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OPINION PIECE

Trust in political parties is being tested as COVID-19 infection rates surge, say UP Political Sciences experts

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Trust, apparently, is a double-edged sword: it is quick to earn, but can dissipate just as fast.

This seems to be the conundrum facing some political parties in South Africa that are also trying to improve their personal connection with voters. With one eye on managing the surge in new and virulent COVID-19 cases, political parties and their leaders are also clearly wary of the likely effect of the virus on next year's elections. There is no doubt that the pandemic serves as an ideological battleground between the main political parties.

The pandemic has already raised necessary questions around the integrity of the election and the IEC's readiness to hold it. What is also important, however, is how political parties and, since this is a local government election, independent candidates will use this experience to shape public opinion in their favour.

Initially, press coverage celebrated the government's interventions both at home and abroad, with the WHO championing President Ramaphosa's decisive and timely measures. Considering the spikes that occurred in Italy and Spain at the time, South Africans were generally pleased to see that some proactive policy was indeed possible even though the sale of alcohol, tobacco and fast foods – their favourite vices – was prohibited. Despite the subsequent easing of restrictions, economic losses have strained an already fragile economy and the people most severely affected are the poorest and most vulnerable.

The public is trying to digest these issues and to reconsider their opinion of political leaders and their parties, and now they literally have more time to do so. Issues competing for media coverage and debate include the monitoring of the health sector's preparedness to save lives, the ability of the fiscus to feed the starving and sustain the economy, the questionable deals that seem to benefit some more than others, and state-owned institutions' ability to manage power supply during cold spells.

Fear of poverty and starvation has replaced concern for the virus, and the stark inequalities that exist in the country have been exposed. While the middle class mobilised against short exercise windows, few paid attention to those living in overcrowded shacks where physical distancing is impossible and running water for the recommended hand washing is scarce. Even the outrage over the military's use of excessive force seems to have waned despite the global campaign to make Black Lives Matter.

Add to this the prohibition of the sale of tobacco products (which even had some non-smokers up in arms!), the manipulation of food-parcel distribution and the infernal disinformation campaigns spreading across social media platforms, and it becomes evident why political parties struggle to calibrate their responses.

Opposition parties are faced with an important but delicate decision: while they do not want to be perceived as sabotaging the national effort, their support for government actions can undermine their positions as alternatives to the ruling party. Parties need to keep their messaging simple, honest and personal, showing just the right measure of genuine compassion and firm commitment, and will need to weave in those terms that are key markers for their voting bases.

From the ANC we have seen a good dose of ‘collective responsibility’ and many statements about how ‘we are all in this together’, despite social media posts of senior officials flagrantly breaking the rules. However, the president’s justification for easing restrictions was perhaps the most compassionate of all responses. Quoted on [Al Jazeera](#), Ramaphosa said: ‘Our people need to eat. They need to earn a living.’

While the DA tries to champion the economy emphasising the virus kills, but so do hunger and poverty, interim party leader John Steenhuisen declared: ‘We have to end the national hard lockdown and we have to do it now.’ The DA did share the EFF’s general concern for holding all ‘organs of state... accountable’ and in May filed papers in the Constitutional Court challenging the Disaster Management Act.

Julius Malema and the EFF, loyal to their party’s ideology, announced: ‘If this white economy must collapse, let it collapse,’ and that relaxing lockdown measures would be ‘attempted genocide’. EFF MP Naledi Chirwa also asked: ‘How many black people have been infected and how many have died’ and ‘how many white people have been infected and how many have died?’ This effort to racialise the issue was curbed by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize, who refused to provide race-based statistics on the pandemic, stating: ‘There hasn’t been a need for that.’

Like other smaller parties, the IFP has not waded into the fray of COVID-19 politics, but has attempted to stake out a middle road and support the national effort to fight the surge. Mkhuleko Hlengwa, its national spokesperson, affirmed the party’s support for the government’s plan as long as it considers the infection rate and expert medical advice. Commenting on the gradual reopening of the economy, he said: ‘... this decision by the National Coronavirus Command Council requires exceptional attention to detail and careful consideration for the lives and livelihoods of South Africans.’

While these politically correct epithets will hopefully calm economic markets, they show very little appreciation of the daily struggles people are desperately trying to manage. Actions, dear politicians, speak louder than words.

To rebuild our trust, political parties will need to work hard and show some heart. Perhaps it is time to offer some tangible, if physically distanced, support to the people of South Africa?

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

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