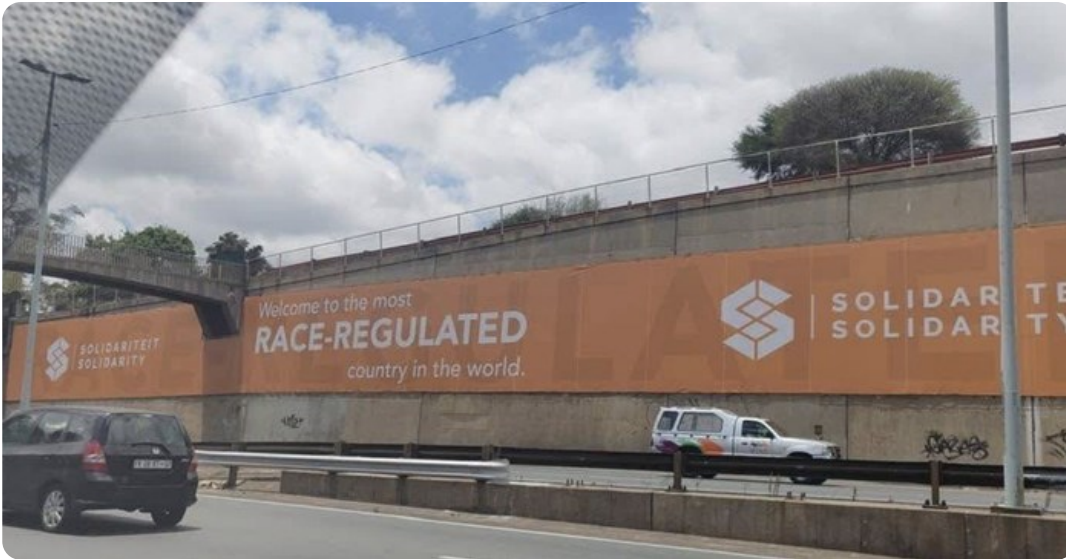


Tlhogi Ngwato | You cannot fact-check your way out of outrage

As South Africa readies itself to host the G20 summit, a subtle but orchestrated reputational challenge is unfolding on our streets. In recent days, billboards and posters have appeared portraying the country as “the most race-regulated country in the world,” echoing false claims about attacks on farmers and anti-white policies.

 By Tlhogi Ngwato 13 Nov 2025



Source: Solidariteit on X.

Trust is emotional

While fact-checking organisations and government statements have already debunked these narratives, the messaging persists, amplified by domestic and international actors. The instinctive response is familiar: clarifications, removal of illegal signage, and reiterating the policy intent of BEE and broader transformation initiatives.

These steps, while necessary, rest on an unexamined assumption that trust is rational and information-led. Trust is not. Trust is emotional, relational, and deeply asymmetrical. You cannot logic someone into confidence, and information-deficit strategies cannot restore credibility once outrage has been engineered.

This distinction is critical; Peter Covello’s crisis formula, Risk = Hazard + Outrage, separates actual danger from public perception. In the current campaign, the hazard – South Africa’s policies are not the threat; but the outrage, deliberately cultivated through provocative messaging, is. The disinformation actors understand this. Their multi-phase approach, which began with social media amplification and diplomatic pressure, has progressed to high-visibility outdoor messaging and is likely to escalate further, possibly to coordinated protests at G20 venues, symbolic acts designed to generate viral content and messaging intended to inflame public outrage.

If the country responds only with one-dimensional fact-correction, it is defending hazard, not outrage. The consequence is predictable: perception outpaces reality, investor confidence falters, and international observers interpret calculated provocations as organic instability.

Behind the curve

Lessons from crisis resilience frameworks, including PWC's "Minimum Viable Company" concept, are instructive. The framework asks a simple question, but a brutally important question: what is the absolute minimum an organisation must protect to survive a major shock? Yet in practice, organisations discover that crises unfold in layers. Infrastructure fails incrementally, networks degrade, and systems flicker in and out. By analogy, disinformation campaigns do not hit all at once; they escalate, adapt, and anticipate defensive responses. And so, you may agree that each stage demands a different response.

Focusing solely on removing posters protects infrastructure but does nothing to safeguard perception. A reactive stance leaves the country perpetually behind the curve, defending individual incidents rather than owning the narrative.



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To address this, it is necessary to rethink trust in crisis communication.

The conventional Western model assumes:

- Trust is universal and rational; therefore, institutions can be believed if they provide transparent, factual information
- Experts can substitute for relationships, so a credible statement from a known authority is seen as sufficient to restore confidence
- Direct, explicit communication works; consider how straightforward, low-context messaging is often enough and, in this case, has been

South Africa's social and cultural context does not align with these assumptions. In collectivist societies, trust operates within close-knit networks rather than radiating broadly to strangers and institutions.

Authority is interpreted through social hierarchies and relationships, not merely credentials. High-context communication dominates, meaning is inferred through relationships, context, and loyalty, rather than explicit statements. To this end, a press release explaining BEE will rarely convince an audience who rely on relational cues to gauge credibility.

This cultural lens can have practical implications for crisis response, especially community engagement. Simply correcting a single false claim is insufficient. The broader story of transformation must be told in ways that resonate with relational and collective trust structures. But in a country such as ours, whose oppression wounds run deep, it isn't easy to relate, especially when social cohesion all but faintly exists. Because of this, policy messaging about historical redress and inclusive growth needs to be delivered differently. The stakes extend beyond perception, sentiment monitoring, and mapping social amplification.

Diplomatic credibility and domestic stability all hinge on how effectively the country manages outrage, not just hazards. Recognising the limits of Western-centric crisis communication does not imply inaction. On the contrary, it demands a more disciplined, culturally intelligent, nuanced and relational approach. The goal is to shape perception proactively, build trust within communities that influence wider sentiment, and reduce the

asymmetry between hazard and outrage. This requires everyone in government, regardless of their individual ambitions to ascend to the highest seat of power, to all sing from the same hymn book, even when politicking.

Complex reputational threat

The country is facing a complex, staged reputational threat. The mistake would be to treat it as a simple factual error to be corrected. The pressure groups behind these campaigns are methodical; their attacks unfold in predictable, escalating phases.

To succeed, the country must adopt a multi-layered strategy that is equally methodical but grounded in relational trust, emotional intelligence, and anticipatory planning. The uncomfortable truth is clear: you cannot fact-check your way out of outrage. Trust cannot be restored through logic alone.

Success will come not from reactive statements but from building a resilient reputation that leverages relational influence and embeds credibility with the social and cultural fabric of the nation. In the digital age perception often precedes reality. The country's response must do the same. Think ahead, act strategically and build trust where it truly resides, not in statements or reactive actions, but in relationships that sustain the nation's credibility on the global stage.

Editors note: The writer's intention is not to comment on the actions of political parties or engage in race based arguments, but rather, an analysis on crisis and reputation using this as a case study.

ABOUT TLHOGI NGWATO

Tlhogi Ngwato, the founder and managing partner of Manaka Publicity, has advised high-profile clients, companies, personalities, sporting personalities and organisations, offering strategic advice that has assisted them through some of their most difficult and thrilling milestones.
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