, the promotion of fixed capital investment and industrialization, job creation, transformation, livelihood support, land reform, infrastructure development, structural reforms and transformational change, fiscal sustainability and the sustainable use of national resources and endowments.
- Creating a more just society by tackling poverty, spatial inequalities, food security and the high cost of living, providing a social safety net, improving access to and the quality of basic services, and protecting workers' rights.
- Stabilising local government, effective cooperative governance, the assignment of appropriate responsibilities to different spheres of government and review of the role of traditional leadership in the governance framework.
- Investing in people through education, skills development and affordable quality health care.
- Building state capacity and creating a professional, merit-based, corruption-free and developmental public service. Restructuring and improving state-owned entities to meet national developmental goals.
- Strengthening law enforcement agencies to address crime, corruption and gender-based violence as well as strengthening national security capabilities.
- Strengthening the effectiveness of Parliament in respect of its legislative and oversight functions.
- Strengthening social cohesion, nation-building and democratic participation and undertaking common programmes against racism, sexism, tribalism and other forms of intolerance.
- Foreign policy based on human rights, constitutionalism, the national interest, solidarity, peaceful resolution of conflicts, to achieve the African Agenda 2063, South-South, North-South and African cooperation, multilateralism and a just, peaceful and equitable world.

These principles are not far off from the ideals and philosophy of the ANC, and they were contained in their election manifesto.

### ***Research Methodology***

The study was a comparative analysis of the Coalitions or Governments of National Unity of the United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa with a view to establish what could be learnt from these countries. It used qualitative analysis of how these countries formed and managed their coalitions or Governments of National Unity (GNUs).

### ***Findings and Conclusions***

The general definition and understanding of the GNU is that it is a political process, and the main actors and negotiators are the politicians sometimes at the perceived detriment and betrayal of the electorate that voted them into power. All countries studied have had their GNU negotiations at a political level and never included the grassroot levels except Malaysia where the definition of 'national unity' expressly includes the minority and ethnic groups.

Coalition governments are not new and in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) they date back to as early as after the First World War and such experience of coalition has led to maturity and they are managed successfully because of that kind of experience over the years. Many countries that experience coalitions for the first time will have challenges, such as Italy that is considered to have gone through a bad example of coalition. However, what is common amongst the countries that have failed coalitions is that the main contributing factor is poor planning for the coalition.

There are two main reasons that lead to the formation of the coalition government or Government of National Unity (GNU) and these are as a result of no party getting the outright majority of the votes (above 50%) after the elections or when the elections are marred by violence and the GNU is used as peace-creation mechanism even when there is a party that got the majority of the votes and won the elections. The latter happened in Kenya and Zimbabwe after their elections. This kind of GNU is also difficult to preserve and sustain because it is characterised by distrust, and it was never successful in these two countries.

South Africa has gone through the latest edition of the GNU which has also gone through a lot of challenges despite the fact that it has been hailed by the international communities. It should be noted that in this case the olive branch was extended by the ANC to potential partners after it had lost its majority and needed to co-govern with other parties. Some political parties decided to be opposition and began to poke holes in the GNU which then derailed the focus of the GNU partners. The GNU was generally viewed by the opposition as the betrayal of the electorate in general and black people specifically since it was perceived as playing into the hands of the political parties (of the right) who were part of the apartheid regime. When the GNU partners differed on the legislation such as Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill (BELA), critics were quick to say the DA for example was against those sections of the legislation that favoured the black learners. The GNU has also been characterised by threats of some partners to pull out and that has created instability and fear for starting all over again.

## ***Recommendations***

The Framework for Coalitions which has been discussed as part of the theoretical review provides a good basis for the recommendations that can improve the coalition government or GNU. The Framework makes the following recommendations which are also adapted to this study:

- Parties should draft coalition agreements to be adopted by coalition partners.
- Coalition talks should start before the elections preferably mediated by an independent facilitator.
- The electorate or party supporters should be kept abreast of the coalition discussions and should give the mandate to the parties.
- Coalition partners should develop a neutral programme of action.
- Political positions should be distributed fairly, and consideration of experience, skills and knowledge should be a priority.
- Public servants should be apolitical during and beyond the negotiations.

## ***Conclusion***

The study was a comparative analysis of coalitions and Governments of National Unity (GNUs) of the United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa. Literature that was reviewed consisted of the definition, characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of the coalition governments. It also included the Framework for Coalitions that is proposed to be used by countries that get into coalition governments. The findings suggest that there are common problems with coalitions across all countries therefore it is highly recommended that there should be a Framework developed to guide the Coalitions process.

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