

Politicians face off with supporters on Facebook

Forget branch meetings! Robust debates now take place on political parties' group pages on social networking websites like Facebook.

From service delivery protests to calls to remove Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) president Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Congress of the People (COPE) parliamentary leader Mvume Dandala, to Phumzile Mlambe Ngcuka's appointment to COPE's executive committee — these cyberspace rallies attract the most comments.

Unlike branch meetings where party members discuss issues among themselves, on Facebook they are able to speak directly to their leaders.

IFP group members are divided on Buthelezi's future. While some say the party would be doomed without him, others say it's about time he handed over the reins to national chairman Zanele Magwaza Msobi or general secretary Musa Zondi.

“As bitter as it may sound, it's about time a national conference is held where a new president will be voted for, and also the party needs a firm restructuring from the bottom to the top,” writes Sibonelo Dopeman Thabede.

Very visible on Facebook

The latest movements and developments on the South African political landscape are very visible on Facebook. Party official announcements and party propaganda face competition — as users looking for the latest juicy gossip can get their thirst quenched with a mere click of the mouse.

COPE's problems have been laid bare in other ways. Since Simon Grindrod and Lynda Odendaal's resignation, COPE's Facebook group membership has been shrinking daily. More than 300 members have left the group — and more are leaving every day. Before the April elections the COPE group had about 20333 members, but by last week it had declined to 20002.

When COPE was formed and in the run-up to the April elections it used the group to galvanise support, announce meetings and new developments.

Dandala appointment a ‘colossal mistake’

On the other hand, the African National Congress (ANC) group membership has grown from about 9000 before the elections to 11322. The IFP has also seen some growth — the party's membership stands at 307.

Some COPE group members are not happy with Dandala's leadership in Parliament or the manner in which he was elected.

“I personally think the appointment of Dandala as the so-called presidential candidate was a colossal mistake by whoever made that decision, as we all know (Mosiuoa) Lekota did not know about it until he was

asked by the press,” says COPE member Lulama Ndukwana.

Other COPE members, including Dandala's political adviser, JJ Tabane, come to his defence.

“Dandala is here for the long haul, voted for by at least 1,3-million people. They voted knowing he was at the helm and will lead our team into government/Parliament,” writes Tabane.

ANC branch members blamed for non-delivery

On service delivery protests, an ANC member blames party branch leaders for not assisting councillors to fast-track delivery.

“There seems to be a discord between branches and ward councillors who happen to be deployed to that level by the movement. Either he/she is drifting or being pushed away by members. “We can't afford this situation to prevail,” says ANC member Tumelo Tsotetsi.

Similar discussions take place on social networking websites such as Twitter and mig33.

COPE deputy president Mbhazima Shilowa was tasked with creating good relations with other parties, and used Facebook to communicate with United Democratic Movement (UDM) leader Bantu Holomisa to try to persuade him to merge the two parties. The conversation heated up as COPE and non-COPE members joined in. “I'm glad you (Shilowa) will respect whatever the UDM decides, because they will never decide to join a gravy train like yours Uncle Sam,” wrote “Zulusaint Madonna”.

Shilowa answered: “You may need to explain what gravy train we are on, which they should stay away from. In fact let me make a prediction: They will never go back to the ANC in spite of promise of money, positions and tenders. I am happy to bet you a wager!” Madonna responded: “Neither will they merge with HOPE let alone COPE, I bet a wager!”

Finally Shilowa said: “You have yourself a bet!”

Who needs branch meetings?

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