JOLEEN STEYN KOTZE, NARNIA BOHLER-MULLER, BENJAMIN ROBERTS, GARY PIENAAR, YUL DEREK DAVIDS and NGQAPHELI MCHUNU

South Africa's Thuma Mina moment: Public opinion and political trust in South Africa's COVID-19 response

Summary

Effective leadership, state capacity and confidence in government are regarded as factors linked to successful COVID-19 pandemic responses to minimise both loss of human life and adverse socioeconomic impacts. Central to effective leadership of any COVID-19 pandemic response is political messaging and communication that generates public confidence and trust. International experience shows the importance of this in shaping perceptions of the quality of leadership, which potentially influences the public's faith in a government's ability to deal with the pandemic. Through coherent and empathetic political messaging, political leaders create a 'rallying-around-the-flag' effect, which requires consistency and broad consensus from all political leaders to reinforce public confidence in government's ability to deal with the national crisis, and reduces public criticism of governments in a time of crisis. In South Africa, the bold leadership displayed by President Ramaphosa and his advisors in instituting an early hard national lockdown received widespread praise, nationally and internationally. Yet, as the lockdown was extended, public confidence in government's ability to deal with the pandemic declined. This policy brief engages with questions on public trust and political messaging during the COVID-19 crisis. South Africans generally display low levels of trust in political leadership. However, during the COVID-19 public health crisis, it appears that levels of public confidence in political leadership were initially higher, but then returned to lower levels, albeit not as low as prior to the pandemic. Engaging with questions of public trust in times of crisis is necessary to determine what factors influenced changes in public confidence in political leadership, which has policy implications.

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic revealed deepening fault lines in democracies, most notably in political trust – an essential precondition for democratic rule (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017). There is growing concern that

political trust, along with other critical democratic criteria, is declining, resulting in a global resurgence of autocratisation (Kalberer 2020). Indeed, Flinders (2020: 1) highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic poses the risk of a democratic crisis globally. Given these considerations, it is necessary to interrogate the broader dynamics of political trust in a context where there are concerns about the resilience of democracy. As Ellinas and Lamprianou (2014: 231) observe, 'given the significance of political trust for the functioning of the political system, it is important to know whether the way citizens relate with political actors and institutions changes dramatically in … times of unusual environmental stress'. This policy brief thus considers the question of political trust in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on one round of data from the UJ-HSRC Democracy Lockdown Survey and Ask Afrika data, the policy brief considers key elements of building and sustaining political trust in times of crisis. We specifically consider the president's political messaging in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on political trust in South Africa.

Political messaging, quality of political leadership and public trust in times of crisis: A glance at international experience

Political messaging is crucial during a public crisis. Government leaders and political elites need to communicate effectively with the public to promote behavioural change and build support for public responses to a national emergency. Seen as the most urgent global health crisis since the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, governments around the world engaged in political messaging about COVID-19 to prepare public health systems, as well as to mitigate the social, economic, and human-life costs of the disease. Indeed, as Bækgaard, Christensen, Madsen and Mikkelsen (2020: 1) highlight, 'in

Figure 1: Distribution of COVID-19 cases by country (22 September 2020)
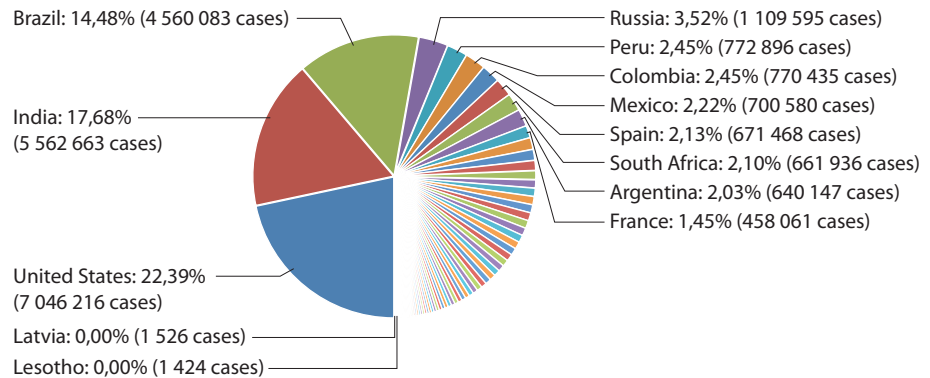
Source: Worldometer (2020)

times of severe international crisis, such as wars and terrorist attacks, citizens tend to "rally around the flag" and increase their support for political leaders'. A key question is thus to what extent these rallying effects might include socioeconomic lockdowns and governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schraff (2020: 1) emphasises that '… the intensity of the pandemic rallied people around political institutions. Collective angst in the face of exponentially rising COVID-19 cases depresses the usual cognitive evaluations of institutions and leads citizens to rally around existing institutions as a lifebuoy'.
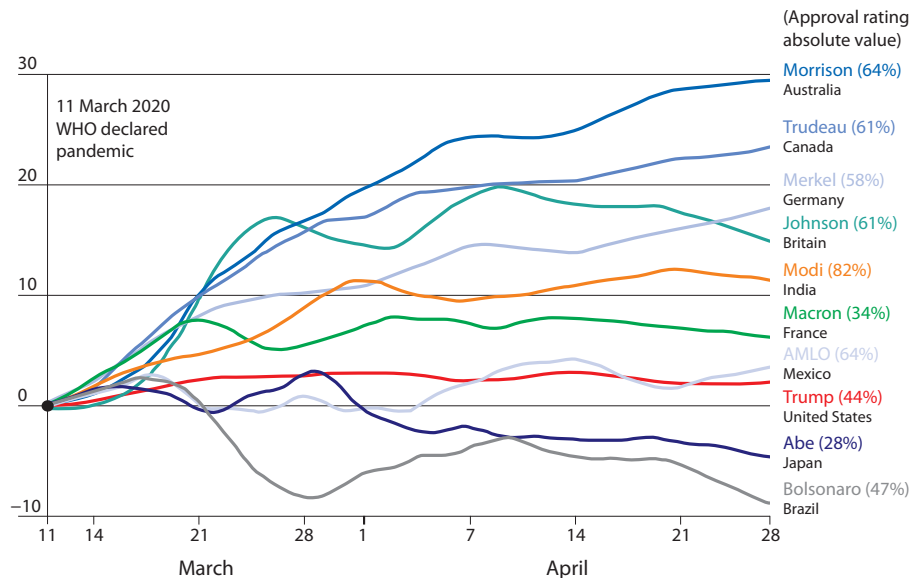
Furthermore, Chatagnier (2012: 631) observes that the magnitude of the rallying effect is mediated by political trust. Political trust enables leaders to call on citizens to voluntarily (and, in this instance, temporarily) forego some of their rights in pursuit of the greater common good during a crisis. In South Africa, President Ramaphosa's political messaging highlighted the need to 'buy time' to prepare the public health system to manage the impact of COVID-19, hence engendering public support for a hard lockdown that severely limited human rights. Concomitantly, the political messaging of COVID-19 denial in the USA and Brazil saw these countries experience a comparatively larger share of global infection rates

(Figure 1). This can be attributed to the adverse messaging from political leaders who denied the profound public health implications of COVID-19, and ignored the policy advice of scientists and experts.

By contrast, political leaders who took the COVID-19 pandemic seriously enjoyed a spike in approval rates, even though they instituted hard lockdowns and curtailed civil liberties and individual freedoms (Figure 2).

This spike in approval ratings for political leaders correlates with how well citizens thought their leaders and governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Germany and Australia show a higher level of social solidarity than the USA, Brazil and Britain, where the latter countries' responses yielded higher death rates (*The Economist* 2020). Therefore, if citizens perceive their country's response as being effective, this creates social solidarity and increased support for political leaders. This social solidarity, however, is also dependent on whether political and government leaders are consistent in both their political messaging and behaviour. In what is described as the 'Cummings-effect' (Fancourt, Steptoe and Wright 2020), data from the UK show a correlation between government announcements on COVID-19 and public trust. Fancourt

Figure 2: Approval ratings of selected world leaders

(Approval rating absolute value)

Morrison (64%) Australia
Trudeau (61%) Canada
Merkel (58%) Germany
Johnson (61%) Britain
Modi (82%) India
Macron (34%) France
AMLO (64%) Mexico
Trump (44%) United States
Abe (28%) Japan
Bolsonaro (47%) Brazil

11 March 2020 WHO declared pandemic

Source: The Economist (2020)

et al. (2020) demonstrate that while public confidence in government and political leaders was high at the onset of the pandemic in the UK, there was a decrease in public confidence in government announcements as the lockdown progressed. When the Prime Minister's advisor, Dominic Cummings, transgressed lockdown regulations, public confidence decreased further, given that trust is related to 'people's willingness to follow the rules and guidelines' both generally and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fancourt et al. 2020). If political leaders and senior government officials do not follow the rules, public trust and social solidarity are weakened.

A similar experience is found in the USA, most notably around political messaging concerning face masks. Utych (2020) demonstrates that Republican supporters are less likely to wear a face mask and follow World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on limiting the spread of COVID-19 than are Democrats. This could be related to conflicting political messaging from Republican then President Donald Trump. This inconsistent messaging

saw President Trump undermining the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which had recommended that Americans wear face masks to protect themselves and others and to minimise the spread of the virus.

President Ramaphosa's political messaging and public confidence
On 15 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, announced directives to deal with it, and mobilised social solidarity around government's response. He stated:

> Fellow South Africans, this is the most definitive Thuma Mina moment for our country. I have great trust that our people will respond positively to this call to common action. Fellow South Africans, this epidemic will pass. But it is up to us to determine how long it will last, how damaging it will be, and how long it will take our economy and our country to recover. It is true that we are facing a grave emergency. But if we act together, if we act now, and if we act decisively, we will overcome it. (Ramaphosa 2020a)

Following this address, broad societal support was evident in social media use of #FlattenTheCurve or #StayHomeSaveLives to allow the government the necessary space to prepare the public and private health services as COVID-19 infections rose. Despite one of the most stringent lockdowns globally, South Africans rallied around the president. Social solidarity was built on a call to collective civic responsibility.

By the end of April 2020, the president's strong messaging and decisive actions had galvanised robust trust in the president. This was the baseline finding from the first round of the UJ-HSRC COVID-19 Democracy Survey (University of Johannesburg (UJ) & Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (2020), which collected online responses between 13 April and 11 May. Over successive phases of surveying during this period, the percentage believing that the president was doing a good or a very good job 'in responding to the Coronavirus outbreak' averaged 85%. South Africans generally show low levels of confidence in the presidency. Afrobarometer (2020) demonstrates that in 2017/2018 (Round 7), 22% of South Africans indicated that they trusted the president a lot, and 17% felt that they somewhat trusted the president.

The high levels of trust expressed in the presidency in the early lockdown period could be attributed to a 'rallying-around-the-flag' phenomenon (The Economist 2020). South Africans showed increased support for political leaders as well as social solidarity around a civic duty to flatten the infection curve. This rating aligns with international experience where leaders of countries perceived to be doing an excellent job in tackling the pandemic were afforded higher levels of trust.

However, as the country moved to lower levels of lockdown, so too, trust

in the president decreased. In early May 2020, as the country progressed to Level 4 of the national lockdown, public confidence in the president remained relatively high with 75% of South Africans indicating that they trusted the president. However, under Level 4 lockdown we saw challenges to the constitutionality of the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC), as well as general societal dissatisfaction due to the economic impact of the pandemic, military brutality, slow rollout of socioeconomic relief measures, as well as continued bans on the sale of alcohol and cigarettes. As Kotze (2020) highlights, Level 4 lockdown regulations were increasingly perceived as irrational, a point President Ramaphosa noted in his third address to the nation in which he apologised for government's mistakes:

> Where we have disappointed, we will continue to make amends … as I said, we are traversing uncharted territory. None of us have ever been through what we are going through now in the history of this country. We will make mistakes, but I can assure you we will always seek to correct those mistakes. (Ramaphosa 2020b)

Thus, President Ramaphosa was aware of and willing to respond to public criticism, and it is noteworthy that in his 13 May 2020 address he did not refer to the NCCC, but rather to the government he leads. President Ramaphosa seemingly became sensitive to questions about the legal nature of the NCCC, of which Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Minister for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, was the public face, and to persistent narratives highlighting factional divides between government ministers responsible for COVID-19 response. Therefore, potential drivers of decreasing trust in the president include failure to clarify the status and role of

the NCCC and the public contradiction of the president by Minister Dlamini-Zuma over the lifting of the tobacco sales ban. Figure 3 below shows a representation of trust in the president from 29 May to 11 August 2020.

A critical element of President's Ramaphosa political messaging has been the need for unity, but also, a receptive attitude to public sentiment. At the beginning of July 2020, public confidence was at 76% but declined to 67% towards the end of July 2020. It is interesting to note that during this period, there was increased media coverage of corruption and theft of COVID-19 relief funds. In his address to the nation on 23 July 2020, President Ramaphosa forthrightly engaged the public on corruption:

> But what concerns me, and what concerns all South Africans, are those instances where funds are stolen, where they are misused, where goods are overpriced, where food parcels are diverted from needy households – where there is corruption and mismanagement of

public funds. Increasingly, we are hearing allegations about fraudulent UIF claims, overpricing of goods and services, violation of emergency procurement regulations, collusion between officials and service providers, abuse of food parcel distribution and the creation of fake non-profit organisations to access relief funding. From the outset of our response to the pandemic, we have been quite clear that there should be no scope for corruption in the use of these resources. More so than at any other time, corruption puts lives at risk. (Ramaphosa 2020c)

Following this address, public trust in the president climbed back to 71%, but then dropped to 61%. This sharp decline occurred when public anger grew as the scale of COVID-19 corruption and graft became more evident despite the president's proclamations. This 'plundemic' drew mass international criticism, and the World Health Organization equated the COVID-19 corruption in South Africa to 'murder' (*Eye Witness News* 2020). At the end of August 2020, President Ramaphosa

Figure 3: Public confidence in President Ramaphosa
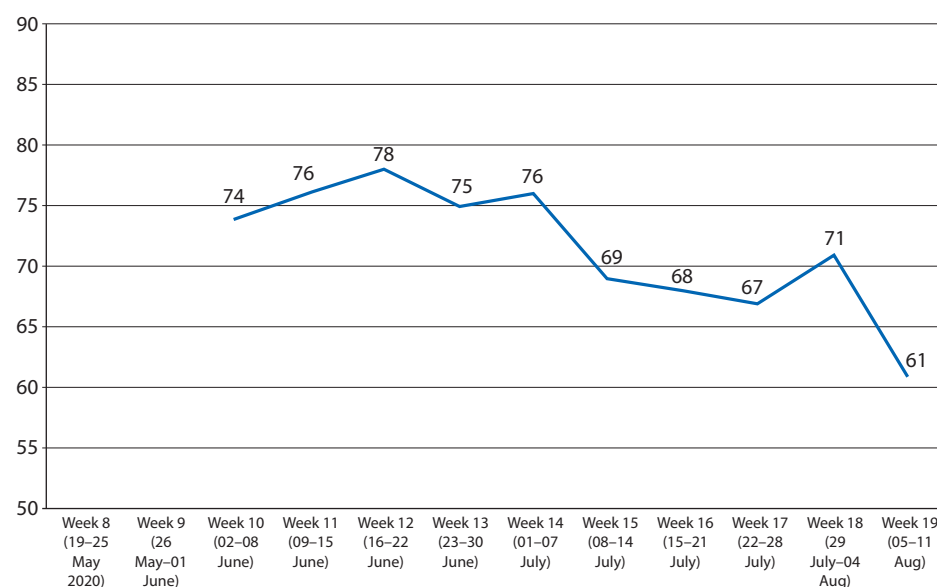
Source: Ask Afrika Covid-19 portal (n.d.)

noted in an open letter to the African National Congress (ANC):

> I am sure that you are aware that across the nation there is a sense of anger and disillusionment at reports of corruption in our response to the coronavirus pandemic. This anger is understandable and justified … We must be sensitive to what our people think and say about the ANC and our behaviour because we are their servants. (Ramaphosa 2020d)

Corruption remains a critical challenge for the Ramaphosa administration. However, the widespread 'plundemic' of COVID-19 corruption revealed the deep roots of graft and the political culture of patronage. President Ramaphosa's political messaging here was strategic: communicating with his political party through an open letter, signalling his recognition of the need to rebuild public confidence through his actions to root out corruption. It is these and other actions by the president addressed above that have kept confidence in his leadership during the pandemic high.

Recommendations

1. Political leaders need to be sensitive to how their words and actions impact on public confidence and trust. When political leaders themselves do not abide by the rules, formal and informal, they undermine public trust in government and constitutional democracy, and weaken social solidarity. Political leaders should therefore rally around creating a state (executive and administration) that is truly open, accountable and transparent, and also responsive to public concerns. This is illustrated by the denialism and hence lack of trust in the USA and Brazil, which has led to far more infections and deaths than in South Africa, where leadership acted swiftly and decisively in line with scientific and expert evidence.

2. Public confidence is dependent on both political messaging and action. If the actions of government are not aligned with political messaging – if they are not consistently aligned – public trust is undermined. This is especially true in times of crisis where urgent social and economic support is necessary – such as food packages, special grants and UIF payments – but not adequately provided for due to a dysfunctional administration civil service or corruption. Integrity, accountability and transparency are essential elements of the building blocks of public confidence. Government needs to significantly improve investment in ethical and efficient governance, at least in line with the Preventative Control Guides published recently by the Auditor-General (Auditor-General of South Africa 2020).

3. Integrity, accountability and transparency are essential elements in building public confidence. They are also necessary characteristics of strong political leadership. Through regular addresses to the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic (colloquially referred to as 'family meetings'), encouraging social solidarity and building civic responsibility, political messaging served to create a 'rally-around-the-flag' phenomenon. The modalities of political messaging during the COVID-19 focused on narratives of delivery (what was done), as well as what priorities were and how government would work to achieve those priorities. More importantly, through national addresses, the president also admitted where government went wrong, thus taking responsibility and listening to public sentiment. Given traditionally low levels of trust in political leaders and institutions in the country, government should consider more national addresses on crucial issues to establish clear political messaging to build public confidence. Creative political messaging will need to incorporate critical elements of communication, including engagement and dialogue on national priorities, drawing on delivery narratives (what was done) and setting priorities with adequate results-based indicators. To build public trust, political messaging needs to resonate with citizens, and, as such, political leadership will need to incorporate the creative use of social media to create a conversation as opposed to 'the traditional "tell-and-sell" model' (Resultsmap n.d.) that characterises political communication. The use of social media can become important in governments engaging in conversation with citizens when setting national priorities.

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POLICY BRIEF AUTHORS

Joleen Steyn Kotze, PhD; Senior Research Specialist, Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Division, HSRC; Research Fellow, Centre for Gender and African Studies, University of the Free State

Narnia Bohler-Muller, LLD; Divisional Executive, Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Division, HSRC; Adjunct Professor of Law, University of Fort Hare and Research Fellow, Centre for Gender and African Studies, University of the Free State

Benjamin Roberts, PhD; Chief Research Specialist, Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Division, HSRC

Gary Pienaar, MPhil; Senior Research Manager, Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Division, HSRC

Yul Derek Davids, PhD; Chief Research Specialist, Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Division, HSRC

Ngqapheli Mchunu, PhD research intern; Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Division, HSRC

Enquiries to:
Prof. Joleen Steyn Kotze: jkotze@hsrc.ac.za