

## SA Perceptions Improve Despite Zuma

Written by Rudi Prinsloo  
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International media coverage of South Africa has improved since Thabo Mbeki's axing despite negative reports on president-to-be Jacob Zuma, research shows.

"The recall of Mbeki from office has been one of the key turning points," says Wadim Schreiner, the managing director of international media research company Media Tenor.

"In essence, since Eskom switched their power off, which was in January 2008, the coverage has been at all times more negative than positive, for a whole range of reasons, including the xenophobic attacks and South Africa's position on Zimbabwe.

"But since Mbeki's recall of office, the coverage has been greatly improving on South Africa, and that, despite quite extensive coverage of political issues and the [fraud and corruption] charges against Zuma," says Schreiner.

Media Tenor researches and analyses media reports on South Africa every month from western countries, African countries and the Bric block, which is Brazil, Russia, India and China.

Schreiner says western media coverage of South Africa is generally the most negative while African media coverage is the most positive, and the Bric block falls somewhere in between.

"The western media are those who are driving the predominantly negative agenda."

Two media reports in the UK and Germany recently caught the attention of politicians in South Africa, prompting them to demand apologies.

Earlier in the week, it was announced that the African National Congress leader would sue the UK-based The Guardian newspaper for defamation.

The action was triggered by an article published last month headlined, "Get used to a corrupt and chaotic South Africa. But don't write it off".

The British daily warned that those "dealing with South Africa must probably get used to Zuma's style of government -- morally contaminated, administratively chaotic and corrupt", and quoted an unnamed friend of the author describing Zuma as "a criminal and a rapist".

Last month, the Democratic Alliance complained to the German publication Der Spiegel over an article it believed could "scare off tourists and frighten investors".

The February article was headlined "The army stands by", and "builds a picture of a country that is on the verge of civil war", said the DA.

The article starts by contrasting the fires in the Western Cape with pre-election tension heating up and ends dramatically with references to the army standing by ready to step in if needed during the election.

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Schreiner says the German media is particularly negative about South Africa, not only on the political front, but also in its reports on the 2010 Soccer World Cup.

"The Germans just can't believe that this World Cup is actually going to happen. They are now reporting that we are more or less on time, but there's always a hint of disbelief," says Schreiner.

The UK and Germany both devote a lot of coverage to South Africa.

"What is interesting in our observations, the media is able to distinguish between the South African government and South African people.

"They [international newspapers] distinguish pretty well between what the government does and business and the social sphere."

Schreiner says the country generally gets positive coverage on the business and social fronts, but "it is usually actions by the government that are pulling them [international reports] down".

The formation of the new opposition party, the Congress of the People, late last year initially received "considerable" coverage in the international press, but that seems to have died down.

"I don't think it should be interpreted as the international media being supportive of Cope, but rather the fact that a new opposition party has emerged in South Africa... it is welcomed as a positive, democratic issue.

"But from January onwards, with the coverage of Cope, the rating is declining, the volume is declining. The party is being scrutinised, it is no longer the flavour of the month.

"In March, for the first time in a long time, there was more positive coverage of the ANC than before. They [the international press] are now focusing more on policy issues, trying to understand the ruling party," says Schreiner.

He says Media Tenor is still in the process of analysing reports after the decision to halt Zuma's fraud and corruption prosecution.

"Coverage has been mixed. Some are saying it is the biggest injustice ever, while others are saying, at least South Africa can now move forward. But the jury is still out, we are still analysing it."

However, Schreiner believes that Zuma has a better chance than Mbeki at getting the international media to warm up to him.

"I think Mbeki was associated, particularly in the international media, with a whole range of negative issues, he has been associated with Aids, Zimbabwe."

There were many international reports on "indecisiveness, in-fighting and political meddling",

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says Schreiner.

"It doesn't seem as if the international media is really missing Mbeki. I think the international media never warmed up to him."

Asked to speculate if it could warm up to Zuma, Schreiner replies: "The international media will not forget about his corruption speculation... the perception of him being involved in corrupt activities is going to remain.

"But, if indeed, if Zuma and the new government is going to be a benefit for people on the ground, and particularly if some of the key economic policies are not going to be changed, I think it is quite possible that they might warm up to him, but it is going to take time."

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