

Trust Deficit in Public Institutions and the African National Congress under the Democratic Experiment: Ominous Signposts Missed?

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses survey and elections results from Afrobarometer and the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), respectively, to demonstrate the relationship between the worsening public trust deficits in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy, and politics, on the one hand, and the ruling ANC's declining electoral fortunes. It asserts that South Africa's democratic experiment, under the ANC's 28 years state governance, was placed on the precipice of civil strife; and, that the July 2021 violent public unrest, destruction of infrastructure and pillage points to ominous signposts of popular citizenry acceptance of anarchy. The article offers three concluding remarks, thus: the ruling ANC's declining electoral fortunes will be hard to halt and reverse because whereas it is easy to lose public trust, it is hard to regain and uphold; the ANC's conduct of the 28 years state governance has set South Africa's democratic experiment on the precipice of ominous signposts of civil strife as societal political leadership vacuum is formed and consolidated; and, unless if the ANC reverts to undemocratic and/or fraudulent electoral conduct to stay in power, it will be decades before it recovers from the ongoing electoral slide. Finally, it recommends that the South African citizenry needs to ensure that the societal political leadership vacuum created by the erosion of public trust may not be consolidated and exploited by undemocratic forces to install unelected government.

Keywords: *Governance; Political economy; Interpersonal and Institutional Trust; Citizen Engagement; Societal Political Leadership; South Africa*

Background

This article explores theorisation of public trust in order to establish analytical tools for understanding the relationship between the incremental erosion of the citizenry's confidence in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics, on the one hand, and political party electoral decline, on the other. The foundational assumption adopted in this article is that public trust, which involves both subjective and objective drivers, is an indispensable resource for legitimacy, order, legality and stability of institutions of the state, constitutionality and politics that sustain democratic experiments (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019;

Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Together, political science and social capital theories on the theorisation of public trust provide that political systems turn on the value of trust by the citizenry and that democratic experiments evolve in “public spaces” that are fiercely contested (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Furthermore, theorisation of public trust indicates that political systems require legitimacy in order to ensure that their attendant structures, processes and systems may function through popular citizen support, rather than the use of coercion or violence.

Collectively, the cultural, social and institutional dimensions of trust, together with durable personal psychological traits and experiential socialisation processes, give rise to unitary public trust that consists of horizontal interpersonal intra-society and vertical institutional society-state relations (Putnam, 1988b; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). That is, public trust is a construct of planning which is simultaneously hardened as a personal psychological trait that is almost impossible to change or influence as well as being changeable through experiential socialisation. Hence, if eroded, public trust would be extraordinarily hard to regain and uphold sustainably. For these reasons, it is foreseeable that the ruling ANC will take decades to regain South Africans’ trust, if ever; and, that the societal political leadership vacuum created could in the process be consolidated and abused to stir civil strife and public violence, or worse. This article does not seek to insinuate an imminent doom for South Africa’s democratic experiment, but it points to a deleterious societal political leadership vacuum that has formed with the decline of public trust in state institutions of democracy, the ruling ANC and all other political parties. Also, the article characterises the July 2021 civil unrest as an ominous signpost of public expression of the societal political leadership vacuum. Whereas the ANC membership increased from 769 000 in 2015 to 1 220 057 in June 2022, it lacked in quality; and, by its own admission, the ANC membership consists of pockets of those who are described as “un-ANC” cadre because of the industrial-scale corruption, factional tensions and infighting. The latter conditions have exacerbated the historical societal divisions, causing in the process public disillusionment with the democratic experiment among an increasingly worrying majority of South Africans, especially the ruling ANC’s voting constituencies.

For a democratic experiment to hold in a heterogeneous society such as South Africa, therefore, conditions of social cohesion have to prevail (Struwig, Roberts, Gordon, Davids, Sithole, Weir-Smith & Mokhele, 2013), which are predicated on complex and tenuous interactions, experiences and expressions of horizontal interpersonal intra-society and vertical institutional society-state relations. Collectively, aspects of political science and social capital theories confirm that social cohesion and vibrant citizen engagement have a mutually reinforcing relationship with public trust in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992, 1993; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Struwig et al., 2013; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Brankovic, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). The erosion of public trust

in state institutions, governance and democracy has to, therefore, be construed as a function of the conduct of the ruling political party, which would be the ANC in South Africa's 28 years of democratic experiment.

Literature Review

Theorisation of public trust: political science and social capital theories

This article contends that the connection between the ANC's declining electoral fortunes and the erosion of public trust in state institutions, the presidency, government and parliament can be understood through theorisation of trust. To this extent, the article draws from a combination of tenets of political science and social capital theories in order to distil theorisation of public trust in terms of its dimensions, types, drivers and value. Literature identifies three dimensions of trust, namely: cultural, social and institutional (Putnam, 1993; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). As a construct of planning, trust consists of subjective and objective parts; hence, it has "relational" and "situational" levels of a generalised non-specific interpersonal and specific institutional confidence nature, respectively (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Struwig et al., 2013; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Brankovic, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). There has to be public support for governing regimes and confidence in public institutions in order for democratic experiments to endure (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020).

Together, the cultural, social and institutional dimensions of trust give rise to two important perspectives, namely: trust, which constitutes durable psychological trait, is formed at a personal level as an individual is born and raised within particular cultural values; and, trust is created and upheld through experiential socialisation processes (Putnam, 1988b). The latter perspective of trust encapsulates influences that may arise from horizontal interpersonal intra-societal relations as well as the vertical institutional society-state relations (Putnam, 1988b). The difference between the two perspectives is that trust derived as a personal psychological trait is hardened and almost impossible to influence or change, whereas that gained through experiential socialisation processes is changeable. But if eroded, the latter form of trust would be equally difficult to regain. Hence, the second perspective encompass horizontal interpersonal and vertical institutional trust, which are not independent of an individual's durable personal psychological traits. For these reasons, this article argues that the ruling ANC will take decades to regains South Africans' trust, if ever; and, that the societal political leadership vacuum created could be consolidated and abused to stir civil strife.

Closely associated with horizontal interpersonal and vertical institutional trust, literature identifies two variants that are often described as distinct types, namely: social (cultural) trust and political trust (Kumagai & Ironio, 2019). Social (cultural) is itself established through a combination of the two perspectives arising from the three dimensions of trust, as described above, whereas political trust draws from only one aspect of the second perspective. As a

result, both constructs of social (cultural) and political trust are, in isolation, deficient in that they exclude the power dynamics that resides in the political relations among citizens and between citizens and societal institutions (Kumagai & Ironio, 2019). Reliance on social (cultural) and political trust alone would provide inadequate tools for the analyses of factors that configure and reconfigure public trust. Indeed, social and political trust too cannot be constituted outside an individual's personal psychological traits, which are themselves not immune from horizontal interpersonal intra-societal and vertical institutional society-state relations.

For this article, therefore, reference to public trust would imply complex and tenuous but unitary combination of political, social (cultural), interpersonal and institutional trust, as well as their personal psychological traits and experiential socialisation. There is acceptance that institutional trust shapes individual behaviour in ways that influences the vitality of civil society (Putnam, 1993). The vibrancy of citizenship engagement is, therefore, dependent upon social cohesion, which is itself a function of interpersonal intra-society trust (Putnam, 1993). Drawing from social cohesion, citizens are positioned to shape institutional decision-making as well as policy implementation, reforms and development outcomes, thereby linking social (cultural), interpersonal and institutional trust to political trust through the vibrancy of citizen engagement. This article adopts this theorisation approach that accepts the unity of trust, in order to encapsulate all variants into the two interrelated categories of interpersonal and institutional trust. Hence, political science and social capital theories provide that the legitimacy and sustainability of a democratic political system, devoid of coercion and violence, derives from and is a resources for institutional trust (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Brankovic, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). On its part, social capital theory holds that stronger citizen engagement, which is a function of social cohesion and interpersonal trust, creates and upholds institutional trust (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Brankovic, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). To ensure that this theorisation of trust adequately establishes the connections between the ruling ANC's electoral collapse with the erosion of citizens' trust in public and state institutions as well as political parties, the next two subsections discuss, respectively, the drivers of trust and unity of trust in public value, governance and state institution bureaucratic services.

Drivers of Public Trust

Confirming the inseparability of the two perspectives arising from the three dimensions of trust, political science and social capital theories identify two critical drivers of trust, namely: competence and intention (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; OECD, 2017; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Brankovic, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Competence refers to the ability of institutions to perform their duties, while intention is about the inclination of institutions to do the right things. That is, competence involves "operational efficiency,

implementation capacity and responsiveness to ... deliver on a given mandate;" and, intentions describe "principles and values that guide action and behaviour" (OECD, 2017: 142; RSA, 2021: 9). Furthermore, competence is driven by responsiveness and reliability attributes whereas intentions derive from values such as integrity, openness and fairness (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Also, two more drivers of trust, commitment and accountability, respectively connected to moral obligation and responsibility, describe the necessary core intentions for governance and government performance (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020).

Invariably, competence invokes principles of effectiveness, accountability and inclusivity. Together, these three principles give rise to collaborative and sound policy making, integrity, transparency, independent oversight and vibrant citizenship. Literature assumes that commitment and application of these values and principles would ensure that such a democratic experiment leaves "no one behind," is participatory and non-discriminatory, thereby guaranteeing subsidiarity and intergenerational equity (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Brankovic, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Arguably, such a democratic experiment would instil confidence, create and uphold public trust; hence, there is universal acceptance that these values and principles constitute foundations for good governance (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). This article holds, therefore, that unresponsive, unreliable, irresponsible, unaccountable, uncommitted and unfair public institutions, that are morally bankrupt and devoid of integrity and openness, erode trust and create distrust. Whereas preconditions for citizens' trust in government involve morality and reliance on government for effective and efficient service delivery, caution has to be exercised because such reliance can equally place citizens in a position of vulnerability to abuses of state power and undue dependence (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Brankovic, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020).

Public Value, Governance and State Bureaucratic Services

The preceding subsection has, among other things, emphasised the indivisibility of trust, in order to assert its understanding as unitary but variable over a continuum from that based on personal psychological traits to that from experiential socialisation. Hence, it has been difficult to aggregate societal trust as a construct for planning bureaucratic civil services. Besides, political science and social capital theories provide for complex variants of bureaucratic civil services and their efficacies in ensuring government performance. There is no universal model of "effective" bureaucratic civil service. Even the International Civil Service Effectiveness Index's (InCiSE) composite metrics of civil service does not provide a conclusive universal model of "effective" bureaucratic civil service. However, a dysfunctional bureaucratic civil service would generally disable vibrancy of citizen engagement and undermine government

performance, thereby eroding public trust in institutions of the state, democracy and politics. Therefore, there is public value in the citizenry's trust of institutions of the state, democracy and politics. Citizen engagement in civic affairs embodies public value for governance, thereby confirming the significance of public trust to the legitimacy of institutions.

As a construct of planning, public trust also consists of subjective and objective aspects. The former involves individual citizens' lived experiences, which are also associated with cultural and social relations, whereas the latter relates to systems used to aggregate and measure institutional governance, economic development and levels of living (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). To circumvent this undue binary of subjectivity and objectivity of the foundations of public trust, this article relies on the notion of public value of trust which ranges along the continuum of symbolic to instrumental. Whether biased towards symbolic or instrumental value, citizenry's trust accord advantage to governance and performance of public institutions; and, government benefit from public trust simultaneously as it is a resource for generating and sustaining trust. Undoubtedly, public trust is crucial to governance; and, the latter has to create opportunities that would influence the former. However, public trust is not just an outcome-based phenomenon; instead, it is a process-based phenomenon, thereby justifying its theorisation as complex and tenuous but unitary, rather divisible. Repetitive horizontal and vertical social interactions, therefore, are necessary for democratic experiments to endure, whereas institutional dysfunctions create public distrust (Putnam, 1988a, 1988b, 1992, 1993; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). For instance, if trust in public institutions and political parties declines due to perceptions of corruption, that in financial institutions may also drop whilst that in media, police and judiciary may increase if they are instrumental in exposing, arresting and successfully prosecuting such acts of malfeasance. Where bureaucratic tendencies overtake citizen engagement, stalling government performance and policy implementation, public trust in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics will suffer severely. However, if the bureaucracy is effective and civil service is efficient, then public trust in public institutions and the state will be boosted, with the implications that trust in the ruling political party too would be held high. But caution has to be exercised because there are variable understandings and explanations of what constitutes effective bureaucracies and civil service because of contextual issues such as historical background and politics (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Alkon & Urpelainen, 2018; Brankovic, 2019; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). One profound point to make, though, is that whereas it is easy to lose public trust, it is hard to create and sustain it. The erosion of public trust can potentially undermine the democratic experiment and raise the costs of governance.

Of particular relevance to the ruling ANC in this regard is poverty, inequality, racial animosities, rampant corruption, crime and violence in South Africa's democratic experiment. There is a strong inverse relationship between public trust and corruption (Lannegren & Ito, 2017); and, this observation is particularly true for South Africa under the democratic

experiment. Violence and crime too are disincentives to public trust with direct implications to the rule of law and confidence in the police (Lannegren & Ito, 2017; Brankovic, 2019; RSA, 2021). In South Africa, public trust is also eroded by the scourge of gender-based violence, undue violence against foreigners and high levels of criminality (Lannegren & Ito, 2017; Brankovic, 2019; RSA, 2021). It may be difficult to establish a causal relationship between violence, crime and corruption, on the one hand, and interpersonal and institutional trust, on the other, but the correlation is strong. Increasing distrust in institutions of the state, democracy and politics demonstrates that citizens' civic engagement is far greater than mere voting activities or public consultations (Putnam, 1993; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Struwig et al., 2013; Brankovic, 2019). In the contexts of industrial-scale corruption, dysfunctional civil service and disengaged citizenry, as well as the absence of transparency and accountability, public trust is eroded. It is this theorisation of trust that pertinently suggests that the ruling ANC would find it extraordinarily hard to regain public trust that it is incrementally losing.

Result and Discussion

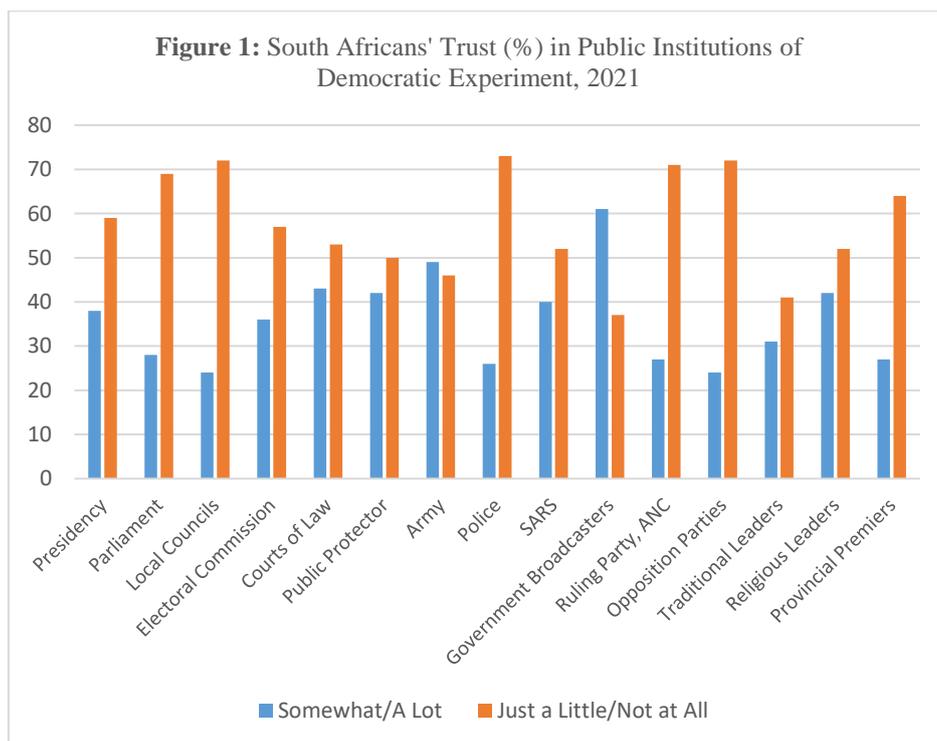
Erosion of public trust, the ANC's electoral decline and societal political leadership vacuum

This section uses statistical evidence to demonstrate that the ANC's electoral decline accompanied the onset of the erosion of public trust in state institutions, the presidency, government, parliament and others. Muller (2021) characterises the erosion of political and social relations in South Africa as a function of concurrency of reinforcing structural changes, prime among which, are factionalism and tensions within the governing ANC as an increasing majority of South Africans no longer trusted the former liberation movement under the democratic experiment. A concerning feature of the ANC's declining electoral fortunes, the internal factional fragmentation and simmering tensions, is that some in the governing party are readily willing "to use political violence," attested to by the July 09-18, 2021 civil unrest, "massive violence, the destruction of key infrastructure ... pillaging" in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Province (Muller, 2021: 2). The willingness to use political violence coincides with an increasing majority of South Africans, as this section will demonstrate, who are willing to forego their right to electoral democracy in favour of an unelected government if security, service delivery and prosperity are guaranteed. This combination of factors, amidst a growing vacuum in societal political leadership owing to the decline of public trust and electoral fortunes of the ruling ANC, spells ominous signposts on the road to deleterious civil strife.

Erosion of Trust in Societal Institutions and Political Parties

Afrobarometer's May/June 2021 national survey results show that trust in South Africa's public institutions, political parties and democracy-supporting institutions had declined to their historic lows (figure 1). Public trust in local councils and opposition parties was the lowest among all other institutions, followed by that in police, the ruling ANC, provincial premiers and parliament, all of which fell below 30%. Public trust in traditional leaders,

Electoral Commission of South Africa, the presidency and South African Revenue Service (SARS) ranged from 31% to 40%. For religious leaders, the Public Protector of South Africa, courts of law and the army, public trust ranged from 42% to 49%, with that in government broadcasters reaching highs of 61%. These results demonstrate that the majority of South Africans have lost confidence in institutions that support the democratic experiment and those that could potentially energise society for vibrancy of citizen engagement. In essence, the majority of South Africans have lost confidence in the democratic experiment; and, this article argues that this phenomenon cannot be dissociated from the decline in the ruling ANC's electoral fortunes, which was set in motion since the 2004 national elections (see figure 4). Conversely, public distrust in public institutions and political parties has been prominent, especially for the police, local councils, opposition parties and the ruling ANC, followed by that in provincial premiers, the presidency, Electoral Commission, courts of law, SARS, religious leaders, Public Protector, the army and religious leaders (figure 1). The least distrusted public institutions were government broadcasters at 37%

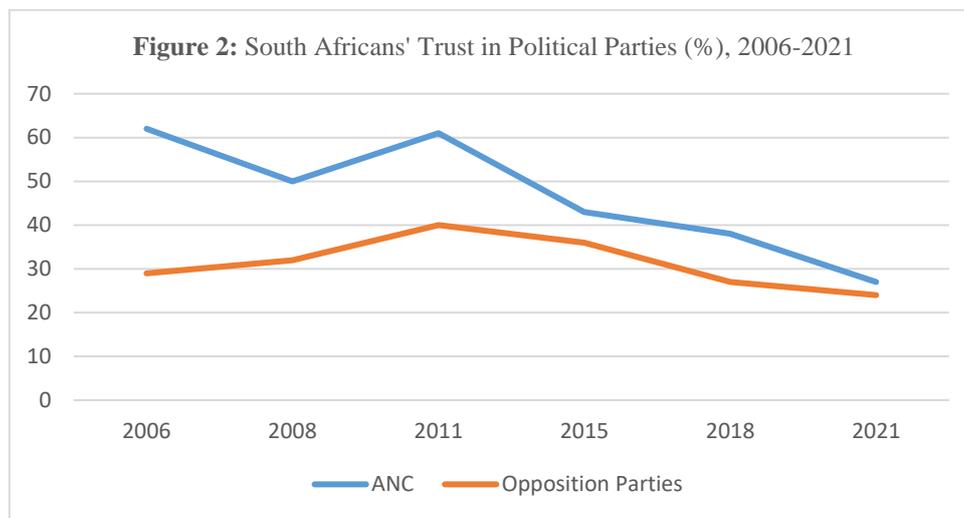


Source: Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021).

The 2021 Afrobarometer results are not an isolated anomaly; instead, they confirm a trend of declining trust in public institutions and political parties as well as increasing distrust in South Africa's democratic experiment. The increasing trust deficit in public institutions, as revealed above, was accompanied by a drop in public trust of political parties, with a drastic decline for the ruling ANC (figure 2). Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021: 15) conclude the May/June 2021 Afrobarometer report thus:

“Many of the declines in public trust originated between 2011 and 2015, a period when then-President Zuma was accused in several corruption scandals and Parliament and courts of law appeared unable or unwilling to provide oversight and accountability. A precipitous decline of public trust in the state, elected representatives, and oversight institutions may be one of Zuma’s lasting legacies.”

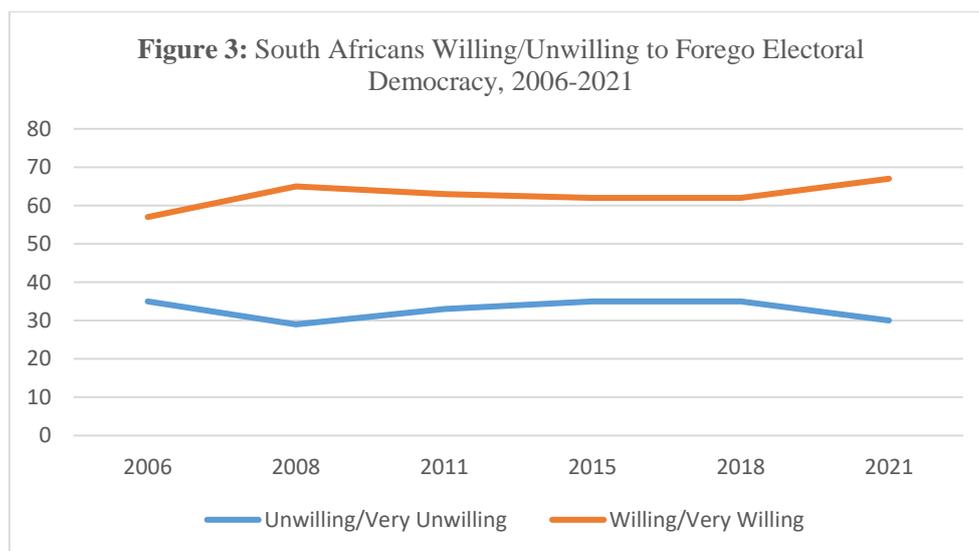
Indeed, trust in the ANC dropped drastically between 2011 and 2015; and, it has since never recovered as it reached the lowest point in 2021.



Source: Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021).

It is evident that opposition parties have never fared-well in terms of public trust in them compared to the ruling ANC during the democratic experiment. From the 2006 high of 61%, public trust in the ANC dropped to 50% in 2008, recovering to 61% in 2011 (figure 2). This slip in public trust for the ANC in 2008 is associated with the divisive contestations that preceded the 2009 national elective conference. The recovery that the ANC achieved in public trust between 2008 and 2011 is indicative of society’s belief that the factional tensions that marked the pre-2009 ANC national elective conference were an isolated epiphenomenal event, rather than an inherent contradiction embedded with the former liberation movement’s transition dynamics under the democratic experiment. Hence, as factional tensions became enduring and public post-2011, societal trust and distrust in the ruling ANC, respectively, decreased and increased drastically. By 2018 when the new party president, Ramaphosa, who was elected at the party elective conference of December 2017, ascended to state presidency and power, public trust in the party had reached 38% and could not recover, notwithstanding the so-called “Thuma Mina” and “Ramaphoria” hyperbolic drives that dissipated (Moosa, 2019), reaching the lowest point of 27% in 2021 (figure 2). The constant and steady decline, straddling the ANC’s December 2017 national elective conference, from 2015 to 2021 is the surest and clearest indicator that South Africans came to believe that factional tensions and industrial-scale corruption are permanent features of the ruling party. These characteristic features of the ANC render state governance ineffective and paralysed.

Similarly, opposition parties did not gain confidence in increasing numbers of South Africans as public trust in the ANC dropped, suggesting that an ominous societal political leadership vacuum is forming. The optics of leaderless civil unrest, political violence, destruction of infrastructure and rampant looting of July 2021 are ominous signposts of the road to dreaded civil strife that societal political leadership vacuum could create. Given that opposition parties have never gained public trust beyond 40% of 2011, which was an increase from 29% in 2006 (figure 2), consolidation of a deleterious societal political leadership vacuum is guaranteed. Since 2011, trust in opposition parties has dropped to 24% in 2021. Another aspect of this trend is that public trust in the ANC and opposition parties have peaked in the same year, 2011, and reached their historic lows in the same year, 2021 (figure 2). That suggests that South Africans' loss of confidence in public and state institutions that are governed by the ANC is generalised to include all other political parties. This phenomenon is a serious sign of societal disillusionment with the democratic experiment itself, because distrust grew even for democratic experiment-supporting institutions like the Electoral Commission and courts of law. This trend is ominous given that an increasing majority of South Africans have expressed willingness to forego electoral democracy in favour of an unelected government if security, service delivery and prosperity are guaranteed (figure 3).



Source: Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021).

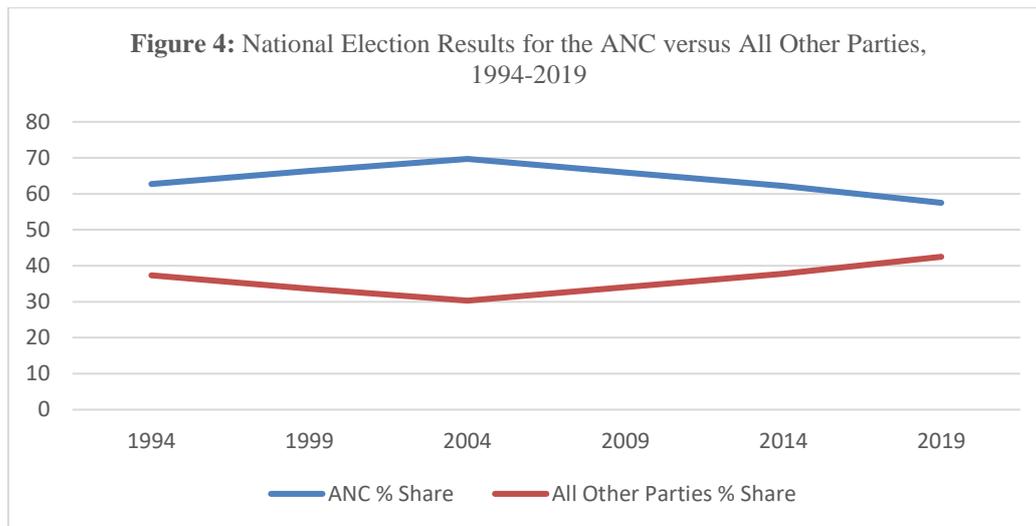
From 57% in 2006, the proportion of South Africans who expressed a willingness to forego electoral democracy for unelected government hovered between 62% and 65% during the 2008-2018 period, reaching a historic high of 67% in 2021 (figure 3). During the same period, the proportion of South Africans who expressed an unwillingness to forego electoral democracy dropped from 35% in 2006 to a historic low of 30% in 2021. This character of the South Africa society suggests that the majority do not perceive, if not derive, value from the democratic experiment. In this regard, the July 2021 civil unrest, destruction of infrastructure and pillaging, amidst state institutions' paralysis, is not an epiphenomenal occurrence along a merely dissatisfied citizenry. This increasing majority of South Africans would most probably go along if a political faction that has access to state machinery were to instigate a

coup. Democracies are generally defended by citizens; and, these results suggest that such defences have been eroded and weakened in South Africa's democratic experiment.

African National Congress's Declining Electoral Fortunes

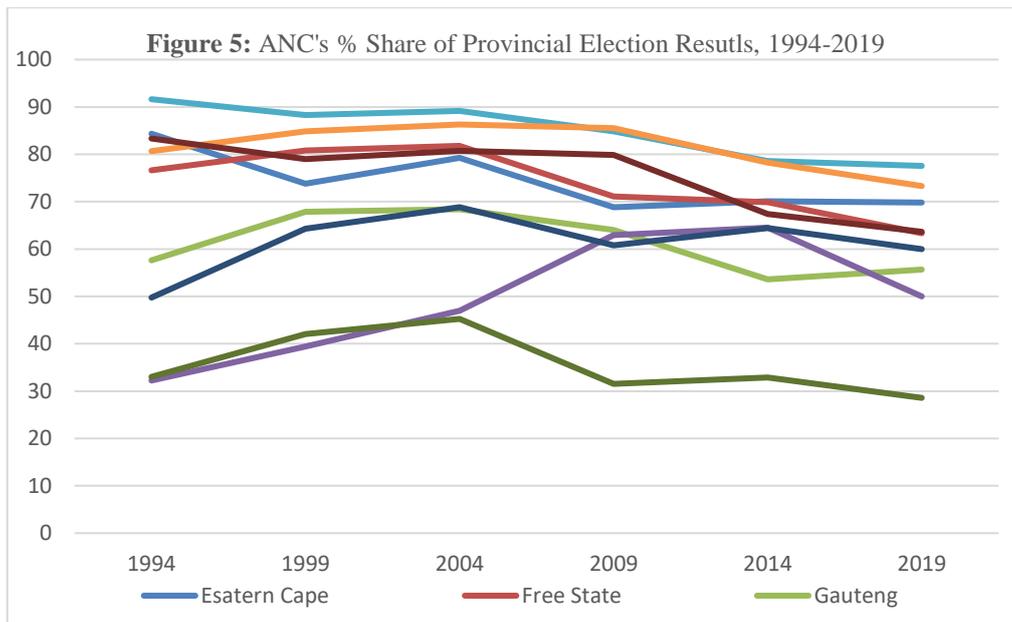
As South Africa grapples with the question of whether the country would not exist without the ANC, Kinzinger's (2022) closing statement at the 8th instalment of the Select Committee hearings of the Congress of the United States of America on January 06, 2021 rings true. Kinzinger (2022: n.p.) said "whatever your politics," "place country above self" and "honour oath of office," impressing upon all to understand that "laws are just words on paper," meaning "nothing without public servants dedicated to the rule of law, who are held accountable by a public that believes that oath matters more than party tribalism where the cheap thrill of scoring political points" is paramount. Kinzinger (2022: n.p.) concluded that if society does not renew its "faith and commitment" to democratic principles, a "great" and "shining beacon" of democratic experimentation as the USA too would not endure. Kinzinger's (2022) statement elicits public value in defense of democratic experiments in order to demonstrate that even as "party tribalism" may be thrilling for scoring political points, only citizens can provide the unbridgeable defence for the rule of law and sanity. South Africa's globally-acclaimed Constitution too will degenerate into "words on paper" if the citizenry loses confidence in the democratic experiment; hence, it is deeply concerning that 67% of South Africans are willing to forego their right to vote for government. That is, this significant majority of South Africans are not determined to hold public representatives and institutions to account, whilst an ominous societal political leadership vacuum is forming and the ANC exclusively preoccupied with cadre positioning for industrial-scale corruption. Therefore, South Africa's democratic experiment will not endue if the citizenry does not renew its vibrancy in civic engagement as well as confidence in the institutions that support democracy.

The ongoing trend in the ANC's electoral fortunes suggests that recovery, which is not guaranteed, may take decades to achieve at the polls. The IEC has by law been required to organise free and fair national, provincial and local government elections in South Africa, as well as to report such results (Republic of South Africa, 1996), even as public distrust in it has increased to 57% in 2021. The national elections are revealing of the ANC's downward spiral in electoral fortunes, especially from 2004 (figure 4), which is not explicable through the incremental strength of opposition parties. As already demonstrated, public trust in all other parties has deteriorated to 24% in 2021 and has always been worse than that for the ANC. Even as a collective, opposition parties have only managed to secure 42.5% of the national vote share in 2019, compared to 57.5% for the ANC.



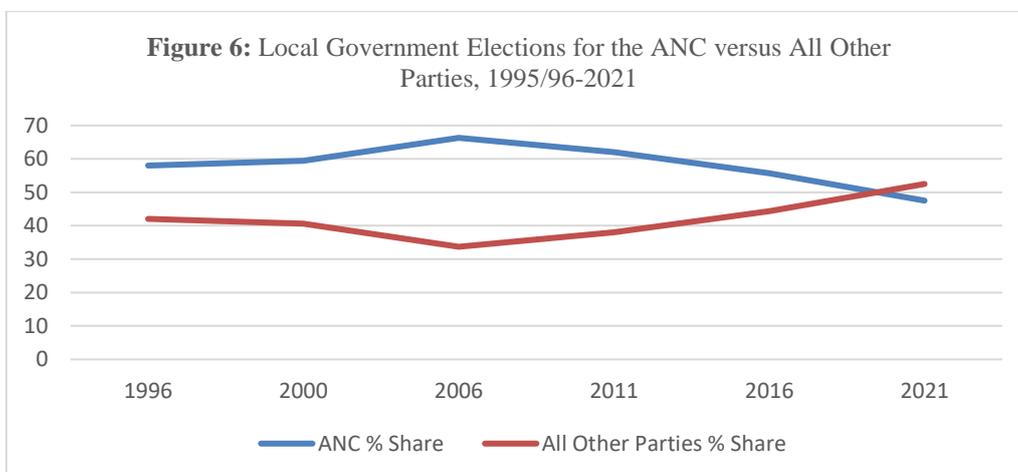
Source: IEC, (2019).

Given the prominence of coalition governments in six of the eight (8) metropolitan municipalities in South Africa (see figure 7), removing the ANC from power, the party must of necessity be seriously concerned about its future. The coalition governments at local government level, whereas unstable, provide further evidence that South Africa would still endure as the ruling ANC meets its demise. Besides the national electoral decline, the ANC has also experienced concerning election results at the provincial scale (figure 5). Generally, the ANC's share of provincial votes has been on a downward spiral since 2004, especially in Limpopo, Free State, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Western Cape (figure 5). Decline in the ANC's share of provincial votes in Mpumalanga and North West started after 2009. The ANC's share of votes in Northern Cape started declining in 2004, but regaining ground marginally in 2014, to only revert to the downward spiral in 2019. Whereas the ANC made electoral gains in KwaZulu-Natal Province, reaching 64.4% in 2014 provincial polls, a steep decline occurred in 2019 to 50%.



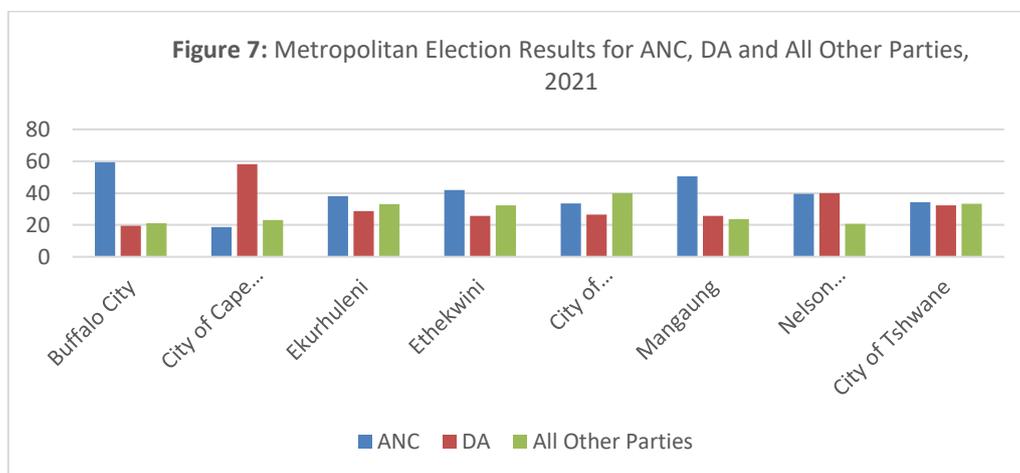
Sources: IEC (1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019).

Local government election results (figure 6) demonstrate the primary contexts within which metropolitan municipalities in South Africa have already had coalition governments after the 2016 elections. Opposition parties, individually, would not be able to form governments at both the national and local government scales in the near future. The same cannot be said about the provincial scales because the Western Cape Province has for years been under the Democratic Alliance (DA) government, whereas KwaZulu-Natal Province was once in history governed by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). At the national scale, South Africa is capable of forming coalition governments, albeit precarious, without the country collapsing with the demise of the ANC's electoral fortunes. It is foreseeable that the ANC may be unable to achieve electoral majority enough to form government at the national scale as early as the 2024 national elections.



Sources: IEC (1996, 2000, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021a, 2021b).

The ANC's declining electoral fortunes are adequately demonstrable through the November 01, 2021 local government election results for the eight (8) metropolitan municipalities of Buffalo City, Cape Town City, Ekurhuleni, Ethekwini, City of Johannesburg, Mangaung, Nelson Mandela Bay and City of Tshwane (figure 7). These metropolitan municipalities are a useful indicator of a political party's command of power in South Africa because they do not just have population numbers, they are economics hubs. Therefore, the 2021 local government elections demonstrate conclusively that the ANC's command of political power and dominance in South Africa has waned significantly. The ANC is not necessarily losing votes to other parties; instead, its declining electoral results have led to coalition governments for the majority of the eight metropolitan councils.



Source: IEC (2021b).

From the November 2021 local government elections, the ANC achieved an outright majority of over 50% only in two of the eight (8) metropolitan municipalities (Buffalo City with 59.3% and Mangaung with 50.63%), whereas the DA scored the same only in the City of Cape Town with 58.22% (figure 7). That is, only three of the eight metropolitan municipalities had governments formed by one party alone. In the five hung metropolitan municipalities, the ANC carried a relative majority in four (Ethekwini with 42.02%, Ekurhuleni with 38.19%, City of Johannesburg with 33.6% and City of Tshwane with 34.31%), whereas the DA had the relative majority in Nelson Mandela Bay with 39.92%. Whereas the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was the third largest party in seven of the eight metropolitan municipalities in terms of the local government election results of November 2021, ActionSA took this spot with 16.05% of the votes following its first participation in elections. This occurrence suggests that none of the opposition political parties was able to consolidate its electoral strength with the ANC's decline. Given the November 2021 results for the ANC in metropolitan councils of Ethekwini (42.02%), Nelson Mandela Bay (39.92%), Ekurhuleni (38.19%), the City of Tshwane

(34.31%) and City of Johannesburg (33.6%), it is inconceivable that the party could secure outright majority anytime in the foreseeable future. Also, there is no evidence that the present balance of electoral forces between the ANC, DA and EFF could be easily broken in the foreseeable future, especially at the national scale. But the likelihood of coalition governments in the five 2021 hung metropolitan councils will continue for the foreseeable future, and that Mangaung could be a hung metropolitan municipality in the next elections (figure 7).

Ominous signposts for the democratic experiment

A concerning proportion of South Africans are willing to forfeit their democratic right of voting in a government of their choice by staying away from the elections and there is a willingness to be subjected to an unelected government, if it guarantees security, service delivery and prosperity. Under the democratic experiment for 28 years, South Africans are already generally demoralised and in despair. Both horizontal interpersonal and vertical institutional trust have been decreasing since at least 2003, as measured by the Afrobarometer, Plus 94 Research, the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) of the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and the South African Social Attitudes Survey of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This trend is extremely concerning because horizontal interpersonal trust is of critical significance in the South African context where decline in public trust for the ANC is accompanied by a similar and even worse trend for opposition political parties, which creates a societal political leadership vacuum that could be abused to foment civil strife in case undemocratic forces seek to usurp state power fraudulently or by coercive violent means. The IJR (2019) reports that the weak vertical society-state and horizontal intra-society relations have direct deleterious implications on societal solidarity and trust (cited in RSA, 2021).

Simultaneously, South Africans have in significant numbers mobilised behind movements that seek to rid the country of criminality, violence and corruption, demonstrating that they have pride in being South African. However, this national pride is also variable across racial divides; and, it was above 80% during 2004-2006, declining to 65% in 2008 and recovering to 81% in 2019/2020 (RSA, 2021). Whereas pride is interconnected with trust and has the capacity to catalyse vibrancy in civil society, citizen engagement and participatory democracy, both horizontal intra-society and vertical society-state relations are dangerously at their lowest levels. South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 Vision of establishing active citizenship and enduring democratic experiment has thus far failed to take pragmatic effect. The ANC has been in paralysis as a ruling party, with the result that state governance has been ineffective, defective and deficient during the democratic experiment. By November 2021, the writing on the wall was vivid that the electoral dominance of the ANC was waning, without reprieve in sight; and, the ruling party will continue to haemorrhage massive electoral votes, consolidating societal political leadership vacuum. This change in South Africans' trust in these institutions will have long lasting effects in society's democratic experiment. The erosion of South Africans' trust in institutions of democracy and politics is a function of the ruling party's history of state governance failures, industrial-scale corruption and state capture. The substantial public mistrust in the ANC, opposition parties and institutions of

democracy among South Africans, has been exacerbated in recent years by president Ramaphosa's evident inaction, indecision, ANC factionalism and paralysis, erosion of state institutions, state capture corruption and the rampant corruption associated with state interventions in Covid-19 pandemic. In the final analysis, this article asserts that the ruling ANC may not regain South Africans' trust in decades; and, that there is no guarantee that such recovery may happen.

This article asserts that an ominous societal political leadership vacuum is forming in South Africa. Public trust in institutions of democracy is crucial for the consolidation and endurance of the democratic experiment. The risk of civil strife is high where society-state and intra-society relations are eroded and public trust in state institutions such as the courts of law, police, parliament, government, the Electoral Commission, Public Protector and the presidency is at historic lows. Strong public trust in state and oversight institutions and political parties is a necessary resource for the functioning and endurance of the democratic experiment, because these institutions are a "democratic ecosystem." Public trust accords legitimacy and authority to state governance through vibrant citizen engagement. In this context, the state institutions' collective failure to maintain law, order and stability during the July 2021 civil unrest, destruction of infrastructure and pillaging, in the face of a significant proportion of people who are willing to forego their electoral democracy for an unelected government, must be deeply concerning for all South Africans.

A vibrant citizenship activism is necessary for the endurance of political systems and the democratic experiment, yet an increasing proportion of South Africans distrust political parties. The failure of opposition parties to significantly gain electoral votes on the back of the ANC's decline suggests that there are no credible "checks and balances" on the ruling party's political power. Rather than express confidence in opposition parties as a converse of the incremental distrust in the ruling ANC, 67% of South Africans are willing to forego elections and to settle for undemocratically installed but effective government. The majority of black South Africans, the ANC's primary constituencies, who qualify to vote have increasingly not bothered to register for voting in recent years. Contrary to prevalent aspirations, the democratic experiment has set in motion worsening poverty, inequality, societal despair, crime, violence, rampant elite corruption and state capture, which collectively worked to weaken democratic norms and principles. Public value in the democratic experiment has waned significantly.

Conclusion

This article used political science and social capital theories to establish the connections between the ANC's declining electoral fortunes and the increasing public trust deficits in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics in South Africa. It theorised public trust using its cultural, social and institutional dimensions as well as personal psychological traits and experiential socialisation, in order to assert that quotidian public experiences and expressions of trust is a convoluted unitary, rather than fragmentary, whole, involving horizontal interpersonal intra-societal and vertical institutional society-state

relations. The article analysed survey and elections results in order to demonstrate the relationship between the worsening public trust deficits in institutions and the ruling ANC's declining electoral performance. South Africa's democratic experiment, under the ANC's 28 years state governance, was placed on the precipice of civil strife; and, the July 2021 violent public unrest, destruction of infrastructure and pillaging points to ominous signposts of popular citizenry acceptance of anarchy.

The article offers three concluding remarks thus: the ruling ANC's declining electoral fortunes will be hard to halt and reverse because it is easy to lose public trust, but hard to regain and uphold it; the ANC's 28 years state governance has set South Africa's democratic experiment on the precipice of ominous signposts of civil strife as societal political leadership vacuum is forming; and, unless if the ANC reverts to undemocratic and/or fraudulent electoral conduct to stay in power, it will be decades before it recovers from the ongoing slide. Finally, the article recommends that the South African citizenry has to ensure that the societal political leadership vacuum created by the erosion of public trust and the ANC's imminent electoral collapse may not be exploited by undemocratic forces to install unelected government. Realistically, the potential for civil strife in South Africa cannot be tenably discounted; and, the signposts of the democratic experiment precipice are ominous in the absence of vibrant citizen engagement and distrust of political system. The article forecasts that the ANC's implosion is imminent and that it will cause havoc, but that South Africa will not go down the rabbit hole with the ruling political party.

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