



Futurelect

Bi-Weekly Social Listening Updates & Recommendations for Electoral Engagement #5

Populism, Foreign Interference and Conspiracy

Overview

- The online conversation around the upcoming elections and political climate within South Africa received more than 320,000 mentions between 18 March and 1 April 2024. The main topics of conversation included the failure of the ANC's court case which sought to have the MK Party deregistered; Naledi Chirwa being moved from position 40 to 200 in the EFF MP list, which has been speculated to be related to a public message shared by the MP¹; Former President Jacob Zuma being removed from the MK Party candidate and being involved in a car accident shortly after that.
- There were also some high-engagement mentions of the election of 44-year-old Bassirou Diomaye Faye as the President of Senegal. Some individuals used this announcement as an opportunity to urge South Africans to vote for a young president, with the candidate in mind being EFF leader Julius Malema. Examples of posts expressing that sentiment can be found [here](#); [here](#) and [here](#).
- #VoteEFF2024 became the most used hashtag during the period with more than 21,000 mentions, followed by #VoteMK2024 (see Figure 1). These hashtags were used to mobilise support for the EFF and MK Party, respectively.

Electoral Court and the MK Party v. ANC

- A recent judgement by the electoral court has [dismissed](#) a case brought by the ANC against the IEC which sought to argue that the MK Party was erroneously registered, and thus should be struck from the ballot².
 - The CABC notes that the lead-up to the case was fraught with allegations of a predetermined outcome - partially mobilised by a pre-judgement presser organised by the governing party (1) ; (2) ; (3) ; (4) ; (5) ; (6).
 - Interestingly, the post-judgement conversation was characterised by the praising of the judiciary, a dissonance noted through various high-traction posts: (1) ; (2) ; (3) ; (4).
- Given the MK Party's intimidatory rhetoric since its inception, however, which has involved mounting threats to not accept the outcomes of elections, we recommend that close observation of the MK Party's rhetoric is necessary, both in the lead-up to the election and thereafter.

¹

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2024-03-05-stir-as-eff-mp-naledi-chirwa-fined-and-made-to-apologise-for-missing-parliament-due-to-sick-baby/>

² <https://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZAEC/2024/3.html> (African National Congress v Electoral Commission of South Africa and Others) ; see more: <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/court-dismisses-ancs-application-for-iec-to-de-register-mk-party/> ; <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-02-19-anc-demands-zumas-mk-party-take-the-spear-in-unlawful-registration-sp-at-before-electoral-court/>

Foreign Elections and Alleged Foreign Interference

- The CABC has noted the importance of a TikTok video across two posts which garnered close to 100,000 views cumulatively. The [video in question](#) relays various successful and unsuccessful coup attempts in the Global South supported or actioned by the United States in prior decades³. The video goes on to speculate that the United States is currently engaged in planning a variety of coup attempts targeted at the BRICS nations, with South Africa particularly high on the list due to elections being held within the next two months.
 - Alongside this, the individual in the video makes reference to the DA and Multi-Party Charter (MPC) attempts to garner Western support for electoral observation, and the launch of the ICJ case against Israel as supposed evidence that such an operation is being planned and will be implemented through opposition parties, particularly those within the MPC.
 - Accounts which shared this video, [particularly in this instance](#), where the post received 85 comments and more than 1,000 retweets and likes, sought to direct individuals to vote for the EFF and MK Party as vanguards against Western imperialism.

- In late March - the CABC noted a spike in conversation about Vladimir Putin retaining power in the Russian Federation. Our snapshot of the conversation recorded 6,182 mentions which contained the keyword “Putin”. These mentions were concentrated on 18 March in relation to election results announced after the general election held in the Russian Federation, which many observers have questioned the integrity of⁴. While conversation related to this event was minuscule in comparison to our total recorded mentions, the South African presidency posted a [congratulatory message](#) which was characterised by mixed responses: (1) ; (2) ; (3)
 - Other responses viewed Putin’s retention of power in a positive light by equating the situation with a [victory for “contextual” democracy](#) and the [Russian people](#), as well as a turning tide in the BRICS block. Andile Mngxitama, leader of the erstwhile Black First Land First party and recent MK Party ally⁵, referred to Lula’s return to the Brazilian presidency and noted that [Zuma will be next](#).
 - The CABC has previously reported on Zuma being ineligible for the position of President or Member of Parliament owing to a previous 2-term presidency and recent conviction, which has seen the former president barred from the electoral list⁶.

- The CABC notes that a proportion of the conversation is related to fears of foreign and domestic interference in the election - across the political aisle. We reiterate the need to amplify the IEC’s independence and robust processes and procedures. The undermining of the IEC’s ability to conduct the election sets a dangerous precedent for post-electoral contestation and a flourishing mis- and disinformation environment.

The IEC

- The IEC has allowed people to vote outside their registered district ONLY if they notify the commission between 15 March and 17 May 2024. In response to a [post](#) sharing this information, some users complained that they had missed the IEC’s communication around this.
 - It’s unclear how many posts the IEC has shared regarding this information, but it could be worthwhile to amplify it both on social media and on the ground. In this respect, media, civil society and campaigns have a key role to play in amplifying IEC messaging relating specifically to the

³ https://www.democracynow.org/2018/3/12/100_years_of_us_interference_regime

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/independent-russian-vote-monitor-says-election-was-mockery-2024-03-18/>

⁵ <https://www.ewn.co.za/2024/01/18/andile-mngxitamas-blf-joins-up-with-zuma-backed-mk-party>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/29/jacob-zuma-election-ban-how-does-it-affect-south-africas-election>

need to notify the commission when voting outside of voter's registered districts. Including this information in campaigns will go a long way towards mitigating against voter dissatisfaction and vulnerability to claims that the IEC is 'preventing' votes from being cast.

- The integrity of the IEC continues to be undermined by various political parties. In the last reporting period, the DA undermined the IEC by requesting Western Nations to monitor the elections, despite a number of efforts made by civil society to encourage independent members of the public to monitor the process. This time, former president Jacob Zuma told supporters that he would [change](#) the election laws to ensure that voting was no longer a secret. "They make it a secret because they want to rob us," he said. The emphasis on one's vote being their secret has various benefits, which include: ensuring that the voter is comfortable and preventing voter intimidation.
 - In this respect, media, civil society and campaigns can play a role in reminding voters of how important voter secrecy is in ensuring free and fair elections i.e., if voting is not secret, then undue influence can be exercised over voters to vote one way or another by more powerful interests - it undermines democracy.

Mis/Disinformation and Unsubstantiated Allegations

- Zuma was removed from the MK Party list and was involved in a car accident. Some supporters of the former president are under the impression that 'evil' powers have coalesced against Zuma. The popular @ProfMoya account even [alleged](#) that the ANC was behind Zuma's accident, or "attempted murder". The post was liked almost 600 times and retweeted by more than 200 accounts. These unsubstantiated allegations qualify as disinformation.
- The MK Party has also blamed the ANC for Zuma's accident, accusing the party of "weakening" Zuma's security, which resulted in the accident, according to a report by [News24](#). In our previous factsheets, the CABC has recommended keeping a record of all allegations containing election mis- and disinformation. Allegations that Ramaphosa's ANC was trying to assassinate Zuma can be traced back to our first elections report, which can be found [here](#).
- Zuma's detractors have also been involved in spreading unsubstantiated allegations about the accident. The @goolammv account (which has more than 90,000 followers) alleged that the former president's car accident was "staged" so that Zuma could get increased security. In a [post](#) that received more than 550 likes with more than 150 retweets, the account shared: "Sources close to disgraced and very corrupt former president Jacob Zuma say the alleged 'accident' was STAGED [sic], this so that Zuma could get increased security detail which government will provide and pay for leading up to the elections".
- The concentration of mis- and disinformation around the MK Party and ex-President Jacob Zuma, when viewed in the light of the intimidatory rhetoric espoused by both in the lead-up to elections, presents considerable cause for concern regarding threats to electoral processes in the lead-up to and during elections, as well as after the election results are announced. In this respect, media, civil society and campaigns have a key role to play in emphasising the importance that the elections be contested and conducted in an atmosphere of peace and security. Here, emphasising that the advent of democracy in South Africa is what brought peace to the country in 1994, and that lasting peace can only be ensured through respect for democratic institutions, processes and electoral outcomes in turn, may be 'talking points' that can be emphasised.

Analysis & Commentary

- Fears of electoral interference by foreign powers, whether Western or Eastern, are legitimate, and particular attention should be paid to how public interest issues are mobilised and amplified online with respect to what alliances may underpin them. For example, South Africa's energy crisis may be mobilised to benefit political actors and formations that align with the promotion of Russian nuclear plant builds, or alternatively, those that align with pro-Israel interests in the context of the ongoing war. It is likely that public interest issues of these kinds - i.e., over which the public may be divided - can potentially be exploited by foreign powers to drive divisions within the South African electorate and influence its outcomes through the exercise of soft power i.e., with the aim of producing 'democratic' regime change. In this respect media, civil society and campaigns can focus on debunking divisive rhetoric related to particular narrative themes by questioning their alignment within the context of ongoing contestation for power in the global political and economic order. In essence, reminding voters that their votes are for South Africa's future alone, and should not be swayed by narratives that serve as Trojan horses for foreign interests. It is also important to note that while foreign powers may be involved, it is likely in the South African context that domestic actors (who are aligned with foreign interests) will constitute the main vehicles through which online interference is conducted.
- Generally, as with conversations related to the IEC and the apparent about turn of the MK Party after receiving a court judgement in its favour, multiple political actors and accounts in the South African political spectrum pass judgement on the validity of national institutions dependent on the favorability of these institutions in relation to their causes. This sets a dangerous precedent and we recommend paying close attention and responding to these trends. Specifically, it presents an opportunity for campaigns and the media to call out political actors and formations that exhibit duplicitous 'support' for democratic institutions. Democratic institutions, whether the IEC or the Judiciary, must be respected irrespective of their decision-making so they can act without fear or favour.

Summary of Recommendations

- Media, Civil Society and Campaigns must play a key role in: (1) Amplifying messaging from the IEC, especially as it relates to the particulars of electoral participation ; (2) Reminding voters of their rights and responsibilities within a democracy, particularly in election season, including the right to confidentiality ; (3) Highlighting that free and fair elections and as well as democratic representation are a privilege that must be maintained; (4) Not solely reporting on divisive rhetoric, but taking individuals, organisations and politicians to task when they spread mis- and disinformation or rhetoric which is harmful.
- The CABG notes that various political actors seek to capitalise on the narrative of a flawed election. Our recommendation remains continued monitoring of attacks against the IEC and Judiciary, as well as the refutation of narratives which seek to undermine the independence and competence of these institutions to facilitate the forthcoming national elections.

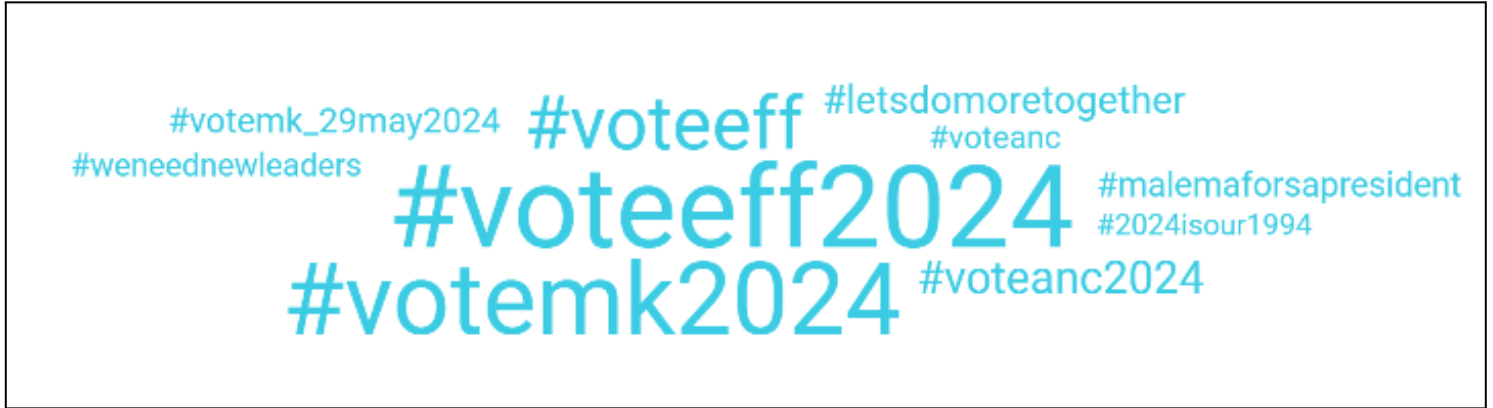
Figures

Figure 1: Top 10 hashtags within the elections conversation between 18 and 1 April 2024