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Spirit of unity in a divided nation: A Pentecostal theological analysis of South Africa's government of national unity

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Background: The Republic of South Africa entered its second government of national unity (GNU) 31 years after its 1994 independence, amid a polarised political landscape. Drawing on the 'Unity' from the GNU, this interdisciplinary research investigates how Pentecostal theology of unity can reimagine national cohesion in South Africa.

Objectives: This article situates Pentecostal theology of unity as both a religious and socio-political force that can foster cohesion and moral vision. Drawing on scriptural, theological and socio-political studies, this article interrogates the tensions between theological and political unity. It further examines the theological resources that inform Pentecostal understanding of unity, such as prophetic witness.

Methods: The study adopted a qualitative methodology to explore the interdisciplinary dialogue of unity between theology and politics, as well as qualitative content analysis of theological texts and public statements, to assess how spirit-led unity relates to governance ethics and their relevance to post-political collaboration.

Results: The findings reveal that the Pentecostal theology of unity provides a critique of power-driven political and moral vision that is inclusive of all South Africans.

Conclusion: The study presented Pentecostal theology of unity as a tool to foster cohesion in the current GNU in South Africa. It provides a theological framework for understanding the need of Pentecostalism in politics, especially the GNU.

Contribution: By placing Pentecostal theology of unity as a socio-political force, this article extends Pentecostal theology into a domain of political evaluation, enriching theology and governance in South Africa. This study revealed that Pentecostal theology of unity through the gifts of the Holy Spirit is parallel to the goals and principles of the GNU.

Keywords: democracy; government; Pentecostal; politics; theology; unity.

Introduction

South Africa is still in conflict wrestling with divisions rooted in the country's political and social history. The state that stood divided for hundreds of years, fighting on opposite lines, is now in marriage. What others may have perceived as impossible happened again. These political parties: African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance, GOOD Party, Inkatha Freedom Party, Patriotic Alliance and other small political parties joined in government of national unity (GNU) (Maswanganyi 2025:2). Government of national unity is a coalition that is formed when the country is in crises to foster unity and stability (Vilakati & Bently 2024:28). This formation is a result of public distrust, unfulfilled promise of democracy and uncertainty among other concerns (Ofusori 2024b:2). The GNU was formed following the ruling party, ANC losing its majority votes. On the 29th of May 2024, South Africa held its sixth elections since 1994. The transition from the apartheid regime to democratic rule was the most significant political transformation of the 21st century worldwide. Similarly, the 2024 GNU marked a significant shift in South Africa's political landscape. Sebola and Tsheola (2024:1) describe the GNU as a conceptual masterstroke. This formation is designed to heal a racially and politically divided nation. Political analysts have evaluated the establishment of this GNU and assessed its challenges and opportunities; however, less attention has been given to how religious principles and paradigms, particularly the Pentecostal understanding of unity, can be used to foster nation building in this governance.

Pentecostalism is a significant force that has grown significantly in South Africa since the 20th century (Resane 2022:1). It has become a pivotal force in Christian ethical frameworks and critique. It will be used to address the GNU's challenges. This article presents an opportunity or alternative for a reimagined unity through Pentecostal theology. Pentecostalism, through its understanding of unity and the Holy Spirit, provides the GNU with an opportunity for theological evaluation. Pentecostal theology shifts unity that is understood as a political agreement to framing it as a spiritual and ethical ground.

Historical background of the government of national unity of South Africa

South Africa was under the apartheid regime that was instituted from 1948 to 1994 (Mikel-Arieli 2022). This regime created a racially divided nation through its segregation system and inequality structure. The South African government was receiving international pressure and resistance from within the country in 1990, making apartheid unsustainable. The ANC, National Party (NP) and other political parties engaged in negotiations for the 1994 GNU (Takalani & Maemu 2025:317). The GNU was officially formed on the 27th of April 1994 after the first democratic elections, with Nelson Mandela of the ANC becoming the President and F.W. de Klerk of the NP as Deputy President. One of the rationales of this GNU was the reconciliation of a divided nation. This GNU, however, faced challenges. Despite its desire for reconciliation, it faced further divisions, driven by ideological incoherence, economic differences, and existing mistrust. The GNU often sidelined and masked the injustices that were unsolved.

The unity in the GNU illustrates cohesion, collaboration and working together. Pentecostal theology of unity illustrates the same. The divisions South Africa was facing did not end with the apartheid regime. In 1994, when democracy was established, arguably in paper, social and economic developments were a fundamental priority of the state. Still, corruption and failure to govern the country strained social cohesion and unity. Issues within the government and the country as a whole have worsened (Kotze 2024:2). Political killings, competition between political parties, poor service delivery and other socio-economic issues have created mistrust and a lack of confidence, hindering cooperation and unity.

Research methods and design

Theoretical framework

This study adopts a qualitative methodology using desktop study, relying on existing literature to examine the concept of unity within South Africa's GNU through a Pentecostal theological perspective. Desktop study suits this study because it allows the researcher to critically analyse already published academic, theological and policy-related materials without collecting primary data. A systematic keyword search strategy was employed to find relevant literature across academic databases, including Google Scholar, Journal Storage (JSTOR) and Elton B. Stephens Company host (EBSCOhost). The search resulted in over 63 journal articles published between 2010 and 2025. The search excluded articles that were not written in English, not peer reviewed or focused on religions other than Christianity.

The study is grounded in Pentecostal theological theory, particularly the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the agent of unity, reconciliation and transformation. The researchers also used the Good Governance theory to determine how the GNU, through the Pentecostal theology of unity, can improve their governance and unity (Keping 2018).

Pentecostal theology of unity

Pentecostal theology of unity is the understanding of unity that is founded in the works of the Holy Spirit (Ramsey 2023:2). The Holy Spirit empowers and unites people in their diversity. The Pentecostal theology of unity is not merely institutional or in doctrinal uniformity but spiritual and missional. It creates communion in the body of Christ (Plüss 2022:11–12), promotes cohesion and reconciliation. This understanding is drawn from the book of Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, where diverse people gathered, and the Holy Spirit descended upon them (Pentecost). This created mutual intelligibility in the midst of differences when people spoke in different languages but had one understanding. The unity is pneumatologically grounded in openness and mutual recognition. It further creates a public manifestation of faith, which broke racial segregation (Baker 2024:78). He reflects on Cecil Robeck and shows that this unity is not an idea but a calling and sure hope. In the context of South African politics, Pentecostal theology of unity has an opportunity for nation building, bringing coherence and reconciliation.

The formation of the government of national unity in 2024

The formation of the GNU is evidence of the ANC losing its majority votes, receiving only 40% of the people's vote (Bosman, Rubidge & Gruzd 2024:2). They claim this was a projected and predicted fate of South African politics. It is evidence of defection and fragmentation of the people of South Africa who have lost faith in one political party, therefore giving their votes to another in hope for a change. It reflects an attempt to bring positive governance to the country through the collaboration of different political parties. This collaboration, however, faces challenges and a concerning question: *Is this political unity also grounded in a moral and spiritual foundation?* Consequently, some of these tensions result from this question.

These tensions and challenges should not outweigh the GNU's purpose. This government should strive for real inclusivity, equality, social and economic change and meet the needs of every single person it governs. This is a familiar

conversation that occurred before in 1994. *How is this 2024 GNU different from the 1994 GNU?* Theologically, unity based solely on political grounds is at risk of becoming superficial and compromised.

Pentecostal theology offers a different view of unity than political unity. It urges us to look at it from different perspectives. In a field known for employing strategies in its governance, one might ask whether this unity is a strategy rather than a collaborative and transformational tool. It further challenges us to ask whether this unity, which may be a strategy, is addressing the state's social and economic issues. Or it is only used to manage power.

Is the government of national unity good or bad: The spirit and letter of governance

It is empirical to evaluate whether this formation is for the good or not. Before we employ Pentecostal theology of unity and the Holy Spirit, we need to consider this political structure. The failure of the ANC to obtain a majority in the 2024 elections brought us to this formation. Understanding that this formation is a pragmatic political arrangement rather than a perfect solution is important. The statement of intent published[1] by the ANC on the 14th of June 2024 (p. 3) states that all parties that form part of the GNU should commit to the affirmed principles and strategies. One of those principles is unity in diversity (8.5). This, of course, is led by their personal political strategies and the intent of the GNU. The mandate of the GNU is good. Kgatle (2025:691) considers the GNU to be a relevant framework in contemporary South Africa. However, with this focus, the 5-year strategies do not include unity at a theological level. The GNU emphasises stability, cooperation and unity for the good of its people. It aims to stabilise the country and address its needs, such as poverty alleviation, job creation and tackling the high cost of living. In addition, the GNU has tensions and challenges. They are discussed next.

Challenges in the government of national unity

The challenges and tensions result from the lack of a shared perspective. Political parties with different ideologies and mandates are forced to work collaboratively (Williams 2024:6). *Can political parties with often-clashing ideologies work together?* In addition, *can people who believed in the apartheid system and are beneficiaries of the same system work in unity with those who suffered the end of the apartheid stick?*

The strained relationship in the country stems from corruption and public mistrust (Ofusori 2024a:1). Corruption is a threat to this unity. Based on the ongoing Madlanga Commission, a judicial commission of inquiry into the corruption, political interference and criminality embedded in the South African justice system led by retired judge Mbuyiseli Madlanga and the ad hoc Committee, a provisional structure in parliament to address immediate issues outside of standing committees, there is no unity within our government (Kempen 2025:40; Thompson 2025:25). These structures were put in place to fight corruption and crime within the government following the claims made by Lieutenant-General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, the provincial police Commissioner for KwaZulu-Natal on the 06th of July 2025 (Radulovic 2025:1). This should bring the country, particularly different political parties, together in unity to pursue the same course. When you dive deep into these issues that go as far as witnesses being killed or allegedly taking their own lives, it becomes more evident that these issues require more than political solutions. A moral and spiritual renewal is a necessity.

As South Africa navigates this marriage, tensions are becoming increasingly evident. This raises concerns about whether this unity is for the people of this country or the governing parties. The people of this country are already united in the call for one purpose: Transformational change. They may have voted for different political parties; however, they voted for the same reasons. On the other hand, political parties face ideological contestation. These contestations show the political standing of these parties, with some in conflict. This is a major tension in this governance that hinders a pure coalition seeking to serve South Africa's people. Vilakati and Bentley (2024:35) concur that the different political ideologies, especially those in conflict, pose a threat to this GNU. These differences need to be navigated and addressed in the interest of the people. Bosman et al. (2024:3) argue that these ideological incoherences undermine the ability of unity to drive for change.

Furthermore, the sharing of power adds another tension. The GNU requires a balance between power sharing and accountability. The blurring of lines is often evident in such coalition agreements, where citizens fail to identify who is responsible for policy failures. This tension further divides governance and sows doubt in a nation that already mistrusts the state. Often, the agreements on this power sharing are for the survival of the political parties, leaving no room for ethics and morals.

The 2024 GNU is different from the 1994 GNU. The rationale is the reconciliation of races and parties with different political ideologies. The coalition partners and leaders should put aside their political differences and desire for power and focus more on working together effectively in governance (Bosman et al. 2024:8). They should protect and serve the people of South Africa, not ride out their term.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Discussion

The Pentecostal theology analysis and the role of the Holy Spirit

Pentecostalism is characterised by the emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the life of the church and of an individual. So, one

1.https://www.anc1912.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Statement-of-Intent-of-the-2024-Government-of-National-Unity.pdf.

cannot talk about Pentecostalism or Pentecostal theology of unity without mentioning the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal theology emphasises the gifts and works of the Holy Spirit. Kgatle (2024:121) indicates that pneumatology plays a role in ecclesial leadership, namely leadership through the Holy Spirit. This ecclesiastical leadership is often responsible for people from different life stages. Similarly, political leadership is responsible for millions of people. Based on a Pentecostal theological analysis of South Africa's GNU, this study emphasises ethical leadership grounded in integrity and accountability. Political leaders should uphold ethical leadership at all costs and become accountable to the people in a democratic South Africa.

Pneumatology can play a role in political leadership through the Holy Spirit. He continues to show that the Holy Spirit in the 21st century can address parities (132) in ecclesiastical leadership. Consequently, it can be used to address power, gender and other disparities within the GNU. This is a transformational pneumatology that is needed in this formation. This Pentecostal theology emphasises baptism by the Holy Spirit, evident in healing and sanctification. This theology emerged from the Azusa Street revival, a remarkable event of the 19th century (Homoki 2017:2). This revival fostered a racially integrated era that challenged social norms. Homoki (2017:3) used the chart by Kenneth Berding that outlines the *charismata* [gifts of the Holy Spirit] in the New Testament. He indicates that in Ephesians 4:11, Christ gave people who hold different leadership offices gifts. The gifts from the Berding chart relevant to this study are service or serving, teaching, encouragement, giving and leading (Rm 12:7 & 9). He further shows that healing, wisdom, and knowledge are gifts of the same spirit. These gifts are emphasised by Pentecostal theology and are needed in the contemporary GNU.

Through the Pentecostal theology analysis, and by the Holy Spirit as a Spirit of unity, the GNU can also learn to foster justice and inclusivity in their national leadership. The church should encourage this unity among political parties and not sow division in the nation, as it understands unity better than political parties do. When people of various races, ethnicities and backgrounds come together, the church should foster relationships that unite diverse communities, emphasising equality and dignity among them.

One of the people who were given these gifts is teachers. The virtue of their office guides teachers. Political leaders in office are guides as well. They guide the nation in various aspects. They assume the office of teachers in this article. These gifts were given for the greater good of everyone, so each one of us must possess them. The above gifts are used to interrogate the tensions and place them as a force to foster cohesion and moral vision in the GNU. Next, we discuss the lessons from Pentecostal theology guided by the Holy Spirit, which are shown to be parallel to the goals and principles of the GNU.

The concept of applying Pentecostal theology of unity in politics such, as the GNU, requires a careful clarification of application. As mentioned, Pentecostal theology of unity is deeply rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit, which unites people of different race, ethnicity, background and status. Some of its biblical roots are found in Acts 2, where people were in communion through the Holy Spirit, and in 1 Corinthians, which demonstrates that the Body of Christ is made of diverse members.

Applying Pentecostal theology of unity to political matters, such as the GNU, is not entirely ideal; it raises practical and conceptual concerns. Of course, the GNU is not a religious or theological institution, and not everyone in this coalition is a Christian, or rather a member of Pentecostalism. Others may belong to different Christian denominations or secular worldview. Therefore, imposing the Pentecostal theology of unity and Pentecostal theology values and morals on the members of this coalition would be somewhat unrealistic and undermining the constitutional democracy of South Africa that practices religious pluralism (Galvin, Chiwaye & Moolla 2024:918). The feasibility of this theology in political settings is based on the level of comprehension. When it is explained narrowly, interpreted as a theological framework that requires Pentecostal belief, its application becomes problematic as the democratic state and governance of South Africa cannot be limited to one religious overview. However, when it is interpreted in broad terms, with the comprehension that it promotes values such as serving and/or service, reconciliation, unity, accountability and giving among many others, then it becomes more feasible to apply in political discourse. Many of the values are shared on both ends.

Acknowledging that theological ideologies of unity may not be easy to sustain practically, especially in the realities of different political contestations, we argue that Pentecostal theology of unity presents moral and ethical values for peace, unity and reconciliation. Similar to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 1995, a body aimed at bringing the truth and reconciliation to the nation (Szpak & Bunikowski 2022:313). This commission was political but led by a religious leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu who provided a more theological atmosphere, especially in moments where theological values such as compassion and forgiveness were needed to reconcile. Pentecostal theology of unity presents an opportunity such as this one, in a political institution where theological values are needed to bring unity for the better governance of the country.

The need for service and serving

Romans 12:7 indicates that if you are required to serve, then serve, and that is what Pentecostal theology of the Holy Spirit emphasises: Service. At the heart of the government should be serving. Zwane (2024) concurs that the GNU needs to improve its service to uphold public responsibility. One common aspect of these political parties is that, during election campaigns, they promise services. They promise service delivery as their priority. Pentecostal theology encourages this priority. To give a comparison: Jesus, who is anointed (Christ), powerful and the Son of God, held different offices. He held the offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. Regardless of his status, he came to earth to serve.

He healed the sick. Matthew 20:28 says, 'even the son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom'. This gift is a needed principle in the coalition to move from what has been deemed a '*tsotsi* [criminal and/or thief] governance' (Mohuba 2025:40) to a governance that is not self-serving and bridges the gap filled by the public mistrust.

The public mistrust mentioned earlier and the ANC's failure to secure 50% of the vote in the 2024 elections are the result of poor or inadequate service delivery by the government (Zweni, Faku & Yan 2025:1).

A need for a moment of healing

South Africa is a country that is still licking its wounds; it needs healing. Wounds of unhealed and unresolved trauma from the past resurface as contemporary social and economic issues. This gift is a force that challenges us to bring healing and reconciliation. There are racial divisions in the country and within the GNU, which Kgatle (2025:687) argues for the need to reflect on Nicholas Bhengu's unity in order to move on and heal from the past wounds of trauma. Furthermore, social and economic divisions are created by inequality and by the neglect of justice. This theology integrates reconciliation with social transformation.

The healing and reconciliation presented to the democratic South Africa in 1994, with Reconciliation Day celebrated on the 16th of December, were a political arrangement. Jethro (2022) indicates that what we call Reconciliation Day in democratic South Africa was renamed from a vow during apartheid that honoured Afrikaners who overcame the indigenous people of the land and claimed it as their own. This day is a pacifier that masks and covers the state's contradictions. Jethro (2013:376) also points out that this is the same reconciliation that observes rituals of healing and reconciliation at Freedom Park. This political healing is performative and a pacifier. Real healing in such a unit should address historical trauma and socio-economic inequalities. *How are we to be united and reconciled if we are not equal?*

The GNU has lessons to learn from Pentecostalism. It united people of different races and genders during the Azusa Street revival (Aiken-Isaac 2023:1). They gathered in one place, defying what was socially normal at the time (Hamilton 2013). The unity was genuine and intentional. The same genuine and intentional unity is needed in the GNU. The Azusa Street revival is a testament to the possibility of unity in diversity. The GNU can learn from Pentecostal theology that people who come from different backgrounds can be together.

The above gifts of the Holy Spirit, emphasised in Pentecostal theology, are parallel to the goals and principles of the GNU. These gifts can be interpreted as principles of Pentecostal theology. Kgatle (2025:682) alludes that these principles are applicable in the context of the GNU. He further indicates that the coalition needs to embrace the gospel of love and forgiveness (p. 290).

Recommendations

Based on a Pentecostal theological analysis of South Africa's GNU, the following recommendations are proposed that:

- The GNU should embrace ethical leadership grounded in integrity, humility and accountability.
- The church should continue its prophetic witness in a nation that is so much divided by colour and creed.
- The GNU should make strides to foster social and economic transformation in a diversified unity. Similarly, as the government often engages with the church on matters of national interest, such as poverty and peace, there should be a policy review to allow the church to engage internally in matters of the state.
- Strong partnerships between religious institutions (churches) and the government should be encouraged, and Pentecostal churches should get involved and not keep silent in a moment of decision.

Conclusion

This study explored the concept of unity within South Africa's GNU through a Pentecostal theological perspective. While the GNU represents a political effort to reduce division and encourage cooperation among diverse parties, Pentecostal theology provides deeper spiritual and moral insights into what true unity really means. From this viewpoint, unity is not just about structure or politics; it is rooted in the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, who promotes reconciliation, renewal and community harmony. This theological view challenges the GNU to go beyond pragmatic alliances and adopt a value-based, people-centred approach to governance.

The emergence of the GNU in modern South Africa appears both imminent and, to some degree, unavoidable, arising from the country's intricate political landscape. While its formation presents both opportunities and obstacles, the focus should not be solely on debates about its creation, but on how this political unity can be critically assessed, strengthened and maintained. In this context, ethical leadership, moral responsibility and spiritual depth become essential.

Furthermore, the Pentecostal tradition highlights the church's dual role as both a partner in social change and a prophetic voice that holds political institutions accountable. In a society still divided by history, inequality and socio-economic issues, the church plays a crucial role in advancing justice, healing and moral renewal. This dual engagement ensures that unity is not just a matter of political convenience but is continually shaped by accountability and ethical awareness.

Importantly, a Pentecostal theology of unity redefines unity not as a one-time political agreement or a final goal but as a perpetual, transformative journey. It urges scholars, theologians, political leaders and faith communities to reimagine unity as a dynamic process rooted in the Holy Spirit's work. Such unity aims not only for cooperation but also for justice, reconciliation and social cohesion. While the GNU offers a significant opportunity for political collaboration in South Africa, its long-term success relies on

its ability to embody a deeper, transformative vision of unity. A Pentecostal theological framework enhances this vision by emphasising spiritual transformation, ethical leadership and the pursuit of the common good. Ultimately, this perspective challenges the GNU to become more than just a political arrangement – urging it instead to take part in the ongoing journey towards a just, reconciled and united South Africa.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Botshelo M. Ramoshaba: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Lufuluvhi M. Mudimeli: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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