

## **Coalition Governments' Place in Edmund Burke's Political Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

*The 21<sup>st</sup> century ushered in a new political phenomenon to Africa: coalition governments. These are formed by different political parties in countries with a history of only one party forming the government. In some cases these coalition governments are a creature of provisions that are not even part of the countries' constitutions but are created specifically to allow progress. This study analyses this new occurrence in line with Edmund Burke's political philosophy (1729 – 1797) using interviews and document reviews. Edmund Burke wrote against radical revolutions; defending what is old, what is conventional and what is long established. As such this supports the conservation and continuation of history. This study analysed this philosophy against the coalition governments. The findings place coalition governments as a big yes and a big no to Edmund Burke. Coalition governments'; preserve history on one hand, whilst eroding the very fundamentals that Edmund Burke sought to defend on the other. As a recommendation the researcher put forward that contemporary politics have a lot to learn from history as much as history has to learn from contemporary politics.*

**Key Words:** Edmund Burke, Coalition, Revolution, Change, Institutions and Opposition Politics

### **1. Introduction**

African politics of late has taken a spectacular twist with the coming in of coalition governments. This has given a chance to the usually opposition party members to be part of the government. However the intricacies of how a coalition government come into being are not to be fully explored in this study. This researcher found it interesting to study on a topic that an opposition Member of Parliament wrote about over three centuries ago. Jones (1967:330) argues that, 'Burke was an active politician and an opposition member, not only of Parliament where he sat for many years, but of the age. He saw the period of transition in England as undermining the constitution.' There was and still is pessimism in some spheres that the transition from old system is not good. Coalition governments in Africa have come mostly in countries that had long established governments under a single party. In Zimbabwe, for example, the Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party has been at the helm forming government since 1987-2007. Two decades is long enough a period and suits to be called an established system. Kenya's also witnessed a coalition government from 2008 to 2013 after years with one party dominating. This write-up commences with some insights into Edmund Burke's theory. This leads into the presentation of findings showing that coalition governments violate Edmund Burke's ideas. Subsequently following this is the section presenting findings drawing coalition governments as affirming Edmund Burke's ideas. The conclusion and recommendations from the study will be found after all these sections.

### **2. Theoretical Underpinnings to the Study**

According to Turner (2013) the publication of the book, Reflections on the Revolution in France by Burke 'followed the events when France had moved from a divine right to a constitutional monarchy. This involved several changes in the traditional social orders and adoption of new bills, like the Adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.' As such this shows that there are issues around changes in the constitution that follow any change of type of government. The coming in of Coalition Government in Zimbabwe saw the drive for the change of the constitution. Obviously this was informed by the idea that apparatus to ensure the continued grip of power by the old regime are enshrined in the constitution.

Turner (2013) posits that Burke observed, 'within a year all major political, administrative, and religious institutions of France had undergone radical change.'

The same comes out of the analysis of the changes that were ushered in by the coming in of Coalition Governments in Africa. In Zimbabwe several changes occurred to the constitution and structure of government. However, this was not proper, for Burke, who was 'vigorously defending' existing institutions. Burke 'defended a social and political status quo that we today find largely indefensible' (ibid). This is very ironical when compared to opposition politicians of today.

Usually it is the opposition politicians who advocate for change and it is very surprising why Burke sought the preservation of the existing institutions. Maybe, at this point this study can take a stand point that he was an unbiased censor of the system. This led to the conclusion that he, on one end, supports and, on the other hand, rejects some of the notions being brought to the African politics by coalition governments.

### ***3. Coalition governments as a refusal of Edmund Burke's ideas.***

#### **3.1 There is a danger of spill over effects of internal events to the commonwealth**

Boucher and Kelly (2009:282) posit that Burke 'was concerned not only with the effect that the French Revolution might have on internal affairs of England, but just as importantly with its effects upon the common heritage of Europe, which for him constituted one large commonwealth with a shared inheritance resting on the principles of a gentleman and of religion.' The same has manifested in Africa especially at Africa Union (AU) level. The AU was founded on Pan African principles with the drivers being revolutionaries of repute. The coming of these coalition governments is now a disturbance on this 'commonwealth' as previously only like minded people had been part of the governments of all the countries in Africa. The internal affairs of Africa are now in quandary as the leaders are now coming from groups with dissimilar political ideologies: Those who seek to preserve and those who seek change.

According to Jones (1967; 333) 'Burke clearly saw, that the French revolution could not be accomplished without serious repercussions in every country in Europe. He saw with alarm that there were not lacking in his country admirers and would be emulators of the events occurring across the channel.' This scenario has replicated itself in Africa. The coming in of coalition governments in Africa has ushered in what we would want to call 'coalition wave'. It seems now that almost every country has found it to be the best alternative after an election. Surprisingly of late most election results do not produce an absolute winner. The few that are close to defining the winner are disputed and rejected. The end result now is to seek refuge in the coalition government. To date the following countries have coalition governments: Algeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Senegal and Zimbabwe; a clear sign of spill over effects.

According to Boucher and Kelly (2009:297) this is happening 'because states are members of the larger family of states, what they do cannot go unheeded by their neighbours. In other words, what happens within the borders of one state cannot be a matter of indifference to another.' Burke therefore became sceptical of the French revolution. Once successful The French revolution was going to set precedence and this is exactly what has also happened in Africa with the coalition governments. It has now become the on-the-spot solution in almost every case. Correctly Freedom of Press (2011) has observed that 'power sharing or none zero sum politics is rapidly becoming one of the political flavours of the century.'

#### **3.2 Institutions are more important than aims**

Burke disapproved the idea of achieving liberty using wrong institutions. The revolutionaries' aim was to bring greater achievement of liberty in France. However according to Jones (1967:333), 'the liberty aimed at by the revolutionists, and so enticing to some Englishmen, seemed to Burke only a caricature of real freedom.' The revolution seemed to Burke a failure in everything of value in politics. The condition of the institutions through which liberty was to be attained was supposed to meet security, peace, prosperity among others which are also desirable. The same criticism has been proffered for coalition governments. According to the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) on <http://www.thezimbabweann.co.uk/human-rights>, 'the emerging concept of coalition governments in Africa is an anathema to democracy and the citizens' right to choose their own government.' This goes back to Burke's idea that it is not democracy that people should worry about, but the institutions that are being used to bring democracy. Democracy cannot be pursued through institutions founded on undemocratic structures like the coalition governments. They override the right of the individual to choose a government.

Coalition governments in Africa have, at times, brought on board people who never even contested in elections. In Zimbabwe, for example, in the 2008 elections the key contestants were Robert G Mugabe (ZANU-PF candidate), Morgan R Tsvangirai (MDC-T candidate) and Simba Makoni (Mavambo-Khusile-Dawn candidate). However by the time when the coalition government was effected, Simba Makoni did not become part of the government. Instead out of nowhere came Auther G Mutambara (MDC), a faction that did not field a presidential candidate in the election in question. As such confirming Burke's fears that the desire for change once pursued using wrongly founded institutions will not fulfil the intended goals.

For Burke the institution holds a higher place than the aim. Once the institution is long established its aims become valuable and directed. The coalition governments in this case are a recent creation which means its aims will leave a lot to be desired as compared to the predecessor systems.

### **3.3 Coalition governments fail to preserve the existing constitution**

Some of the exploits of the coalition governments still do not fit in Burke's philosophy. Foremost the coalition governments seem to have made it their main objective to change the constitution. Burke revered the constitution. Jones (1967:341) quotes Burke as saying 'our constitution stands on a nice equipoise with steep precipices and deep waters upon all sides of it. In removing it from a dangerous leaning towards one side, there may be a risk of oversetting it on the other.' He was appreciating that a constitution can never be the best possible but was against changing the constitution. Burke was worried about the danger of 'oversetting' the constitution on the other side. This has been evident especially in the constitution making process in Zimbabwe. The ZANU-PF party was more interested in preserving it as it was whilst the MDC-T, MDC-M and most civil groups pushed for the democratisation of the constitution.

New issues that were previously unheard of in the history of Zimbabwe became topical during in the constitution making process. Jones (1967:360) argues that Burke forewarned about this, 'We may see some "crying evil" in existing conditions and desire to do something about it. What we do not see is that any fundamental change in this single respect will have repercussions such as mutually dependant nature of the world- all along the line.' In Zimbabwe's constitution making process the new issues became hurdles leading to a long road of tug of war in the constitution making process. The issue of homosexuality, devolution of powers, and running mate among others stood up as the sticking points in the constitution. Burke was afraid that changing the constitution will lead to some extremities coming in. Due to the drive towards democracy, greater tolerance and winds of globalisation, 'unAfrican' issues sneaked their way into the proposed Zimbabwean constitution. This will lead to a drastic change not only of the constitution but of the culture also. As such these exploits of the coalition governments with parties founded on different ideologies lead to the dangers that Burke predicted. The danger is real therefore coalition governments become a 'big no' to Burke. Jones (1967:341) expresses Burke's in this quotation: 'Every project of a material change in a government so complicated as ours, combined at the same time with external circumstances still more complicated as ours, is a matter full of difficulties: in which a considerate man will not be too ready to decide; a prudent man too ready to undertake; or an honest man too ready to promise.' Thus these hurdles in the constitution making process became imminent because of these complications.

According to Jones (1967:360) this explains Burke's distrust of the French Revolution; he feared that any large scheme of reform, 'however noble in motive, because it involves a radical alteration of existing institutions and of customary patterns of behaviour its novelty would be a fatal stumbling block...the scheme will inevitably fail, and the old institutions under which men lived being destroyed, nothing remains to preserve order but the use of force and terror.' This scenario is yet to manifest itself to that very bad extent but the elements are already propping up in Zimbabwe. Despite agreeing to the new constitution there is evidence of usurpation of powers especially by the executive. Since the executive do not have any refuge as the apparatus that used to protect it are destroyed by the new constitution, use of force and terror surely becomes inevitable.

In Zimbabwe the issue of the Service Chiefs became very topical because as it is this becomes the only guarantee to staying in power of the old regime. Why is the scenario like that? Jones (1967:362) asserts, 'It is not, Burke thinks, that the liberty sought by the revolutionists is valueless. Liberty is a noble ideal, but it is dangerous, it is not practical. Of course liberty is valuable; but so are other things as well: security and property for instance.' So the issue of a coalition government now fails to fit into Burke's philosophy again. The ideologies of the parties remain at loggerheads and thus incompatible.

This is so because ‘it may be that the institutions of the ancient regime were deficient in liberty but in a slow, gradual growth by trial and error, by adaptation to circumstances, a form of government had developed which, if not perfect, at least took account of, and in a measure achieved, a variety of goods’ (ibid: 362). Therefore there are people who will go all the way to defend it at all cost.

#### **4. Coalition governments as a Yes to Burke.**

##### **4.1 Gradual change is desirable than sudden change**

There is need to appreciate that the pace and force at which change comes has a bearing on the results. Change can be sudden or gradual.

According to Jones (1967:333), ‘Burke’s real thesis against the Revolution is that, however noble their aims, disaster can be only the outcome of a sudden and violent overthrow of existing institutions and of the age-old traditions by a group of visionary and impractical idealists without any political experience.’ The view of some respondents to this research was that it is here where Burke’s ideas support coalition governments the most. Burke’s scepticism against a radical revolution has been categorically stated that it was because he hated the ‘sudden and violent’ nature of it. The coalition governments have come in as an answer. They usher in gradual change. There is no overnight change over from the experienced to the amateurs. The countries that so far have formed coalition governments have seen those ‘juveniles’ in government working with the old and vice versa.

In Zimbabwe the provisions of the Global Political Agreement ensured that in every ministry the Minister and the Deputy Ministers came from different parties. This clearly avoids the sudden change that Burke was pessimistic about. This agrees with the observation that Boucher and Kelly (2009:284) made; ‘Burke was not against revolution *per se*. He supported the glorious and bloodless revolution because it restored some of the principles that James the Second had supported.’ The experience so far has shown that coalition governments’ in fact restore most principles and ensure that most good principles that were already in place on paper are fully implemented.

##### **4.2 Coalition governments reinforce restraints**

A mixed government has a characteristic of having active restraints. This works as ‘checks’ in the current scenario of the coalition governments. Burke also observed the same scenario occurring during his time. According to Jones (1967:337) Burke posits that ‘one great end undoubtedly of a mixed Government like ours composed of monarchy and of controls, on the part of the higher people and the lower, is that the prince shall not be able to violate the laws.’ By ‘prince’ he meant the equivalent of the executive in the present day. The absence of representatives from across the political divide that was prevalent in Africa has always been criticised as being unfavourable to separation of powers. The branches of government theoretically work as checks and balance on their own but, in reality, loyalty calls the tune in African politics. There is no way any arm of government can question the ‘prince’s’ transgressions if the government is composed of people from the same party. The party ticket will take precedence. As such that ‘great end’ that Burke saw in a mixed government is consistent with one of the advantages of a coalition government. In a coalition government the parties usually work very hard to outdo each other. Since this will be a temporary arrangement the parties will try to impress for the next round of elections. Therefore all the groups in the government tread very carefully lest the other group will call it a feast when it slips.

##### **4.3 Coalition governments as reflection of the image of nation**

For a government to be called properly constituted it must reflect the true image of the nation. This is because the government stands as a formation of representatives of the whole population. The assumption is that these representatives know of the needs of the people from their respective constituencies. The government is not there for its good but for the good of the people. As such it should be constituted to enable all the variations of the nation to be effectively represented. For Burke ‘the virtue, spirit and essence of a House of Commons consist in its being the express image of the feelings of the nation’ (Jones; 1967:338). The view of this researcher is that this also points to the need for a coalition government. In many scenarios the rationale of elections as democracy measure has been defeated as they have been used to perpetuate tyranny of the majority. These issues of tyranny of the majority pertinent in a democracy were observed in America by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859).

Tyranny of the majority has ‘a danger peculiar to democracy, in which the psycho- logical dynamics of democratic society cause the emergence of a stultifying sameness in public opinion and an unwillingness of the majority to tolerate difference’ (Boucher and Kelly; 2009:363). Of which the reality is that the people’s desires, ideologies and other defining characteristics cannot be homogeneous. These differences are not addressed when the government is formed after the winners are determined by getting the majority votes in election. Welch in Boucher and Kelly (2009:367) further explain Tocqueville’s unease on democracy highlighting that, ‘In a society where there is no higher appeal than majority opinion, there is strong desire to abdicate responsibility for contributing to that opinion and simply to conform to its dictates. When the majority makes up its mind once and for all, everyone falls silent, and friends and enemies alike seemingly hitch themselves to its chariot.’ Although Tocqueville did not suggest a coalition government as prescription, it has addressed this anomaly.

In a coalition government even the minority get a chance to be represented. This makes more sense in that the majority will is not necessarily always right. In fact this is what Rousseau (1712-1778) brings out in the definition of the general will in Hoffman and Fidler (1991:114). ‘The general will is more than the sum of individual wills because it is the reflection of the common good and not the interests of particular groups.’ Thus coalition governments address not only the issue of representing everyone than the previously single party formed governments but also the general will. In Kenya, according to [San Francisco Chronicle](#) (16 July 2008), ‘Kibaki and Odinga- then agreed to parcel out top government posts among their allies and expand the Cabinet from 34 ministries to 41 to better represent Kenya’s ethnic groups.’ So the idea that Burke had of having a house of common ‘that reflects the image of the nation’ was then effectively addressed.

In the case of Zimbabwe, basing on the election results of 2008, the better part of Matabeleland voted in favour of MDC-M. However this party was the least popular party at country level. The worst part is that it did not even have a presidential candidate contestant, having decided to support the Simba Makoni led MKD party. In the absence of coalition government the will of the majority will have been imposed even on these people from Matabeleland. The coalition government saw the coming on board of members from MDC to be part of the government. At the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) ZANU-PF contributed 15 ministers and 10 deputy ministers, MDC-T 15 ministers and 7 deputy ministers and MDC-M 3 ministers and 2 deputy ministers. For the Ministers of State the parties got 5, 2 and 1 respectively. In this case this study is of the position that the coalition government becomes a big yes in Burke’s philosophy as it reflects clearly the image of the nation.

## **5. Conclusion**

There are other ideas that stem from Burke’s philosophy that do not give any tolerance to coalition governments and any changes they may bring along. For Burke the society is not about the living only. Boucher and Kelly (2009:293) posit that ‘Society is indeed a contract...it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.’ This brings the idea that no changes should be permissible as the living only form part; a small one for that matter, of the contract. The coming in of the coalition governments mean there is a shift from what the dead would have perceived as the ideal. However an interesting transgression of the mind will argue that even the dead of our time changed some things that those who died before them had set. It becomes obvious that every generation, at one point, goes against the previous generation’s standards. As such the coalition government is just a transgression of this generation which, with time will also evolve to become the history not to be transgressed against. Since these coalition governments are now a reality no future generation will not take heed of their contribution because irrespective of the reason or rationale of their creation, they have served a useful social purpose. The way we cherish what we inherited is the same way the future generation will cherish these coalition governments knowing that they embody the collective wisdom of the parties that formed them.

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