

OPINION

Polls reporting misleading

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CREDIBILITY: PRE-ELECTION EMBELLISHMENTS ARE DANGEROUS

» **Forecasts may call credibility into question.**

The certainty expressed by many commentators that the demise of the ANC is imminent reminds one of Mark Twain's famous quote: "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated..."

Screaming media headlines that the ANC is about to vacate the plush offices of the Union Buildings, are, in my view greatly overstated.

Whether they are to remain in power is not the point.

The point is the danger that embellishments hold for democracy and the ultimate acceptance of the election results as being credible.

Despite a deep dive of the data of most polls suggesting

the ANC is most probably going to hold on to power, either on their own or in coalition with a smaller party, people are continuously being informed that the ANC's support has plummeted to below 40% and a real possibility exists for the now opposition to take control via some form of coalition arrangement.

The Inclusive Society Institute's (ISI) own poll, conducted by Ipsos, has, for example, been misrepresented in media headlines.

To illustrate: one headline boldly stated "ANC support plummets to 33%", whilst the unpacking of the ISI data actually suggested an outcome somewhere between 48% and 52% for the ANC at a national level.

This has to do with allocation of the "don't know", "won't say" responses and recalculations to accommodate the difference between the profiles of the eligible voter corps versus its registered voter corps, and different voter turnout scenarios.

Is this really important?

The issue is that misrepresentation at a grand scale can affect public acceptance of the election results as trustworthy and credible.

When a continual barrage of the ruling party's certain loss, conveyed with overwhelming conviction is met with their ultimately win, there will be those that will call the results into question.

And that could feed the cause of those who wish to undermine the credibility of institutions such as the Electoral Commission of South Africa.

The election, some will say, was stolen, while in reality, it was the misrepresentation of the polls that could lead to the wrong conclusions.

History is littered with unfortunate upheaval when the expected results conflict with actual results.

We don't want or need that.

On its own, one may argue it's best to fob off misrepresented polls. However, when one adds:

► The latest call by the Democratic Alliance (DA) to western governments to provide resources for parallel voter tabulation, and then;

► Warning them an ANC drop below 50% will present significant risks "as the ruling elite grow more desperate to retain electoral support ahead of the upcoming elections", suggesting "they may be willing to put their narrow political interests ahead of the country's broader interests and sacred constitutional values", and on top of that;

► The uMkhonto weSizwe party's warning they will make the country ungovernable if they don't get their way, then one needs to caution the conveyors of information to ensure accuracy, balance, and context.

For the record, as things

stand now, no non-ANC coalition can be formed without the support of the Economic Freedom Fighters.

This is unlikely given the history of coalitions in Gauteng and the deep ideological differences between the opposition parties.

Another theoretical composition could be a grand coalition between the ANC and DA or Multi-party Charter. But this, too, is improbable given the charter is campaigning on a "never the ANC" ticket.

The electoral fortunes of the parties may change significantly as their campaigns unfold. But those fortunes should change based on accurate and truthful reporting, not on the basis of false narratives.

Because should those fortunes not change, fertile ground for unnecessary turmoil could have unintentionally been prepared.

Something this troubled country could do without.

► *Swanepoel is chief executive of the Inclusive Society Institute*

Misrepresentation of polls could lead to wrong conclusions