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COALITION GOVERNMENTS IN THE SADC REGION: A CASE STUDY OF THE GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY IN ZIMBABWE

The nature and fate of coalition governments on the African continent is evidence of the fact that the very idea of such governments is new in the African polity. At the heart of some of the failures of coalition governments on the continent is the lack of a substantial blueprint that could guide the ideological and pragmatic approach to how such governments ought to be constructed and consolidated. Kadima (2006) makes the contention that one of the reasons the phenomenon has not been given greater attention by African scholars is that many of them do not see value in studying coalitions, in part due to the hegemonic power that has historically been wielded by former national liberation movements turned governing parties. In the limited instances where studies on coalition governments have been conducted, it has largely been at a point where these former national liberation movements have begun to haemorrhage electoral support and to have their very legitimacy challenged by citizens, as was the case with the formation of the Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe. The implication of such an approach is that coalition governments are largely studied post-mortem. And while this is important in so far as providing reflections on how these governments were constituted, the observations of those who were part of them and the citizenry that experienced them, as well as their overall effectiveness, it often pays little attention to the theoretical orientations of these governments.

These orientations matter because it is in understanding them that we can make sense of how effective and sustainable coalition governments can be built. This will go a long way in mitigating the circumstances that resulted in the collapse of nearly all coalition governments in South African metropolitan municipalities following the 2016 local government elections, and the seeming unsustainability of governments of national unity within the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region. But in setting parameters for this approach, it remains necessary to study the histories of coalition governments in the region, both in terms of the conditions that gave rise to them and their effectiveness in service delivery and other important objectives of government.

Zimbabwe and the Government of National Unity

Making sense of the legacy of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Zimbabwe is a complex exercise that demands more than a simple study of the literature that has been generated by scholars and practitioners who were involved in the implementation of this government. It is an exercise that also demands conversation with ordinary Zimbabwean people who were the biggest stakeholders in this GNU. For this reason, it was necessary to visit the country to engage not only the key political players who were part of the GNU process, but with ordinary people whose experiences of it matter more. Some of these experiences are captured in this chapter and reflect the profound ways in which the re-imagining of forms of government has the potential to bring about stability and rebuild trust in the very institution of government that in many parts of the region, including South Africa, is experiencing a serious trust deficit. To understand the GNU in Zimbabwe, it is important to reflect briefly on the historical material conditions that set parameters for its existence and necessity.

Zimbabwe's History of Conflict

The GNU in Zimbabwe was established in 2009 based on the Global Political Agreement (GPA), a power-sharing agreement that closed a chapter on years of political instability and conflict between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the main opposition party in Zimbabwe. For nearly a decade, ZANU-PF and the MDC had a relationship characterised by violent political rivalry. In response to the growing support that the MDC was receiving largely from civil society activists, the trade union and labour movement, intellectuals and the urban population, ZANU-PF responded by unleashing a campaign of dispensing violence against opposition. Mutisi (2011) contends that the cardinal factors that contributed to this conflict were ideological posture, power, governance, and resource distribution. But beyond the unstable political environment that this rivalry created, it also had devastating socio-economic consequences for Zimbabwe. It resulted in "increased rates of unemployment, growing levels of poverty and declining life expectancy rates affecting the populace" (Mutisi, 2011:2) and set parameters for other forms of systematic violence as well as the erosion of the legitimacy of democratic institutions that became entangled in the conflict.

That the conflict between the ZANU-PF and the MDC was ideological is evidenced in the language that the two parties used in characterising each other. The latter had always described the MDC as a "puppet of the West". In a rally televised by state media back in June 2003, the late former president, Robert Mugabe, reacting to the arrest of late MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, stated that "The puppet of the West deserves jail time" (*Independent News*, 2003). It had always been a contention of the ZANU-PF that the leading opposition party was a surrogate of Britain tasked with orchestrating a