



Julius Malema Making headlines

SA'S REPUTATION

Smudged image

The roping in of former ANC Youth League spin doctor Zizi Kodwa to handle President Jacob Zuma's public image could not have come at a better time for him and SA.

From the poor handling of news of Zuma's love-child with Sonono Khoza to the ANC's failure or inability to rein in Youth League president Julius Malema, to other events, SA is making headlines for all the wrong reasons.

How bad is the damage to the country's reputation?

"We are doing fine but there's reason to be concerned," says Wadim Schreiner, MD of Media Tenor SA, a research organisation specialising in strategic media content analysis.

He says according to recent ratings, Zuma's media ranking has dropped to negative levels lower than during his rape trial in 2006. Responsible for the

turn in the tide was news of his love child and extramarital affairs.

The president's media ranking has slid from a 10% increase in positive coverage during the national elections last April to a negative 29% in February.

And, for the first time, his negative image is mirrored in African media.

"The issue of the love child has made a lot of African media outlets very angry," says Schreiner.

Most critical have been the Kenyan media, which have denounced Zuma's behaviour as not being representative of the continent. "There seems to be a feeling among African media that Zuma's actions are pulling African culture down," says Schreiner.

"More so because SA has often claimed to be speaking on behalf of the continent and has tended to take the moral high ground on issues such as corruption."

The celebrations of the 20th anniversary of former president Nelson Mandela's release from prison were supposed to work in SA's favour, but the media focus at the time was on Zuma's state of the nation address, which, in turn, was overshadowed by the love-child scandal.

The "rise" of Malema has not done SA's image any favours. Though international coverage of the firebrand has increased five-fold in the past two months, it's been mostly negative.

Synonymous with reportage on Malema is the perception that SA politicians are vulnerable to greed and have a penchant for expensive lifestyles.

The 2010 soccer World Cup, due to kick off in June, has not escaped scathing international media attention.

But there is good news. Schreiner says SA's response to negative reports, particularly on the World Cup, has improved. "Now you find the Local Organising Committee (LOC) responding more and more and relevant ministers being quoted, saying that we are working on problems," Schreiner says.

LOC spokesman Rich Mkhondo says they are not fazed by negative reports. "I think the negativity is being exaggerated," he says.

Mkhondo says of his department's tasks, only 10% are dedicated to dealing with media reports, while it focuses on implementing the LOC's marketing and communication strategy. He points to the success of the Confederations Cup and the World Cup final draw. "We believe we need to be judged by what we deliver and not by what our critics say."

Schreiner says coverage of SA, especially abroad, continues to be determined by individuals' actions. That needs to change.

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