Project Name: Working for Democracy

Protest narrative deep dive

Date range report covers 01 - 22 Jan 2023
Release date: 3 February 2023

Introduction

South Africans are enraged by the state of electricity supply in the country as 2023 gets started. Data from the popular "EskomSePush" application, a mobile app that allows users to track load shedding stages and times, has revealed that more than half of 2022 was mired by power cuts (208 days). The date range for this report covers 01 - 22 January 2023. During this date range load shedding was experienced every day, with citizens sometimes dealing with four hour stretches of no electricity. Eskom, the energy state owned enterprise (SOE), struggles with multiple issues like ageing infrastructure, poor maintenance and management of power stations, corruption and the remnants of State Capture.

Amid the emotional and economic impact that the energy crisis has had on South Africans, the National Energy Regulator of South Africa (NERSA) granted Eskom an 18.65% tariff increase, slightly more than half of the 32% increase that Eskom had requested, on 13 January 2023. This did not sit well with the public and contributed to large spikes in conversation on Twitter with people calling for a national shutdown. This report looks at conversation related to hashtags and keywords like #nationalshutdown and the attempts to mobilise the public en masse that played out on Twitter. While organisations tried to pull the public together around the common goal of taking our collective frustration over load shedding to the government, we see that opportunistic scapegoating for political gain also gained ground in discussions about the protest, blurring the main reason for the calls to shut down (Eskom tariff hike and continued load shedding) with calls for Cyril Ramaphosa to step down.

Tools

In order to assess the conversation on Twitter, researchers made use of Brandwatch, a social media listening tool that is able to filter conversation by using keywords. Keywords used in the protest conversation for example were #nationalshutdown, #standupSA or "DA and Luthuli House" to name a few.

Desktop research was also conducted for online news media articles that were used to understand how the various calls for protest action against Eskom was being covered by traditional news houses. Due to the media freedom afforded to reliable news houses in South Africa, certain sites and channels are often a good space to turn to for fair and unbiased reporting on issues of public concern. According to a Press Freedom Index for Africa in 2022, South Africa was ranked 3rd out of the 53 countries that were assessed. On this index, South African press freedom received a score of 75.56, well above neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe (44.94) and Eswatini (46.62). According to this index, a score of 70 to 85 points is considered satisfactory while scores between 40 and 55 represent "difficult situations". On the global index, South Africa is within the top 20% of countries for press freedom, sharing the 70 to 85 point range with countries like Spain, Austria, Argentina, The Netherlands, France, The United Kingdom, Switzerland and Canada to name a few. South African as press

freedom is an important point to consider because online campaigns that seek to sew divisive narratives in society often rely on painting the news media as untrustworthy and claiming that other less verified sources hold true information with slogans like "the media won't cover this" or "this is the news they don't want you to see".

Overview

Based on the search criteria for this report, 88 110 total mentions were returned. Close to 24% of these mentions occurred on 16 January, 3 days after news about the tariff hike was made public. This peak in conversation on 16 January can be observed in Figure 1 below.
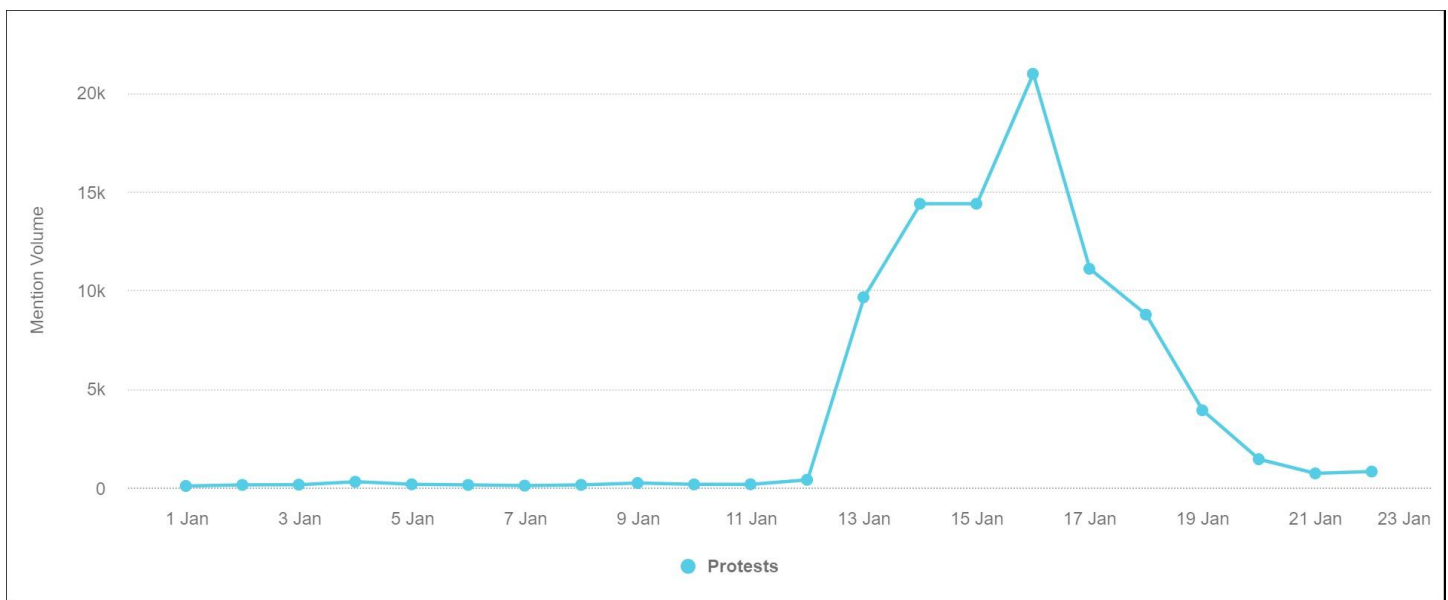

Figure 1: Mention volume based on search criteria with noticeable peak on 16 January 2023

Based on the data that was found within the mentions, five categories were distinguished namely, #nationalshutdown, #StandUpSA, DA march to Luthuli House, isolated flare-ups in small towns and #Ramaphosamustfall. Categorising the data in this way, allowed us to understand the flow of protest related conversation on Twitter and news media as important dates for the different hashtags and keywords became easier to track. This categorisation is visually represented in Figure 2 below.
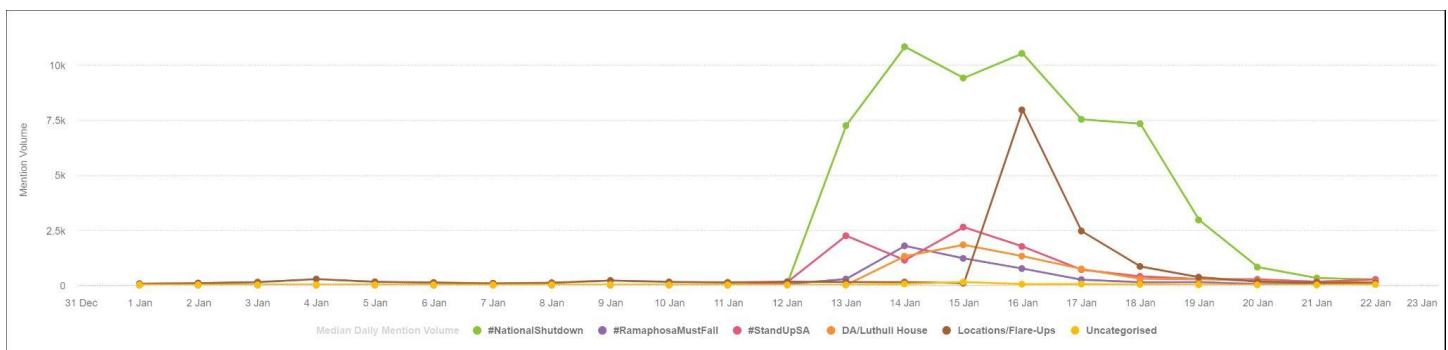
Figure 2: Mention volume broken down by categories

In the next section of this report, we will unpack some of the data points found in the #nationalshutdown and #ramaphosamustfall categories to represent how these hashtags were repurposed to drive images of violence and pro-Zuma sentiment within the narrative of national mobilisation. We will also look in some detail at #StandUpSA, the Democratic Alliance's (DA) march to Luthuli House and misinformation relating to flare ups in small towns like Parys during the reporting period.

#Nationalshutdown

More than half of the total mentions in our dataset included #nationalshutdown and returned a very high retweet percentage (88%). These totals along with the reach of the total mentions can be seen in Figure 3 below. A high retweet percentage is indicative of little original content that becomes amplified. This amplification can be organic where people on Twitter resonate with the message or find it important enough and choose to retweet the content of their own volition. Or, as we have observed in the past, sharp spikes can also represent topic amplification that has been coordinated by networks of accounts that try to reach as many online social media users as possible with their message for pecuniary benefits.

Figure 3: Mention, reach and retweet volumes for posts that contain #nationalshutdown

Unlike #StandUpSa, #Ramaphosamustfall and DA/Luthuli house, which were found in little to no posts before 13 January 2023, #nationalshutdown appeared in dozens of mentions from the start date of our reporting period. These posts ranged from hashjacking for content promotion to keyword stuffing by accounts that have been flagged by the CABC in the past for exhibiting inauthentic behaviour. Examples of these posts are seen in Figure 4.
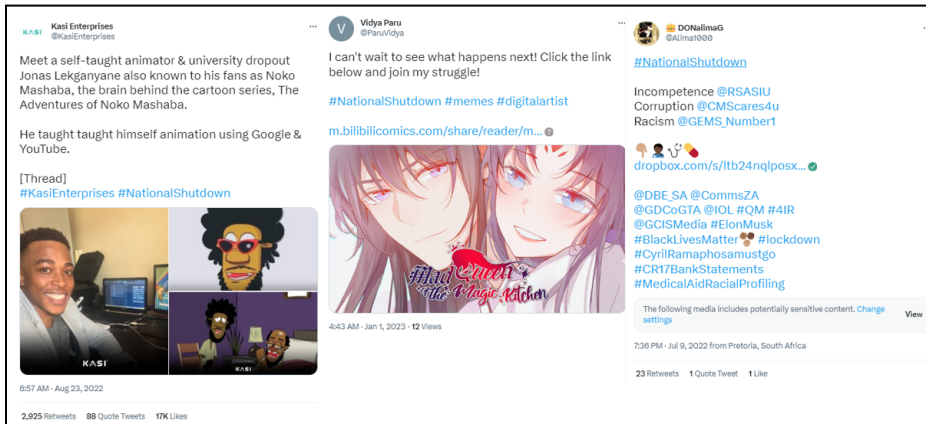
Figure 4: Examples of posts from 01 January that contain #nationalshutdown

In Figure 5 below, we see that in the early days of January 2023, some of the posts that contained #nationalshutdown also displayed a strong anti-Ramaphosa sentiment. The post to the left of Figure 5 shows a date from mid 2022. However, this old content was retweeted 5 times on 04 January 2023 and thus appeared in the current dataset. The song in the post uses the voices of young Africans who sing about their dissatisfaction with the government over the tune of popular song "Happy" by Pharell Williams.
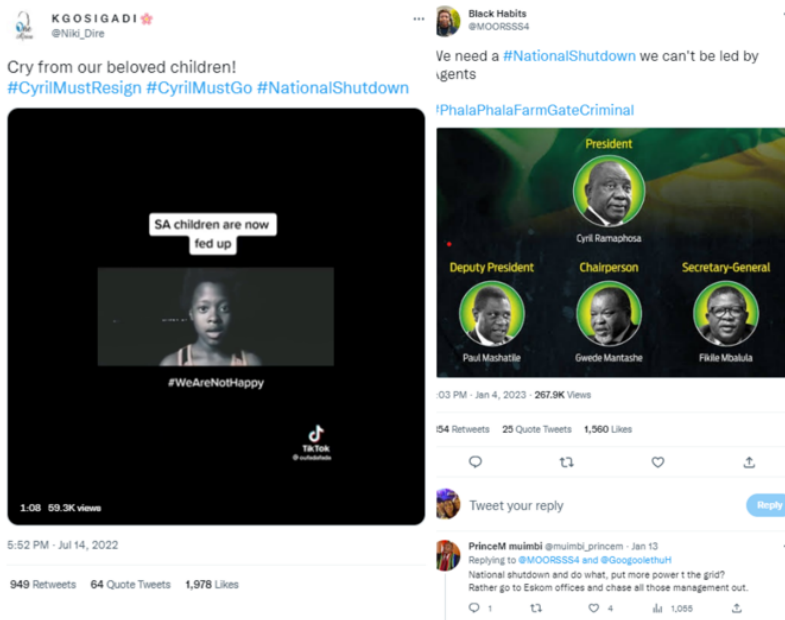

Figure 5: Examples of posts in early January that contained #nationalshutdown and showed anti-Ramaphosa sentiment

Once news of the tariff hike was released, we see a sharp spike in posts containing #nationalshutdown, reaching its highest peak on 14 January 2023 (refer to Figure 2 to observe the date of peaks in this category). More than half of these mentions also contained the hashtag #loadshedding. Aggravated by the tariff increase and eager to show Eskom how frustrated they were, tweets were posted calling for everyone affected by load

shedding to join a national shutdown. One of these tweets backed by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is shown in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Example of a post that encouraged people to join a National Shutdown with load shedding being the primary agenda behind the call to shutdown SA.

Figure 7 shows a call from another political party, the African Transformational Movement (ATM), for citizens to join against load shedding. While the post makes mention of the unemployment rate, the focus and reason behind the protest action is clear - take a stand against loadshedding.

Figure 7: Call from ATM political party to end loadshedding with #nationalshutdown

The calls to shut down SA were soon followed by tweets that focussed less on Eskom and more on the removal of Cyril Ramaphosa, like the example shown in Figure 8 below. This #nationalshutdown tweet contains a screenshot from a Facebook post that displays #CRmustGo. This post was retweeted more than 5 000 times and appeared to pull the call for a national shutdown away from the issue of load shedding, to focus on getting rid of Cyril Ramaphosa as president of the country, similar to the #zumamustgo campaigns that were held before Jacob Zuma's impeachment.
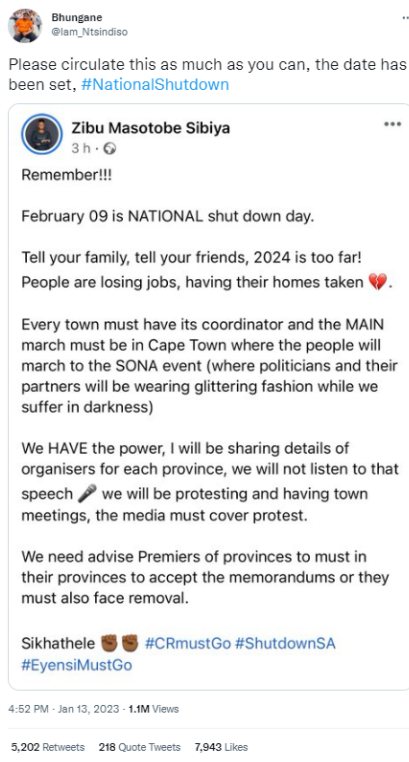

Figure 8: #nationalshutdown post that doesn't mention load shedding but instead uses #CRmustGo

What is interesting about the way the post in Figure 8 is displayed is that the hashtags #CRmustgo, representing the true agenda behind the post, wouldn't be picked up through social media listening tools as ANC factional content because that hashtag is part of an image and not the written part of a post. This means that for social media analysers looking for certain keywords, posts like this may go by unnoticed if it didn't receive such a massive number of retweets and likes.

Another tweet simply repeated "Ramaphosa Must Go" 14 times with #Nationalshutdown along with the image of an ANC shirt burning. Images of violence or chaotic protests were fed along with #nationalshutdown and #RamaphosaMustFall as we will see in the next category. In Figure 9, we see an example of this tactic where people are asked to hit like and share a post that contains #nationalshutdown and the image of people moving

away from a space where a fire has been started. An astute commenter to the post explains that the consequence of this post is to incite public violence, which is a common-law offence.

Figure 9: Post that drives violent images in the #nationalshutdown narrative taking attention away from the real issue at hand.

In Figure 10 the same person that tweeted the violent scene in Figure 9, posted twice the next day, while #nationalshutdown was still trending with images of Jacob Zuma and the national shutdown hashtag this time asking people to like and share if they think that Zuma is better than Ramaphosa and to hit like on another post if you miss Zuma. This indicates that accounts like the one shown in Figure 9 and 10 are feeding a clear pro-Zuma narrative into the Twitter space forsaking the authentic public cries for mobilisation against Eskom. This makes the national shutdown appear to be a potentially violent event that is actually based on the ongoing power struggle between the pro-Zuma and pro-Ramaphosa camp and therefore an internal political issue, rather than an issue of national concern that affects all South Africans.

Figure 10: Posts that make the online narrative about #nationalshutdown confusing because of the pro-Zuma/anti-Ramaphosa messaging.

#Ramaphosamustfall

#RamaphosaMustFall represented a small subset of the overall protest conversation, comprising just 5.4% of all mentions. The retweet percentage, 83.2%, and mean posts per author, 1.6, indicate a preference for the sharing of content rather than original engagement from accounts present. Content within this category, while only accounting for 5.4% of total conversation, represented 7.5% of accounts reached overall. This implies that the network of people sharing this type of content is sufficient to reach a large audience, even with smaller volumes of conversation.

Figure 11: Mention, reach and retweet volumes for posts that contain #RamaphosaMustFall

#RamaphosaMustFall appeared briefly, with 1662 mentions, in the lead-up to the ANC electoral conference[1], held in December of 2022 . The hashtag has seen renewed use with regard to the load shedding crisis in early 2023, peaking at 1780 mentions on a single day (Jan 14) and representing an almost 3-fold increase in usage from 01 to 22 January 2023 (see Figure 12).

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[1] The CABC has produced two reports on social media conversation as well as media representation of the four ANC presidential candidates during this period: Social Media Report ; News Media Coverage
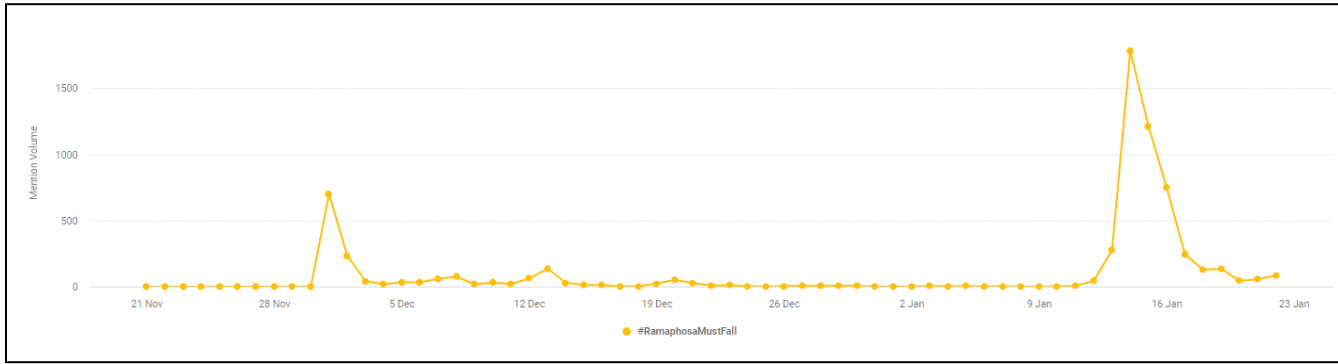
Figure 12: Usage of #RamaphosaMustFall

Content within the conversation sought to misdirect anger from the various issues at Eskom, towards Cyril Ramaphosa. The top 3 most active accounts within this category give us a brief overview of content which may have been used to amplify and misdirect attention away from genuine discussion and civil mobilisation and are described below.

@lyricsplug was the most active author within the data set, accounting for 75 mentions of #RamaphosaMustFall. These mentions ranged from non-targeted, frustration driven posts around the state of politics to targeted, anti-Ramaphosa sentiment.

Figure 13: Targeted Posts from @lyricsplug combining #NationalShutdown with various hashtags related to Ramaphosa's scandals and comparisons with former president Jacob Zuma

A recurring feature of posts from this account was the use of hashtags related to #PhalaPhalaFarmGate[2] as well as #CR17BankStatements and #RamaphosaVSZuma. Furthermore the account made dual use of #NationalShutdown and #RamaphosaMustFall, this may imply an attempt to conflate the two issues in the public eye, scapegoating Cyril Ramaphosa as the reason behind load shedding and a call to shutdown the country.

The second most active account, @MaboneKhoseni, accounted for 48 mentions, all of which were retweets. Over the last 2176 posts (as determined by TruthNest), the account holds a 95% retweet tweet-type and 0% original tweets (original tweets refer to posts to a timeline by an account that contains words that this account has typed or images that they have uploaded. They do not include quote tweets or tweet replies). Content retweeted by the account can be seen in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14: Examples of content retweeted by @MaboneKhoseni

In the posts above, we note further mention of Jacob Zuma and a call for the return to the nuclear deal. South African media is considered counter to the solutions which the poster believes would have ended load shedding. Reference is made to Independent Power Producers and from this we may infer an anti-renewables stance driving the type of content that is seen in Figure 14. Muammar Gadaffi appears in the profile picture of the first account and this factor along with the type of content that we see posted creates doubt about the authenticity of this account as a regular citizen and suggests that it may be part of a machinery designed to drive narratives for political or other gain.

The third and final top author of interest is @MOORSSS4 with 46 mentions of #RamaphosaMustFall. The posts from this account are mainly original tweets and tend toward an anti-western and conspiratorial angle of misdirection toward Ramaphosa. Selected tweets from this account are shown in Figures 15, 16, 17 and 18 below.

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[2] The CABC released a deep-dive report in October 2022, which identified inauthentic activity tied to the RET faction of the ANC in the online conversation surrounding Cyril Ramaphosa and the Phala-Phala Farm scandal:
#PhalaPhalaFarmGate: Manufacturing Dissent

The tweet shown in Figure 15 contained the attached image and called for other users to make #RamaphosaMustFall trend. This particular tweet garnered 1,500 likes and 304 retweets while reaching 119,497 accounts.

Figure 15: post encouraging Twitter users to make #ramaphosamustfall trend alongside #nationalshutdown

In Figure 16, we see #nationalshutdown appear with claims long forwarded by members of ANC's RET faction that President Cyril Ramaphosa is backed by so called "white monopoly capital" - a phrase that was created by the Public Relations firm Bell Pottinger in a pro-Zupta campaign, to undermine business and political spheres just before Jacob Zuma was impeached.

Figure 16: Ramaphosa is portrayed as a puppet of the west, controlled by "white masters"

Figure 17 contains a particularly graphic image that invokes images of the IFP and ANC factional fights that took place in the 80s and 90s. At this time, people who did not align with a particular agenda were "necklaced" i.e. a tyre that was doused in fuel was placed around their neck and they were set on fire.

Figure 17: Graphic image that brings to mind the infamous "necklacing" that took place in South Africa

Much like Figure 16, Figure 18 again tries to drive the message that Ramaphosa is controlled in some way and even turns to the highly conspiratorial, making the claim that the South African Judiciary is controlled by the CIA. This conspiratorial ideation is common in disinformation tactics creating the allusion that something larger and hidden from the general citizen is afoot. This plays on a fear of the unknown, the psychological term for this condition being Xenophobia - a term that has now taken on the meaning of fear of foreigners or strangers.

Figure 18: #Nationalshutdown appears alongside a conspiracy that the South African Judiciary works for the CIA

#RamaphosaVSZuma was a popular choice when attempting to hashjack conversation around the National Shutdown, the hashtag was used 364 times overall across all categories but mainly concentrated under #RamaphosaMustFall and #NationalShutdown as per figure 19.
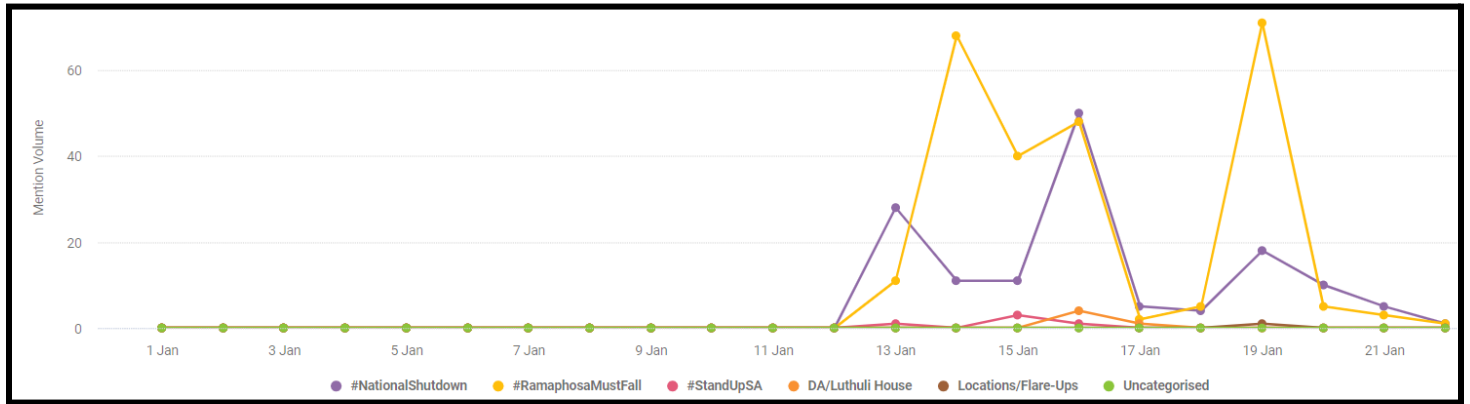

Figure 19: #RamaphosaVSZuma mention volume within categories

The post in Figure 20 contains a video from Tik Tok and is concerned with presenting Ramaphosa as an intermediary for the alleged "real owners of South Africa", the Rothschilds family and the Stellenbosch Mafia, including Johan Rupert. The interviewee in the video indicates that South Africa is run by a global organised crime syndicate and that it is not a true democracy.

Figure 20: A Tiktok video shared to Twitter with #RamaphosaVSZuma and #RamaphosaMustFall

The #RamaphosaMustFall sub-section of the overall protest conversation was inundated with posts similar to the above. The content and tactics employed provide some insight to what an attempted hashjacking campaign looks like.

Civil and Political Action Against Loadshedding

Contrary to attempts of misdirection, civil action organised on social media has positioned itself as legal, peaceful and in pursuit of solutions. Of these, two publicly organised mobilisations formed part of our data set. #StandUpSA, a march scheduled for the 2nd of February to Megawatt Park in protest of continued load shedding and the decision of the National Energy Regulator of South Africa (NERSA), who proposed an 18.65% tariff increase. #PowerToThePeople, the Democratic Alliance's (DA) content driver for a march to Luthuli House focused on similar issues but saw fit to march to the headquarters of the governing party rather than to Eskom offices because as an SOE, it is felt that this is an issue that the ruling party must address.

#StandUpSA, a newly formed civil organisation, made use of a hashtag, an official account and consistent engagement detailing each step of their protests' growth, fundraising and objectives. In Figure 21 we see the official social media page of the organisation and in Figure 22 we see active engagement from the head of the organisation, Khustaz Mtwentwe, as he regularly updated concerned citizens with details of the peaceful protest being arranged to submit a letter of demands to Eskom's executives at Megawatt Park. #StandUpSA accounted for 9901 mentions, received 9313 retweets and reached 16.8 million accounts. While the retweet percentage of this conversation is high, in the context of a peaceful mobilisation it represents strong interest from the almost 5000 unique authors in ensuring that the message is spread far and wide.
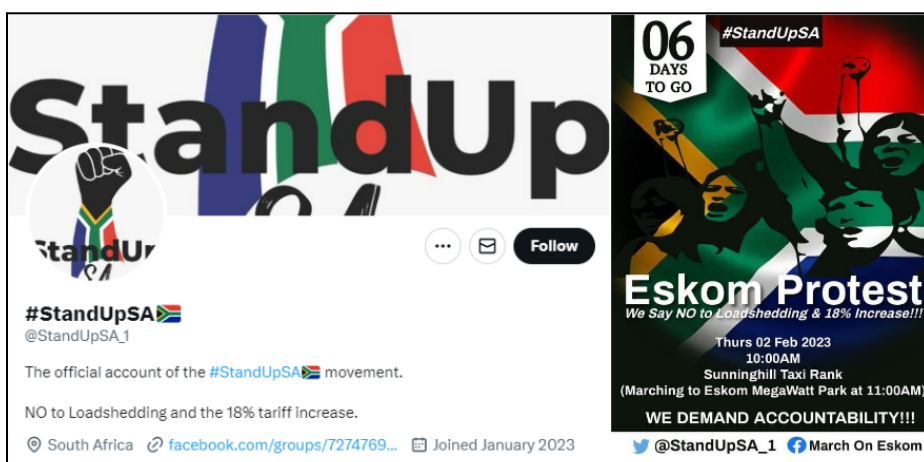

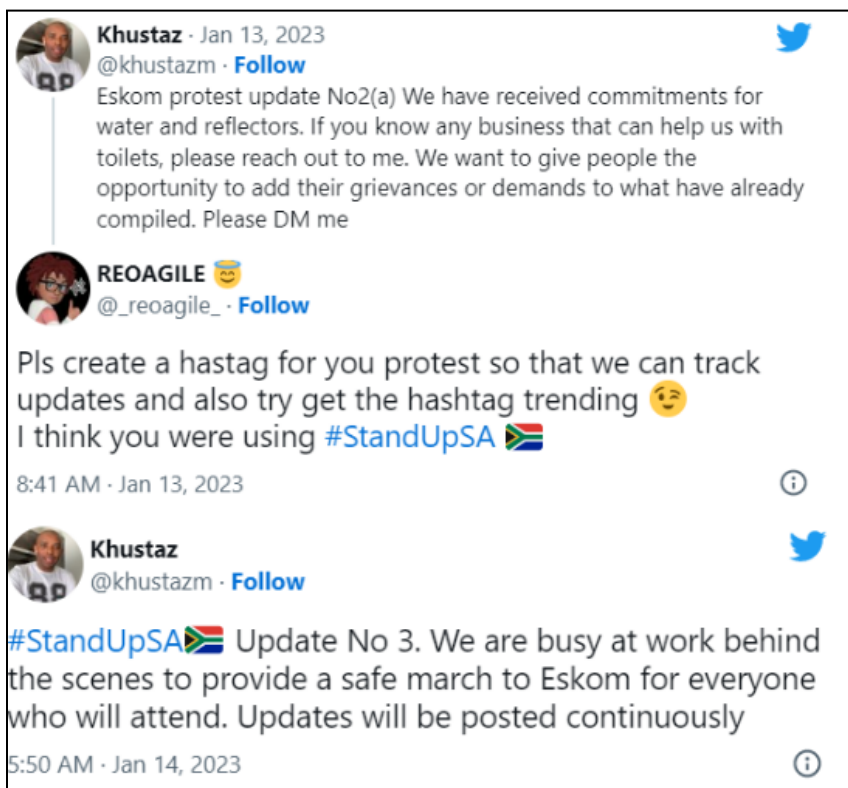*Figure 21: The official Twitter account of StandUpSA.*

Figure 22: an interaction between the head of #StandUpSA and a twitter user.

There is accountability behind the #StandUpSA campaign, that has been authorised to peacefully protest against issues that citizens face. This is unlike the accounts that sought to take attention away from legitimate calls for mobilisation.

The #PowerToThePeople march, organised by the DA for the 25th January accounted for 6150 mentions, of which 5509 were retweets with 3824 unique authors. Content around this march reached 15.6 million accounts. Owing to the nature of being the official opposition party, the march was bolstered through verified political accounts as well as South African media as we see in Figure 23 below. The DA created posters as well as a website linked to a petition against the tariff increases, which aligned with the primary reason for outrage by South Africans at the time. This poster is seen in Figure 24 below.

Figure 23: The #PowerToThePeopleMarch received publicity from media houses as well as official political accounts.

Figure 24: A political poster shared by the DA to gather support for the march on Luthuli House. An official website was created as well.

Although the conversation related to the DA and Luthuli House was our second-least active category in terms of mention count on Twitter, the demonstrations which took place gathered strong support as we see in Figure 25 with large mobilisations in both Johannesburg and Cape Town.

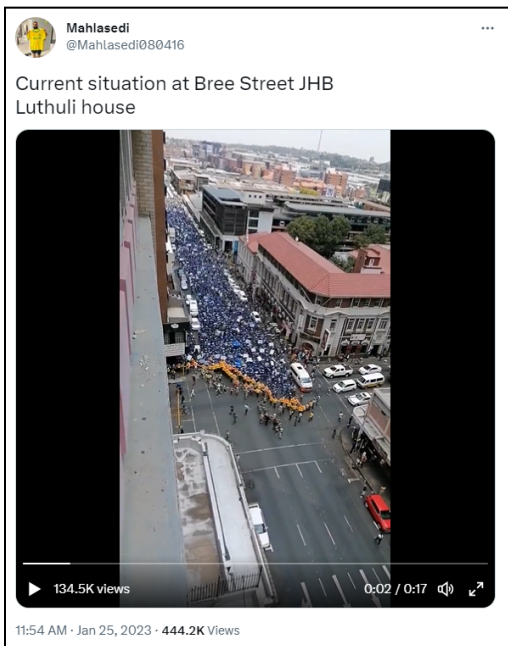*Figure 25: A video shows a large contingent of protestors who joined the DA march on Luthuli House*

Flare-Ups and Civil Action

Flare-ups of protest action took place across the country during the reporting period. Using the locations of these flare-ups as keywords, we measured 13,900 mentions by 8089 unique authors. The conversation was bolstered through 11,740 retweets and reached 29.7 million accounts. Due to the fact that these are the names of places, not all the content in the 13 900 mentions were related to the flare-ups. This is especially the case because our dataset starts from 01 January 2023.

Kroonstad saw a large crowd march against load shedding as confirmed by media houses and personalities, while the march in Parys has been reported to be based on frustrations with municipal service and water issues and not inherently focused on loadshedding.

For protests of this nature, where an overarching organising body is not visible, the Right2Protest, a coalition of civil society organisations, is instrumental in protecting the constitutional right to protest and ensuring fair and legal protections for those involved. This message appeared in conversation about Kroonstad where one of the flare-ups took place and an example of this is seen in Figure 26 below.

Figure 26: Right2Protest shared this poster in response to a post on the Kroonstad protests

Misdirection was potentially present in the content around flare-ups as the spontaneous action of these communities provides fertile ground for speculation and misinformation. This was particularly evident in the Parys protest which saw the house of the mayor burnt down allegedly by angry citizens from the area. See Figure 27 for an example of the images shared of the house burnt down.

Figure 27: Videos and images shared by an account of the Parys Mayor's house set alight

While the image above tells us that the people of Parys are upset over issues with water in the municipality, a historically problematic news reporting page on Twitter, the Insight Factor, indicates that the protest was the result of load shedding, while using the charged narrative of deliberate sabotage which also appeared under #RamaphosaMustFall. News24 on the other hand reiterated that the protest was due to water issues. Examples of the posts by the Insight Factor and News24 are shown in Figure 28 below.

Figure 28: An unverified media account, the Insight Factor, makes use of the deliberate sabotage narrative when reporting on both Kroonstad and Parys, shifting the cause of the Parys protest from water to loadshedding as well

Conclusion

Social media spaces like Twitter are powerful in that they have the ability to rally mass public support behind issues that we face as a society. However, due to the way in which these online systems are designed, they also present a space for opportunistic, bad actors to misdirect narratives of social importance. The impact of this is that citizens seeking information and solutions to their struggles may become confused within the chaos of a manipulated narrative.

Images of necklacing, fires and violent protests that don't align with the intention behind legal and peaceful protests should be considered as fear mongering because people who are not familiar with mass mobilisations may feel that by showing up in support, they place themselves in an environment where they could be hurt or attacked. Showing these kinds of images alongside #nationalshutdown as civil organisations and political parties tried to rally behind the issue of load shedding to push for a solution to a big problem that all of us can unite behind should not be taken lightly. Protest action scheduled for 02 February 2023 by #StandUpSA in Gauteng and "A country in crisis: the real state of the nation" organised by civil society group Defend Our Democracy, which takes place at St George's Cathedral in Cape Town on 08 February 2023, should not have to fight for space in online conversation because there are those in the country who seek to divide rather than unify.