

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

## South African Politics and Online Electioneering Discourses in Selected Social Media Sites in Phuthaditjhaba

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Received: 23 February 2023 | Revised: 09 December 2023 | Published: 01 January 2024

Reviewing Editor: Dr Grace Temiloluwa Agbede, Durban University of Technology

### Abstract

*This study analyses electioneering discourses in selected social media sites of Phuthaditjhaba in South Africa. It focuses on political messages and images posted by political parties on selected Facebook Pages and X handles in Phuthaditjhaba. Using critical discourse analysis as a method and netnography as an instrument to collect data from selected sites, I analyse the packaging and language of political communication and highlighting socio-economic issues used by political parties to persuade voters and undermine messages of their competitors. The theoretical underpinnings of the study are drawn from Kubin and von Sikorski's (2021) notions of ideological and affective polarisation, and Entman's (1995) idea of social media constructions of poverty. Their ideas guide my analysis of how political rivals capitalise on existing socio-economic issues in Phuthaditjhaba to mobilise sentiment among disgruntled residents. Data was collected from ten social media sites namely, four Facebook group pages, four X group handles and two individual X handles. Ten images and accompanying texts were sampled from the selected sites. Thematic analysis was used to categorise the data. The findings of the study show that while politicians used social media for campaign purposes, residents of Phuthaditjhaba used it to contest, and challenge messages of political parties.*

**Keywords:** politics; poverty; blackness; social media; Phuthaditjhaba

### Introduction

This study analysed selected messages that political parties posted on social media sites in Phuthaditjhaba during the 2020/2021 election season. By focusing on political messaging on social media, the study sought to explore how political parties packaged their messages to solicit support from residents of Phuthaditjhaba and how residents of Phuthaditjhaba appropriated the same social media platforms to articulate grievances and highlight the failures of political parties. Thus, the study is an exposé of social media sites as platforms for political parties and residents of Phuthaditjhaba to initiate and conduct robust political discourse on socioeconomic issues affecting the community. Social media is a powerful tool appropriated by political formations for swift and inexpensive communication with large audiences. As an electronic platform, social media has radically transformed political communication by moving it from the physical streets and stadiums to the virtual space. In their analysis of election campaigns on Facebook and X, Stier *et al.* (2018: 50) argue that social media has fundamentally changed political communication by presenting election candidates with “widened range of strategic choices”. Among these strategic choices is the ability to determine social media demographics and post messages that speak to particular targeted groups. Elsewhere, Jungherr *et al.* (2020) perceive social media platforms as “key tools for electoral campaigns”. Significantly, social media platforms enable political parties and politicians to construct and post electoral campaigns that instantly reach various audiences at the click of a button. Since “election campaigns are communication campaigns” (Bimber, 2014: 130; Oparinde, 2018), social media offer political parties alternative and technical ways to communicate their campaigns to the social media audience. Social media communication is often accompanied by visual illustrations that emphasise particular attributes

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of a political party. Thus, most of the political messages that I analyse in this study are accompanied by images of poor water and electricity supply as socio-economic issues faced by residents of Phuthaditjhaba.

Political parties visually illustrate socioeconomic issues using social media tools that enable editing and photoshopping of messages and images respectively, allowing users to create social groups where participants can discuss issues of common interest. During the 2020/2021 election season, political parties and residents of Phuthaditjhaba used social media groups to mobilise support. The same social media groups were used by political parties to organise political meetings and door-to-door campaigns, while residents of Phuthaditjhaba used them as platforms to mobilise dwellers to protest against poor service delivery. The role of social media in politics is a widely studied area. In the United States for instance, Kreiss and Jasinski (2016), and Karpf (2017) have explored the role of social media in the political campaigns of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Bimber (2014: 131) submits that Obama's "social media [campaign] was no more than one of many factors in his win in 2008, while his campaign's adaptation to new technical possibilities had a more distinct effect on his success in 2012". In a study on political campaigns in the age of the like button, Gerodimos and Justinussen (2015: 15) state that, "Obama's campaign made highly strategic and focused use of Facebook as a tool for promoting its key messages and, crucially, for mobilizing supporters to act on its behalf". Strategically, Obama's social media campaigns focused on his "personality and family, while rhetorically, the campaign depended mostly on emotions (pathos) and to a lesser extent on credibility (ethos)" (Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015: 15). While scholars perceive social media as enabling political parties to package their social media electoral campaigns, Bimber emphasises that social media are evolving platforms that define and shape the contemporariness of politics. Social media messages are often strategic in capturing politicians' involvement with citizens by demonstrating competence in dealing with socioeconomic issues.

Exploring the impact of online environments on political communication, Shmargad and Klar (2019) argue that social media enables creation of mobilizing information and political news that inspire political debates and reflect political opinions. Hence, social media sites selected for this study are platforms for debating political issues and sharing views on the political messages of different political parties. The issues posted by social media users on selected social media sites in Phuthaditjhaba ranged from affirming support for political parties to articulations of socioeconomic grievances and failures of political parties. It is thus my argument that during the 2020/2021 election season, political parties appropriated social media platforms to package their messages, mobilise information and create political news. I conceptualise mobilization of information as ways through which politicians and political parties construct and use discourses on social media to dialogue with and solicit support from social media audience. There is intentionality and functionality of text in the selected discourses that deliberately incorporate historical struggles as part of information mobilization toward whipping up emotions among communities that experienced apartheid. However, historical references were sometimes criticized by residents of Phuthaditjhaba who cited housing and the water crisis as glaring failures of political parties.

This study is divided into three main sections. The first section analyses images of housing crisis in Phuthaditjhaba as expressions of poverty. It highlights how politicians exploit this crisis for campaigning purposes, and still make no effort to solve the problem after the elections. The second section focuses on political posturing by politicians as a strategy for votes. It analyses how politicians manipulate situations of poverty in Phuthaditjhaba to gain votes and dump their campaign promises after the elections. The third section analyses the political language of persuasion. In this section, I argue that the political language of persuasion is used by politicians to convince citizens to ignore current socio-economic realities and trust the process.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study explored how political parties, politicians, and residents of Phuthaditjhaba used social media platforms for dialogue and to express their political views during the 2020/2021 election season. The study partly drew on Kubin and von Sikorski's (2021: 188) notion of ideological polarisation which designates the "divergence of political opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and stances of political adversaries" on social media platforms. Kubin and von Sikorski (2021: 188) state that ideological polarisation is usually linked to "affective polarisation" and "the extent to which people like (or feel warmth towards) their political allies and dislike (or feel lack of warmth towards) their political opponents". I appropriate the notion of affective polarisation to analyse how political rivals use existing socio-economic issues in Phuthaditjhaba

to mobilise sentiment among residents in ways that generate mutual dialogue and the politics of collective catharsis. To examine how political parties used poverty, an existential challenge in Phuthaditjhaba, as a campaign tool, I appropriate Entman's (1995) discourses of social media representations of poverty. Although Entman focuses on traditional media outlets such as the television, his engagement with "visual constructions of poverty" informs my analysis of how discourses of poverty are constructed through social media visual images. Entman suggests two categories of visual constructions of poverty in the media, namely, visual images that define poverty as a discourse that threatens the well-being of the community and visual images that define poverty in terms of suffering. In the former category, Entman analyses poverty through visual images of crime, drug abuse and operations of gangs. In the latter, he analyses poverty through visual images of "poor health, and inadequate medical care". These categories inform my analysis of images and texts that reflected socio-economic challenges faced by community members and the subsequent exploitation of such existential challenges by politicians.

## **Methodology**

This article analysed social media electioneering discourses (images and texts) posted by political parties on selected social media sites during the 2020/2021 election season (January 2020 to December 2021) in Phuthaditjhaba. The period was characterised by heightened political tensions. Selected social media images and texts were read through critical discourse analysis. Schiffrin *et al* (2001: 352) define critical discourse analysis as a form of analytical research that analyses the use of text and speech in political and social contexts by enacting, perpetuating and resisting social power, dominance and inequalities. Critical discourse analysis enables linking themes in selected images and texts. Discourse refers to communication practices that reflect certain ways of thinking. For Dobson and Knezevic (2017: 783) language and other forms of expressions such as "visual communication, built environments and social cues" are part of communication practices. Elsewhere in this article, analysis focuses on the language that political parties and residents used in the sample images and texts as dialogic communication of their political views. The article also used thematic analysis in its engagement with selected images and texts. Braun and Clark (2012: 2) view thematic analysis as systematic method of identifying, organising and offering "insight into, patterns of meaning across a dataset". They add that "through focusing on meaning *across* a dataset, [thematic analysis] allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences". Kiger and Varpio (2020: 2) refer to thematic analysis as "a method for describing data, that also involves interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes". Equally important is that thematic analysis allows "themes to emerge from the dataset itself rather than be determined by a specific pre-existing theoretical framework" (Liu *et al.*, 2019: 42).

Ten images and accompanying texts were selected from X (five images and texts) and Facebook (five images and texts). The X accounts sampled for the study were, *City of Phuthaditjhaba*, *Phuthaditjhaba*, *EFF Free State* and *SABC News Free State* (official handles) and *David D Mabuza*, and *Nonceba Mhlawuli* (individual accounts), while the Facebook accounts were, *Phuthaditjhaba Thaba Di Mahlwa*, *Phuthaditjhaba News* (group accounts) and individual accounts for *Philip Seetsi* and *Bongani Madonsela*. The above social media sites were selected for the analysis because they were continually active throughout the 2020/2021 election season. Social media sites focusing on non-political issues such as business and marketing were excluded from the study. Data sampling on selected sites was based on whether the posted images and texts reflected the dialecticism between electioneering and socio-economic challenges that residents of Phuthaditjhaba faced. Images and texts that reflected on electioneering politics and socio-economic issues of other communities outside Phuthaditjhaba were excluded. Images and texts were then categorised into seven (7) thematics as follows, housing crisis, political persuasion, political posturing, exploitation of existing challenges, exploitation of the anti-apartheid struggle, corruption as cause of poor service delivery, and poverty as threat to the well-being of dwellers. For ethical reasons, initials were used to identify participants instead of their real names.

## **Brief Historical Background of Phuthaditjhaba**

Phuthaditjhaba is in the Eastern Free State province of South Africa. It falls between the borders of KwaZulu Natal and Lesotho. It is a former Bantustan/Homeland of the apartheid era which, like all former Bantustans, continues to face numerous socio-economic challenges. Todes and Turok's (2018: 28) averment that the Bantustan system facilitated

the marginalization of “blacks from mainstream socioeconomic and political activities” best describes present day Phuthaditjhaba. More than two decades into democracy, the socio-economic status of Phuthaditjhaba has barely improved. In a presentation to the CoGTA Portfolio Committee, Kgomo and Gelderblom (2020: 7) posit that seventy three percent out of three hundred and thirty-three people in Phuthaditjhaba live in poverty. Elsewhere, in its report on Phuthaditjhaba housing, the Provincial and Local Government (2021: 20) states that forty one percent of housing facilities in Phuthaditjhaba are underdeveloped. This underdevelopment and degraded socio-economic status are noticeable in selected images and are a consequence of poor service delivery. Most inhabitants of Phuthaditjhaba depend on government grant because of the high unemployment rate. During apartheid, the homeland government-built factories that employed people in the area and guaranteed livelihoods. However, since the industrial action of the 1990s, most of the factories closed and the few that reopened are not enough to cater for the growing population. In the article published by *Polity* (2021), Jankielsohn states that unemployment in Phuthaditjhaba is more than twenty six percent and second in South African provinces. Given the persistent socio-economic challenges in Phuthaditjhaba relating to the delivery of services such as electricity and water, electoral campaigns in the area tend to focus on how to alleviate poverty and improve service delivery. The following section discusses housing as a theme that emerged from the data as a subject of debate for both political parties and residents on the selected social media sites.

### ***The housing crisis in black communities***

This section analyses depiction of discourses of the housing crisis in Phuthaditjhaba through social media images and texts posted by political parties and residents. Housing crisis refers to scarcity of accommodation in the form of formal houses as provided for in the South African Constitution. The housing crisis in Phuthaditjhaba dates back to apartheid and has continued to haunt contemporary communities. Analysing poverty in former South African homelands, Nishimwe-Niyimbanira (2016: 47) argues that poverty is not only defined by income shortfall but also deprivation in various life domains such as housing. Manomano *et al.* (2016: 111) engage with housing problems and programs in South Africa and emphasise that housing is a necessity that must be recognised as a basic need, right, and an indicator of poverty eradication in a country. Poverty is symbolised by squalid informal houses in social media images. Suggestively, some social media images and texts draw a link between the housing crisis in Phuthaditjhaba communities and unemployment. In a media statement for *Polity*, the Democratic Alliance (DA) leader in the Free State, Jankielson (2021) states that unemployment among other social issues like economic instability and underdevelopment, “maladministration and corruption” are responsible for the housing crisis in Phuthaditjhaba.

Social media images and texts posted in the 2020/2021 election season underpinned the housing crisis as an expression of poverty in Phuthaditjhaba. Figure 1 below shows a typical home in Phuthaditjhaba. Shacks exemplify underdeveloped surroundings and abject poverty in Phuthaditjhaba.



**Figure 1:** EFF doing a door-to-door campaign

**Source:** <https://web.facebook.com/Phuthaditjhabanews/photos/a>

The picture shows a man donning the Economic Freedom Fighters’ (EFF) political party regalia, presumably on a door-to-door campaign, gazing at a half-dressed unidentified woman. The pictured homestead has a shack for a home, in dusty surroundings, typifying Phuthaditjhaba’s housing crisis. In South Africa, shacks are informal houses signifying



poverty. In a study on poverty and inequality in South Africa, Triegaardt (2006: 2) argues that “Poverty is apparent to the human eye and is profiled by shacks” among other social ills. The shack in Fig 1 represents Phuthaditjhaba’s housing crisis — a post-apartheid phenomenon that the local government is failing to resolve. The image is a satirical revelation of unfulfilled promises made by politicians during election campaigns, lampooning politicians’ exploitation of power as reflected in Schiffrin *et al.* (2021) critical discourse analysis. These promises symbolize the emptiness felt by community members trapped in conditions of poverty until the next elections. The gaps on the sides of the shack’s door filled with pieces of cloth, a misplaced plate, tin of paint and other misplaced paraphernalia in the yard, speak of the dwellers’ economic struggles.

Among the citizens’ comments is one from T who says, “Free house my girl vote for the red Barre and get out of this Zozo”, and CD who says, “Hey baby...if you vote EFF I'll buy you a (Reconstruction and Development Programme) RDP house”. The first comment echoes the 1996 African National Congress (ANC) manifesto that promised to deal with the housing crisis in former homelands such as Phuthaditjhaba. The cynicism in the first comment suggests that the EFF, like other political parties that previously governed Phuthaditjhaba, is making empty promises that it will fail to fulfil. The second comment reveals Phuthaditjhaba communities caught in a cycle of poverty. Perceived through Schiffrin *et al.*’s critical discourse analysis, the use of the term “baby”, impresses a sense of childlike infatuation and gullibility, and speaks to the exploitation of poor communities during the electioneering process. Getting an RDP house comes at a cost — offering sexual gratification to politicians. While “the RDP aimed to set South Africa firmly on the road to eliminating hunger, providing land and housing, access to safe water and sanitation” (Nishimwe-Niyimbanira, 2016: 1), social media users’ comments expose politicians exploiting desperate communities by making false promises, thus, perpetuating poverty in poor communities.

Social media users also capture the housing crisis as a metaphor of the squalor and poverty haunting Phuthaditjhaba residences. The suggestion here is that people with disabilities have to endure the double burden of disability and man-made conditions of poverty, echoing Entman’s (1995) argument that poverty is a discourse that threatens the well-being of the community. Fig 2 shows a shabby shack with the supposed disabled owner conversing with a man wearing an ANC T-shirt. Present at the scene is the public broadcaster and government mouthpiece, the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC). Next to a shack is the amputee with walking aid sticks signifying disability. The combination of a shack and disability speaks to Banks *et al.*’s. (2021: 386) argument that disability and poverty are closely connected and reinforce each other. Although these writers focus on disability and poverty in Vietnam and Nepal, their engagement with the question of whether disability increases poverty is relevant to reading the image in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** The display of housing of most residents in Phuthaditjhaba  
**Source:** <https://www.facebook.com/SABCNewsFreeState>

On the relationship between disability and poverty in South Africa, Graham *et al.* (2014: 16) argue that in most cases, disability results in lack of formal education, unemployment and poverty. In Figure 2, the surroundings strewn with pieces of cloth, plastic papers, stones and other items, a shack with a door that is falling apart, a window that shows glass and wooden window pans, and the owner sitting on a beer bottle crate speak to the poverty and squalor endured by this household and community. The contrast in appearance between an ANC member who is in a white T-shirt, and the disabled shack owner, highlights poverty and persistent economic inequalities in this former homeland. Members

of the ANC are fashionably dressed with traces of wealth suggested by their bulging bellies. Apart from tracing government failures to deal with the housing crisis in Phuthaditjhaba, social media users challenge the shrewdness and exploitative nature of politicians during elections. Reflecting on the link between poverty and the propensity for exploitation, Sticker (2021: 194) argues that absolute and relative poverty increases failure to avoid and escape exploitation. People with disabilities, as shown in Figure 2, are usually susceptible to abuse by politicians who promise to transform their lives during elections only to disappear once they have been elected.

Figure 3 below is from Facebook and shows ANC members campaigning in Phuthaditjhaba. The rugged gravel road shown in the image and the rickety brick house in the background betray the housing crisis and poverty in Phuthaditjhaba. In the foreground are ANC supporters with raised fists signifying the “Amandla! Awethu!” (Power to the People) slogan. The irony at play here is that there is no resonance between the dilapidated houses of Phuthaditjhaba inhabitants and the power that the ANC gained on behalf of the people in 1994.



**Figure 3:** The ANC members campaigning  
**Source:** <https://scontent.fjnb6-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t39>

Although the “Amandla! Awethu!” slogan is synonymous with black South Africans’ struggle against apartheid, the dire living conditions of black people in Phuthaditjhaba suggest that the struggle for a better life is far from over. Nonetheless, contemporary South African black communities often appropriate the slogan to express their own social grievances (Tivenga, 2018: 142). In Figure 3, the slogan expresses power in the hands of the ANC as a party as opposed to the hands of the people. The contrast between the “Amandla Awethu” slogan and the apparent housing crisis in the background suggests failure by the ANC to decisively deal with the scourge of post-apartheid poverty in Phuthaditjhaba. The feeble, half raised hands of the supporters suggest some kind of fatigue, given that the political power that the people supposedly gained has barely transformed their lives.

Some images that accompanied the campaign trails of political parties on social media show that the housing crisis in Phuthaditjhaba is an existential crisis. Some informal houses are shown in a state of disrepair, posing a threat to the lives of the dwellers. Figure 4 shows ANC supporters pasting posters on a shack with a roof anchored by stones. The posters reflect the image of a smiling ANC and current South Africa president, Cyril Ramaphosa. The ANC motto, “Building a better community together” is ironic because the shack ridicules failed aspirations to build better communities. While the ANC president’s smile suggests hope and optimism, the condition of the shack, which is on the verge of collapse represents residents with nothing to smile about in the new South Africa. The shack’s precarity signifies economic instability and the vulnerabilities of living in poor communities such as Phuthaditjhaba. Although it is not clear whether the individuals in the image are the owners of the shack, worth noting is that the crouching man’s old and ragged shoe foregrounds the dire economic challenges, poverty, and inequalities in the former homeland.



**Figure 4:** ANC supporters pasting posters on a shack  
**Source:** <https://web.facebook.com/search/top/?=anc%20Phuthadijhaba>

### ***Posturing for votes***

Politicians manipulate conditions of poverty in Phuthaditjhaba through theatrical participation in community activities during the election period to gain votes. This is a point Oparinde et al. (2021) also established while using the Nigerian case study in terms of how politicians weaponise poverty in their political communications. Social media images and texts posted during the 2020/2021 election season attest to this. The aim is to impress voters and solicit votes. Interestingly, social media comments from ordinary citizens suggest that politicians rarely complement their campaign performances with action after the elections. Thus, one can argue that in post-apartheid South Africa, discourses of alleviating poverty are a currency politicians use to trade for votes in poor communities. Figure 5 shows an ANC member helping a woman wash laundry during the 2021 campaign in Phuthaditjhaba. The caption and comments accompanying this image portray politicians as actors pretending to care about communities when they need votes.



**Figure 5:** An ANC member doing a laundry for a resident to gain their vote  
**Source:** <https://web.facebook.com/Phuthaditjhabanews/photos/a>

The image in Figure 5 is captioned, “If they do our laundry maybe I will vote”, suggesting the despair that characterises this community, and the desperation of politicians when in need of votes. The irony is that the politicians’ posturing for votes in poor communities betrays their awareness of the needs of these communities yet, after the elections they do little to resolve the issues, making poverty a permanent condition in black communities. Commenting on the image in Figure 5, one commentator (RC) says:

*“This is exactly how Anc operates in real life, they will ignore your situation and they do what they want to do and leave. The least the guy could have done is to buy her a bunk stoll so she can put those dishes on top to enable her to wash properly without hurting her back. That’s how u change a person’s situation not this nonsense”.*



The above comment exposes ANC politicians engaging in cosmetic gestures of care during elections while overlooking the real needs of the communities. It is interesting to note that RC is concerned about politicians who “do what they want to do and leave” showing that their political agendas are not aligned with the needs of communities. This explains why they leave communities in poverty after every election. The assumed failure by the pictured ANC member to realise that the woman needs a “bunk stool” shows that political parties are not in touch with every reality of life in poor communities. Another Phuthaditjhaba netizen, NV comments, “mnm they can even wash your whole body to get your vote, that’s how desperate they are for ivote *zenu*, wait until the elections are over and see their true colours”. NV’s comment exposes the hypocrisy of politicians who claim to champion the needs of the poor, and yet abandon these communities after elections. Consequently, communities remain trapped in poverty until the next elections. The fact that politicians are so desperate that they can “even wash your whole body to get your vote” suggests political careerism for politicians with no other source of livelihood, hence they do anything to retain their positions.

There are connections between electioneering and underdevelopment in Phuthaditjhaba as shown in social media images and texts of the 2020/2021 election season. The infrastructure that the ruling ANC failed to fix before elections, becomes electoral campaign points in the current election. Figure 6 shows images posted by ANC on X depicting the campaign trail of South Africa’s Vice President, David Mabuza, during the election period. The image on the left shows Mabuza and his delegation touring a water supply site in Phuthaditjhaba. That the ANC Vice president’s visit coincides with the election period is opportunistic as Mabuza’s campaign trail focuses on service delivery issues that have affected Phuthaditjhaba for many years. The images in Figure 6 create an impression that the Vice-President has come to address the water crisis in Phuthaditjhaba once and for all. The uniformed workers and equipment in Figure 6 suggest that the installation of water supply infrastructure is underway, while the image of politicians (on the left) in safety wear positions them as architects of community development. The caption that accompanies the images says: “As we committed in @ParliamentofRSA, we are here in Maluti-a-Phofung to see for ourselves the interventions that the Free State Provincial Government is making to ensure that residents have water and electricity”. The implication of this statement is that the ANC-led government is fulfilling its promise to “ensure that residents have water and electricity”.



**Figure 6:** The Vice-President visiting Phuthaditjhaba

**Source:** <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/ExufrxnXAAcQfKC?format=jpg&name=large>

One year after the ANC won the 2021 elections, the communities in Phuthaditjhaba continue to struggle accessing water and electricity. Responding to David Mabuza’s X above, K.B comments, “We heading to the elections very soon *akr jwale*... Here they are pretending to care where have you been all this time while we were drinking dirty water?”. KB’s comments lament election-oriented development initiatives as neglectful of communities. According to KB, the ANC only pretends to care when it is election time. The people of Phuthaditjhaba have been drinking dirty water long before the election season and politicians did not seem to care. PJ also commented, “The lack of empathy for the people is disgusting”, suggesting that politicians are far removed from the communities that they lead. Analysed through discourse analysis, both commentators draw attention to how politicians neglect developing water infrastructure only to exploit it towards elections to garner votes. PJ’s comment that politicians lack empathy is significant as it brings the ethics of care into politics. However, attempts by PJ to humanise politics by focusing on the lived realities of the electorate and the rhetoric of electioneering censures politicians. KB’s exposé of David Mabuza’s politics of absentism



while communities get dirty water points to the ANC's shortcoming in maintaining its connections with the communities it governs.

### ***Political language of persuasion in the midst of poverty***

This section analyses the language of political persuasion in selected social media images and text of the 2020/2021 electoral season in Phuthaditjhaba. Political language of persuasion is a form of communication used by politicians to convince community members to vote for them even in the face of glaring poverty and lack of basic services. In an analysis of the use of metaphors in the language of persuasion, Lapka (2021: 88) defines persuasion as language use that aims to stir human feelings while concealing and highlighting specific parts of the message. In the images and texts analysed in this section, political language of persuasion draws on South Africa's apartheid past and the inequalities it entrenched in communities as if to say the only way to address the historical imbalances is to support the party that brought freedom. Such historical references and reminders, as later discussed, seek to convince community members to see their current conditions of poverty as a creation of the apartheid government that the ANC-led government is trying to resolve. In an exploration of politicians' use of persuasive language, Malabar (2020: 76) argues that candidates use language that appeal to their voters' specific emotions for their message to be comprehended. I argue that the political language of persuasion is a mechanism through which politicians blindfold citizens to ignore current realities and trust the process.

Figure 7 is a fascinating SABC News' X that reflects how the ANC used language in the 2020/2021 election period to persuade Phuthaditjhaba community members. The image below shows South African Vice President, David Mabuza, and his delegation accompanied by Phuthaditjhaba community members.



**Figure 7:** The Vice-President campaigning for his party  
**Source:** <https://twitter.com/SABreakingNews/status/>

The image above is accompanied by a caption that says: "We delivered you to the promised land': Mabuza urges Phuthaditjhaba residents to vote ANC despite failings". David Mabuza likens the ANC's role in South Africa to that of the Biblical Moses, who delivered the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land. David Mabuza exploits ANC's anti-apartheid struggle to solicit support from Phuthaditjhaba community members. Reference to the Biblical Moses is not only an attempt to legitimise and naturalise ANC rule but also to whip up emotions especially among those who experienced apartheid. The politician appropriates the biblical experience of Moses to persuade Phuthaditjhaba community members to support the ANC based on history. Mabuza's use of the phrase "the promised land" is ironic considering that the ANC's failures are mentioned in the same sentence that promises the milk and honey of the promised land. Mabuza seems to suggest that communities in Phuthaditjhaba should be grateful that the ANC delivered them to the land of promise.

Responding to David Mabuza's post, one commentator BB asks: "Did he say promised Land, only if that promise was Sodom and Gomorrah because that's where the ANC took the nation. We didn't even cross the Red Sea, moved from coals to burning fire". This comment carries on with the Biblical imagery albeit in a way that subverts Mabuza's representation of South Africa as the promised land. Far from being the promised land, BB suggests that South Africa has become a symbol of Sodom and Gomorrah, the two Biblical cities that God destroyed because of rampant

immorality. To say South Africa did not even cross the Red Sea is to suggest that South African communities continue to live in semi-apartheid conditions years after the demise of apartheid. TA shares similar sentiments in the comment, “That land in Maluti-a-Phofong doesn't have water, under their leadership!”. In this comment, TA subverts Mabuza's promised land narrative by pointing out poor service delivery in Phuthaditjhaba. The implication is that Maluti-a-Phofong does not exemplify the Biblical promised land because it does not have water, let alone milk and honey.

Worth noting is how the political language of persuasion incorporates the failures of previously elected parties and officials in an attempt to rhetorically present the contesting party as a better alternative. For instance, the APC Azania party highlights the ANC's failures to provide basic services and infrastructure for Phuthaditjhaba communities. The APC makes an illustration shown in Figure 8, of residents of Phuthaditjhaba washing their laundry at a nearby river. The APC uses this image to stress its capabilities to deal with the water crisis if voted to power. In fact, the water crisis in Phuthaditjhaba is severe that at some point, a teenager drowned in the river while trying to fetch water.



**Figure 8:** Phuthaditjhaba mom blames municipality for child's drowning while collecting river water

**Source:** <https://twitter.com/legasamollo7/status/>

The image in Figure 8 is accompanied by a X that reads, “Phuthaditjhaba community vote @APC\_Azania @themba\_godi coming local government elections otherwise you struggle your entire life”. The caption portrays the APC candidate Themba Godi as the political messiah capable of dealing with the poverty that the ANC has failed to solve since the end of apartheid. In its X, SAfm quotes the African Content Movement (ACM) party leader Hlaudi Motsoeneng saying:

*“You can't trust the ANC, they have failed Phuthaditjhaba for the past 27 years. I'm saying to all people of Maluti a Phofung, please if you vote for poverty, you vote for problems, vote for ANC and other political parties. Vote for Hlaudi you'll see miracles”.*

Motsoeneng's language also exposes ANC's failures while projecting his party as capable of addressing socio-economic challenges in Phuthaditjhaba community. Where the ANC has failed for over twenty years, Motsoneng claims if the residents of Phuthaditjhaba vote for his party, they will see miracles. Incidentally, Motsoneng was once a member of the ANC and Chief Operations Officer (COO) of the public broadcaster, SABC, and was fired on allegations of corruption and misrepresentation of qualifications.

Some political parties construct their language of persuasion by incorporating discourses of accountability. These discourses seek to undermine previous incumbents by highlighting corruption as the source of service delivery challenges in Phuthaditjhaba. Fig 9 shows Economic Freedom Fighters' (EFF) Vice President Floyd Shivambu (in a black EFF T-shirt) leading a march with supporters in Phuthaditjhaba demanding accountability for lack of service delivery from previously elected public officials.



**Figure 9:** The EFF marching for water in Phuthaditjhaba

**Source:** <https://twitter.com/EFFFreeState/status/144827704592269315>

The image in Figure 9 is captioned: “@FloydShivambu joined the march in Phuthaditjhaba to demand that all Municipalities in the District give full account on water, electricity and roads. Service delivery can only be possible under the EFF government, because only the EFF has the political will”. The caption gives the impression that EFF is a responsible political party with responsible leadership that will be accountable when voted to power. The caption further suggests that the lack of water, electricity and infrastructure is a result of previously elected corrupt political parties. Regardless of the EFF march shown in Figure 9, the roads in Phuthaditjhaba remain poor and full of potholes. The march was a mere political gesture that did not change anything in Phuthaditjhaba.

Apart from highlighting its role in the anti-apartheid struggle, the ANC also sought to woo voters through the discourse of unity. Figure 10 is an ANC rally where officials emphasised the need for unity suggesting that the problems facing Phuthaditjhaba can only be solved when all stakeholders unite. Antithetically, a comment from a social media user in Phuthaditjhaba suggests that the problem is not lack of unity but corruption in the ANC.



**Figure 10:** The ANC supporters gathering

**Source:** <https://twitter.com/NoncebaMhlauli/status/>

This image is accompanied by a X from the ANC which reads, “Fifth and last community meeting for the day in Phuthaditjhaba. The people of Maluti-A-Phofung love the ANC and they love their President. Together we will build better communities!”. Politics is a game of numbers and the ANC is aware of this. It exploits the number of people who attended the community meeting and appropriates it as the language of love to legitimise the ANC. However, participants on X highlight corruption as the cause of service delivery challenges in Phuthaditjhaba. One participant, CC comments:



“You wish....Maybe u are 1 of those few who benefited from corruption...We are tired of ANC ...Dikwankwetla did wonders...den boom...Kak ANC reversed all..Bona Mmanapo e jwang..1 cnt even tell hore ke sepetlele..Elizabeth rose yona ha kesa buwa”.

CC suggests that poverty in Phuthaditjhaba is a result of corruption from ANC officials. By comparing the eras of the ANC and Dikwanketla political parties in Phuthaditjhaba, CC shows how the ANC corruption derailed progress. CC makes reference to the collapse of public institutions under the leadership of the ANC. For example, he claims that Mmanapo regional hospital and Elizabeth Rose hospital in Phuthaditjhaba have deteriorated under the leadership of the ANC.

## Conclusion

This article analysed political discourses of electioneering posted by various political parties on selected social media sites during the 2020/2021 election season. The analysed political messages were selected from social media groups and individual accounts that discoursed election campaigns of political parties in Phuthaditjhaba. The study argued that selected political messages highlighted the failures of some political parties to elicit support from residents of Phuthaditjhaba. The analysis cited political parties that integrated the water crisis in Phuthaditjhaba into their social media messages to highlight and criticise the ANC for its failures while suggesting that they will address the socioeconomic challenges if elected. The study also noted that some political parties highlighted the housing crisis in their messages to show that the residents of Phuthaditjhaba have remained trapped in a cycle of poverty, suggesting need for new political leadership. I argued that some messages, especially on the housing crisis, show how politicians exploit existing challenges for political mileage. For instance, selected messages and accompanying comments suggest that politicians only visit Phuthaditjhaba during elections to solicit support and rarely deal with the housing crisis thereafter. The article also argued that the political language that political parties used during the campaigns is manipulative with a focus, not on addressing challenges but on winning elections.

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