

FOREIGN DESK

Sharing the spoils

A marked increase in the number of disputed African elections has seen a rise in the prevalence of coalition governments. Bhekinkosi Moyo wonders whether they are the happy families they claim to be?



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Africa is struggling to come to grips with the concept of power-sharing. Along with the return of military intervention and the abuse of religion, power-sharing arrangements seem to be growing in popularity.

Whether they're called unity governments, governments of national unity (GNU) or inclusive governments – the engineering of consociational administrations following the outcomes of disputed elections is becoming cause for concern.

Proponents of such arrangements often cite South Africa's GNU and its subsequent Truth and Reconciliation Commission as an example of a successful negotiation. What they do not say is that the South African model was crafted and agreed upon before elections were even held. In other instances (Kenya and Zimbabwe being the latest) disgruntled politicians lose elections and resort to violence in order to retain or illegally assume power.

And it's not as complicated as we are led to believe. It's actually very simple: leaders are refusing to subject themselves to their constitutions and the laws governing elections.

I could not have said it better than Ayi Kwei Armah when he wrote in *New African*: 'For many dreaming of making it into the good life, the power of the incumbent politician looks like the greatest escape of all. As the extractive economy shrinks, while populations and needs increase, African states increasingly resemble crowded chambers losing oxygen. In such an atmosphere, political power becomes the most visible lifeline left. Members of the ruling party are the lucky bozos manning the oxygen tank.'

In the Netherlands, consociationalism has been practiced to deal with divided societies' conflicts since as early as 1917.

This phenomenon has been spread across the world, particularly through the works of Arendt Lijphart.

South Africa, Kenya and Zimbabwe are not the only advocates of consociational governments in Africa. Other countries that have resorted to power-sharing include Rwanda, DRC, Sudan, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Burundi and now Madagascar.

What distinguishes them from the rest is their narrow fixation on executive power-sharing as opposed to the other broader elements of proportionality, minority veto and segmental autonomy.

Consociational engineers often argue that in divided societies, majoritarian democracy is akin to dictatorship. As a result, power-sharing is often posited as the solution – as a way to apportion political power and prevent the violence that normally accompanies disputes.

This is very far from the reality though. In more than 15 peace accords that have been negotiated across Africa, only Burundi can be regarded as stable today. But even so, this could change easily. Critics argue that promoting a consociational governance system is de facto and de jure, creating an incentive for rebels to claim a stake in power-sharing settlements. In other words, it pays to be a rebel.

In August, I attended a presentation by a Zimbabwean minister on the challenges facing the country's inclusive government. Listening to him, I could not but conclude that power cannot be shared and managed collectively. Resorting to power-sharing does not address the fundamental causes of conflict. Instead it exacerbates them.

I argue that power-sharing is only useful in so far as it stops societies going to hell; however, it cannot take them to heaven. Our aim should be to restructure power rather than share it.

The problem in Africa is not that of deeply divided societies for which consociationalism was designed – Africa's problems are of governance. **AD**