

Rainbow fades as public distrust grows

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THE standoff between the executive and the judiciary, as well as prolonged parastatal crises and political scandals, is costing us dearly. Poor political judgment and disreputable conduct involving corruption and maladministration have contributed to an erosion of public trust in our democratic institutions.

Ultimately, it has also cast doubt on SA's reconciliatory path. Ideally, citizens should distinguish between permanent democratic institutions and individuals who are elected for a fixed time. The support we offer politicians should fluctuate depending on their performance but our confidence in democratic institutions should remain strong over time.

Public opinion data collected by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation shows, however, a persistent decline over the years in citizen support for political actors and democratic institutions. Survey findings from the reconciliation barometer reveal a decline in public trust in national leaders, from 65% in 2006 to 49% in 2013. Trust in the Presidency dropped from 75% to 55%. Parliament has not fared much better – public trust declined from 69% in 2006 to 57% by 2013.

Distrust of particular politicians has spilled over into trust evaluations of their institutions. A barrage of poor judgment over a period of time damages the reputation of those responsible but also the credibility of the institutions. Understandably, citizens struggle to assess the trustworthiness of institutions without thinking about their incumbents.

The next question is whether citizens who distrust the incumbents and their institutions continue to trust the political system. Nation-building in SA relies on popular support for the idea of a united national identity. Ideally, our attachment to the "rainbow nation" should be consistently strong. Yet the barometer survey suggests South Africans are increasingly unlikely to embrace the rainbow nation.

Perhaps the most important story is that diminishing support for institutions and the rainbow nation has negative implications for reconciliation. The data show that we have also become less inclined to embrace the "forgive and forget" doctrine.

When asked if South Africans should "forget the past and move forward" and "forgive those who hurt others during apartheid", the people who disagree are most likely to be a part of this growing group of sceptical citizens.

What to make of the data? Increasing distrust and scepticism towards individual politicians should strengthen democracy, as citizens become more discerning of performance. However, the decline in institutional trust and support for a unified nation are worrisome.

There should be important distinctions in the minds of citizens between the principles that guide the larger democratic system and its institutions, and those who more transiently inhabit them.

The actions of public officials should not fundamentally affect positive attitudes towards the nation state and democratic institutions. The fact that citizens express dissatisfaction suggests that prolonged discontent with the performance of politicians has eroded support for the larger political system.

More than this, it may even be undermining our attempts at nation-building and reconciliation. As citizens become increasingly despondent with the political arena, they also become less inclined to embrace the idea of a united nation.

Politicians should remember that our institutions are not infallible. Ultimately, they are shaped, upheld and defended by those who inhabit them. Their ill-considered behaviour has the potential to reach far beyond Parliament and the Presidency to shape the hearts and minds of South Africans for years to come.

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