



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

Trust – the ‘glue’ that binds society together – is missing in SA

By Daryl Swanepoel

“If the people cannot trust their government to do the job for which it exists – to protect them and to promote their common welfare – all else is lost.” Barack Obama, talking of the problems of corruption, said this in a speech at the University of Nairobi in 2006 when the young senator was still three years away from dealing with the demands of becoming the 44th president of the United States.

Obama’s concern at the debilitating and corrosive impact of people’s lack of trust in how they are governed has been echoed many times since then by a host of leaders, including the UN secretary-general, Antonio Guterres, who has warned that the world is “suffering from a bad case of trust deficit disorder”.

“Trust is at a breaking point,” he told the UN General Assembly in 2018. “Trust in national institutions. Trust among states. Trust in the rules-based global order. Within countries, people are losing faith in political establishments, polarisation is on the rise and populism is on the march.”

This holds true for South Africa as well. Findings from the Inclusive Society Institute’s extensive GovDem Poll, conducted by Ipsos late last year, found that “the trust needed to underpin social cohesion ... is largely absent. South Africans do not sufficiently trust their fellow compatriots.”

Distrust between races is worryingly high, with only around 50 percent of those from the minority communities indicating that they completely or somewhat trusted people from the black community.

The poll also found that South Africans deeply distrust those who do not belong to the same political party as their own. Those who indicated that they support one of the three main parties (the ANC, Democratic Alliance and Economic Freedom Fighters), completely or somewhat completely distrust people from either of the other two main parties.

This distrust carries through to neighbourhoods, families and the wider community, poisoning the body politic and throwing obstacles on the road to rebuilding a country gutted by colonialism and apartheid.

The Inclusive Society Institute argues that this “is particularly unsettling given the country’s past racial divisions, and party support that remains largely divided along racial lines. This needs to be overcome in order to achieve social cohesion and to build a united nation.”

The Edelman Trust Barometer 2023, whose online survey sampled more than 32,000 respondents across 28 countries, echoes many of the Inclusive Society Institute’s GovDem Poll findings in its South Africa Top 10 report for this year.

The top finding is that “once again”, business and NGOs are the only trusted institutions in South Africa. There is a 40-point gap between trust in business and trust in government, representing the most significant gap of all 28 countries surveyed.

Among other findings, Edelman noted that “South Africa is one of six countries that is severely polarised, meaning respondents see deep divisions in their country and do not feel they can be overcome” and that some “believe these divisions could lead to violence, lack of economic growth and worsening of prejudice if not addressed ...”

Philip Machanick, emeritus associate professor of computer science at Rhodes University and who was the interim vice-chairperson of the Makana Citizens Front during the 2022 local government elections, says: “Someone once said that earning trust is like climbing a tree. Losing it happens as fast as falling out of the tree. South Africans are very patient people as we have been losing trust in our government at a glacial pace. We sit silently while promise after promise is broken then suddenly wake up and get angry.

“Makana [formerly Grahamstown] municipality is no different: the ANC has dominated the local government since democracy was established. The trust deficit is increasingly growing. We saw it in the 2021 elections when the Makana Citizens Front won 18.1% of the vote, more than the DA, and reduced the ANC majority to less than 1%. But even there, trust is undermined as a cabal hijacked the MCF seats and now tamely votes with the ANC.

“What is needed is an awakening to the possibility that trust is actually possible because distrust of the government has spread to distrust of the opposition,” is what Machanick would like to see nationwide is an alliance of civic leaders who are known for working selflessly for their community. “Politics as usual is terminally broken. If we do not get this right, the biggest growth in the vote will continue to be Don’t Vote, the party that would’ve won the last national elections if that was a thing.”

In remarks to a reporter at the launch of his political party, Rise Mzansi, at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg on 19 April this year, Songezo Zibi said: “What we’ve lost is bigger than politics, it’s trust. It’s an anchor for South African society. If we cannot have that, nothing is going to work.”

Writing on “How to restore trust in governments and institutions”, Grant Duncan, an associate professor at Massey University in New Zealand, asserts that “trust is not a thing that one can literally build, break and then rebuild. Political leaders cannot simply approve a policy and a budget to rebuild trust in the way that we rebuild worn-out infrastructure.”

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is “working with its member governments and (non-members too) across a range of interconnected issues to restore or reinforce trust, because ... [they] legitimise decisive and effective action by governments, and encourage citizens and businesses to accept it.”

The OECD notes that “the current situation suggests a loss of trust in government that is deeper, more prolonged and more systemic than previously, going well beyond mistrust of a particular leader or institution” and adds that “two of the top reasons cited for a lack of trust in government include corruption or fraud, and wrong incentives driving policies. Governments must act on these issues, building measures to ensure reliability, fairness, responsiveness, inclusiveness and integrity into policymaking and service delivery.”

In an article on how to rebuild trust in South Africa, Martin Kingston, vice-president of Business Unity South Africa in 2018, recommended that the country “move away from a mindset focused solely on

fighting corruption, to an approach based on building trust and integrity at all levels of society” and that it “needed to strengthen institutions and dismantle networks of patronage, cronyism and corrupted systems”.

However, he cautioned, “we must acknowledge that comprehensively addressing the legacies of the past will take considerable time and resources, and is likely to suffer setbacks along the way.”

In his closing address to the ANC’s national executive committee in April, President Cyril Ramaphosa, talking of the upcoming 2024 elections, said the party “must make it clear that we are working hard to regain the trust of the majority of South Africans ...”

It is good that the leader of the ruling party has identified this as problematic and in need of attention.

Whether the ANC can regain that trust will only be known after the next election.

The party certainly has its work cut out for it in convincing the electorate that it can, indeed, be trusted to govern in their best interests.

To do so it will have to lead from the front, be decisive in its fight against corruption and maladministration, steer away from controversial policies that undermine confidence in the economy and rejig its communication strategy to focus on a trust-building narrative.

Daryl Swanepoel is the CEO of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of the Institute’s GovDem Poll.