



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

Misrepresenting Polls Does Democracy A Disservice

By Daryl Swanepoel

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". Screeching media headlines that the ANC is about to vacate the plush offices of the Union Building, are, in my view greatly overstated. Whether they are to remain in power or not, 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 that the ANC is most probably to hold on to power, either on their own, or in coalition with a smaller party, consumers of media are continuously informed that the ANC's support has plummeted to below 40% and that 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 newspaper 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 allocating of the 'don't know', 'won't say' responses, and recalculations to accommodate the difference between the profiles of the country's eligible voter corps versus its registered voter corps, and different voter turnout scenarios.

One may ask: 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 that wish to undermine the credibility of institutions such as the Independent Electoral Commission. The election, some will say, was stolen, whilst in reality, it was the misrepresentation of the polls that could lead to the wrong conclusions. And 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 that its best to fob off misrepresented polls, but when one adds the latest call by the Democratic Alliance to foreign Western governments to provide resources for parallel voter tabulation and then warning them that 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 that "they may be willing to put their narrow political interests ahead of our country's broader interests and sacred constitutional values", and on top of that, MK party's warning that they will make the country ungovernable if they don't get their way, then one needs to caution the conveyers 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 EFF. And this is extremely unlikely given the history of opposition coalitions in Gauteng and the deep ideological differences between the opposition parties. Another theoretical composition could be a grand coalition between the ANC and the DA or Multiparty Charter, but this too is highly improbable given that the Charter is campaigning on a “never the ANC ticket”.

It may well be that in the coming months the electoral fortunes of the parties may change significantly for better or for worse as their campaigns unfold. Then so be it. But those fortunes should change based on accurate and truthful reporting, and not on the basis of false narratives. Because should those fortunes not change despite the false narratives, fertile ground for unnecessary turmoil could have unintentionally been prepared. Something our already troubled country could certainly do without.

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