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Polls as reliable as a Cape Town weather forecast

AS THE South African general election date (May 29) draws nearer, and so too the official celebration of 30 years of our hard-won democracy, pre-election polls have been frequenting our headlines.

And while the utility of such polls, for gauging public sentiment, is not entirely lost on me, the predictions of these polls are seemingly becoming ever more outlandish, leading me to question the place for such pre-election polls in our democratic process. Take, for instance, a recent poll that made its rounds, suggesting that South Africa's incumbent ruling party, the ANC, would receive a mere 39% of the vote. This would entail a 20% fall from the 57% of the vote it secured during the 2019 elections.

While frustration with our government is palpable, could such sentiment alone precipitate a 20% drop in ANC support? The party has been South Africa's dominant force since our first democratic elections in 1994, never losing more than 5% of the vote nationally in a single election. The difference between the height of the ANC's support in 2004 (69.7%) and its current position is a mere 12.2%; so, a steep fall of 20% should, at the very least, raise a few eyebrows.

But the eyebrow-raising doesn't stop there. This same poll indicates that former president Jacob Zuma's newly minted uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party is poised to snatch 13% of the national vote, overshadowing the EFF who are predicted to garner a comparatively modest 10%. Let's not overlook the fact that the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) has already ruled Zuma's eligibility to stand for election due to his criminal record. It's a head-scratcher, isn't it? A party barely out of its political diapers already wrapped in controversy, and yet it's enjoying a meteoric rise in the polls.

Let us forget the grand plan of MK is to win a two-thirds majority nationally, which would allow them to amend our Constitution, paving the way for Zuma to take the reins for a third term. This bezares disregard for constitutional norms and threats of civil unrest, should they not get their way, raises profound concerns about the erosion of our democratic principles.

And just when you think you've seen it all, this same poll predicts the DA, South Africa's official opposition, will receive 27% of the vote. That's a 7% hike from the 2019 election and an 8% rise from figures reported in an earlier poll from February. If anything, it's an indication that these predictions are all over the place. Perhaps it's a reflection of South Africa's tumultuous political landscape or maybe it's just a testament to the unreliability of polls in general.

The unreliability of pre-election polls in South Africa stems from the nation's complex and diverse electorate. With socio-economic disparities, regional variations and great cultural diversity, capturing the full spectrum of voter preferences is near impossible. Adding to the mix are the enduring echoes of apartheid and historical inequalities which continue to shape political attitudes and voting patterns, further complicating the task of polling.

Moreover, methodological limitations and technical hiccups plague these polls, rendering them about as reliable as a weather forecast in Cape Town.

The consequences of inaccurate pre-election polling extend beyond a mere statistical error, rattling the foundations of our democratic process. When poll results veer wildly from actual outcomes, it breeds disillusionment and cynicism among voters, chipping away at the trust in our electoral system.

Furthermore, inaccurate polling data can warp media coverage, sway political strategies and contribute to division within our society.

So, as we navigate the choppy waters of South Africa's electoral landscape, let us heed the cautionary tale of pre-election polling: approach with skepticism, handle with care and always take the predictions with a generous pinch of salt.

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