

## 'Parties failed to push the Zuma factor'

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Opposition parties left it too late to capitalise on the negative perceptions of African National Congress (ANC) president Jacob Zuma in their bid to sway undecided voters, according to research company Media Tenor.

The ANC began its campaign "with the task of persuading a deeply dissatisfied electorate" with a "flawed polarising candidate", according to the company's managing director Wadim Schreiner and research collaborator Professor Robert Mattes from the University of Cape Town (UCT).

Considering this the "least surveyed" election in the country since 1994, they nevertheless analysed the results of surveys conducted in the lead up to Wednesday's poll.

The researchers questioned why the opposition did not take better advantage of results that showed dissatisfaction.

The Congress of the People (Cope), which had the potential to break out of the mould in the eyes of the black majority, "squandered" its potential advantage with leadership squabbles and the nomination of the unknown Mvume Dandala, suggested Mattes, director of UCT's Centre for Social Science Research.

They found that none of the parties really addressed voters' concerns either, focusing on education, infrastructure and health, while barely mentioning unemployment, crime and HIV/Aids. The latter were issues identified as the main concerns of voters surveyed by Afrobarometer.

"In other words, the parties all focussed on the issues that were of least concern to the electorate," they said.

Schreiner and Mattes also believed voters would have struggled in vain to get information from the media on what the opposition would do differently.

"Instead, internal disputes, personal attacks and mockery have been the focus of the day. Coverage has focussed on events and rallies, but little substance or analysis.

"The 'who does what when' has been more prominently featured than the 'why'," they said.

### **Election coverage by the media**

They found the bulk of the coverage was on the party's leaders and not their policies and the study of election coverage on radio, television and print media found that only three to five parties received significant campaign coverage.

The ANC got the most, followed by Cope, and then the Democratic Alliance (DA), although the DA overtook Cope in coverage towards the end.

Cope complained on Sunday over the poor coverage it received from the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), but the SABC defended this as a technical glitch.

"The ID, PAC, UDM, ACDP, Azapo as well as the even smaller parties had to be content with snippets of mentions on the 'in other election news' sections," said Schreiner.

The Inkatha Freedom Party trailed behind in coverage, being a "shadow of its former self", getting its most notable exposure through its court challenge to the government over the refusal of a visa to the

Dalai Lama.

The company found that withdrawing charges against Zuma had no effect on support for the party and the ANC had mitigated negative publicity surrounding Zuma through on-the-ground communication, rallies and meetings which generated "riveting" images for positive television coverage.

The party also received media support through the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the ANC Youth League and some "independent" analysts, he said.

"While it might not have addressed critical issues, it effectively mobilised its 'base'," said Schreiner.

Schreiner said coverage had improved since the last elections, even though the media industry had its own challenges with retrenchments and cost cutting which would have an effect on what they can cover.

Journalists relied too much on "best-selling sound bites", rather than getting the message across.

But, said Schreiner, the media's focus on leaders does not mean that voters will go to the polls unaware of issues.

"We should not underestimate the intelligence of the voter," he cautions. "The electorate are pretty clear, they will vote for the party that they believe is going to solve their problems."

Media Monitoring Africa also noted that there was almost no coverage of important women's and children's issues.

*Business Day* wrote on Tuesday that major publications have refused to endorse any particular party.

However, popular YFM DJ Sbu has reportedly been placed on leave until after the elections after being spotted on stage at an ANC rally on Sunday. -- Sapa

**Source: Mail & Guardian Online**

**Web Address: <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-04-21-parties-failed-to-push-the-zuma-factor>**

