

## War Of The Lamp-Posts

Written by Rudi Prinsloo  
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Politicians warring for votes on the country's lamp-posts are decidedly unhappy at attacks on their carefully composed posters by vandals wielding thick black markers, stencils, duct tape and spray-paint.

"It is not good for the public to see things like that. It really is a problem," said Pieter Groenewald, the federal legal committee chairman of the Freedom Front Plus.

Along Beyers Naude Drive, in Blackheath, Johannesburg, FF Plus leader Pieter Mulder has gained a scrawled beard, eyebrows and earrings, and the party -- known in Afrikaans as the Vryheidsfront Plus (VF) -- has been re-dubbed "Vokken Fansy".

But, it is African National Congress president Jacob Zuma who appears to be suffering the worst of the attack, at least in Johannesburg.

His detractors have added horns to his visage, a forked tongue, a shower rose, a banana. They have labelled him "criminal", and the country under his rule "Zumbabwe". His party's message "Let's work together to do more", has gained the word "crime" along some streets, "corruption" on others.

"The defacing of posters is a matter of great concern to the ANC... because it clearly demonstrates there are still politicians in South Africa [who] do not believe in political tolerance and [who] do not believe in constitutional democracy," said ANC spokesman Brian Sokutu.

"We are taking this matter to the IEC (Independent Electoral Commission) because we take [it] very seriously," he said. The party records and files every instance of poster defacing brought to its attention and forwards them to its legal monitoring unit.

As fast as party officials take down the offending posters and replace them with clean ones, though, other posters are defaced.

"I'm not surprised that Zuma has borne the brunt," said senior associate political analyst at the Centre for Policy Studies Aubrey Matshiqi. It was likely that as the president of the largest party, there would be more Zuma posters than any other, he said.

Matshiqi believes there is a "positive" side to defacing. "It is a form of political communication and therefore... it's a form of political participation. It is a way of giving voice to a particular political view."

What was questionable was whether it was an acceptable way of expressing a political view. "I suppose the answer lies in the country's political culture," he said.

While it might be par for the course to lob eggs at British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, a South African politician subjected to a similar pelting would be deeply offended.

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"My view is that our political culture doesn't allow for [the defacing of election posters]," said Matshiqi.

It could be seen as part of a counter culture, he suggested, but added that it could also be electioneering, people "giving the finger" to the norm or highlighting the issues they believed should be the real concerns of the election.

At the moment, it is a crime to deface an election poster, and one the Electoral Act warns is punishable with a fine of up to R200,000 -- or just a "formal warning".

Should a party's supporters be found to have had a hand in it, the party itself can be deregistered -- and out of the election altogether, said Groenewald.

If people wanted to make a political comment they should write a letter to the newspapers or vote on election day, said Democratic Alliance chief executive officer Ryan Coetzee.

"They should pay for posters before they use them to make a comment. They are our posters," he said.

Posters cost the party R16 to R17 each, for the board, the pasting, the drilling, the transporting and travel time. "Posters are very expensive," said Coetzee, estimating that the party had easily lost 20,000, maybe more.

"We spray paint the back of the boards. That cuts on theft quite nicely. We do that entirely for that reason".

Its bus shelter campaign had fared even worse, he said. "I'll never be doing that again." From the beginning of the campaign, the branding was just "ripped off".

"Billboards are fine. Nobody can reach them," he said.

"There are crazy people out there... If they can reach them, they can deface them... That is why we put more money on billboards, because they are higher up," said United Democratic Movement leader Bantu Holomisa.

Holomisa is himself a victim, with devil's horns and a tail added to the party's election message on a dustbin in Beyers Naude Drive.

Even the UDM's billboards have been targeted, with two replaced so far. The ANC said one of its billboards had also been defaced.

The Congress of the People went for mainly billboards and wrap-around building advertising from the start of its campaign.

"My sense is that the effect [of poster defacing] on the election is just about zero," said political analyst Steven Friedman.

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"How does one evaluate something like this?" he asked, adding that care had to be exercised in describing it as an indication of some kind of social phenomenon because "one person with a great deal of energy and the right equipment can do something like this".

He found it "a stretch" to suggest someone was out there defacing posters to make a political comment.

"It is far more likely [that it is being done by] someone deeply intolerant [who] can't stand the sight of someone else's posters up, or someone who thinks they are hilariously funny," he said.

"Quite frankly, I've never seen any particular connection between posters and... the election result.

"I would probably go so far as to say that if one voter out of 20 million was influenced by posters that's quite a lot."

Parties could not lose by "never putting the darn things up in the first place".

Retorted Holomisa: "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

Although Holomisa acknowledged that posters seemed to be little other than a "waste of money", he said: "Once people don't see you on these posters they think that you are not there."

Aside from political daubs, a curious sticker showing the image of a tongue has made its appearance on posters throughout the city this election.

The sticker over Mulder's mouth along Beyers Naude Drive proclaims "Mada Tongue".

DA leader Helen Zille has also had the Mada Tongue treatment -- on a poster in Parktown North -- as have Zuma, Gauteng premier Paul Mashatile, Cope's leader Mosiuoa Lekota, IFP president Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Holomisa.

Mada Tongue's Facebook page states: "Celebrate speaking your Mada Tongue". On the popular social networking site, it writes: "Mada Tongue is a registered clothing label. We support SA Comedy", proudly displaying photographs of its poster handiwork.

Although "Mada Tongue" promised to respond to cellphone and written enquiries by Sapa, it did not.

Advertisers have, as in the past, also jumped on the election band wagon with posters entreating the public to Vote for Milk, starring Sean Penn; and to Vote for David Kau, promising a better laugh for all.

"I think it's fun," said Matshiqi. "It's one of the things I look forward to during an election campaign... to see how clever it is going to be."

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This year though, the ads had not reached the standards set by Nando's in the 1994 election, with its left-wing, right-wing posters.

"A lot of stuff is obvious," Matshiqi said. The election-linked ads included punts for Wonderbra, Outsurance and Game.

"I have not seen anything that I would regard as cutting edge," he said.

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