

Parties use the internet to get to the youth, writes Sibongakonke Shoba

Young and politically full of fun

THE youth will play a big role in deciding whether the African National Congress (ANC) retains its two-thirds majority and which party becomes the official opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA) or the Congress of the People (COPE), experts say.

Wits University politics professor Susan Booysen says although COPE seemed to enjoy more support from young people than the DA did, ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema was a big attraction for the ruling party in wooing the youth.

Booyesen says Malama's utterances made politics "funny" to many young people, hence he managed to attract large crowds.

According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), about 6,4-million young people are registered to vote.

Many political parties have targeted this audience through the internet, mobile phone technology and entertainment.

COPE claims to have the support of many young professionals who have access to the internet. The party's page on the social website Facebook has more than 20 000 members — while another group page titled "I will not vote for COPE" has little more than 4 000 members.

COPE's second deputy president, Mbhazima Shilowa, has more than 2 600 friends on the website whom he interacts with and encourages to vote and campaign for the party.

"We are saying your vote is decisive, it's crucial, it's critical," he writes in his latest posting.

The ANC has refused to be left behind in this drive to reach young voters. Party leaders such as Gauteng chairman Paul Mashatile, KwaZulu-Natal chairman Zweli Mkhize and Deputy Home Affairs Minister Malusi Gigaba interact with young people on the site almost every day.

The ANC has also taken advantage of mobile technology to engage with the youth on mg33.com, a service that allows people to chat live via SMS. Yesterday, Malema and Young Communist League leader



THE ANC JIVE: Young people like these — central in determining if the ANC gets a two-thirds majority — have shown that political campaigning need not be without a touch of youthful fun. Picture: REUTERS

Buti Manamela answered questions from young people via this service.

Liza van Wyk, CEO of training organisation BizTech, says although South African political parties did not make use of technology on the scale of US President Barack Obama during his campaign, the youth vote could be crucial in deciding who wins the elections.

"The traditional campaigns that have always been used could equally be appealing to SA youth," she says.

The Gauteng Youth Commission (GYC) and youth radio station YFM ran a campaign that encouraged young people to register and vote.

GYC chairman Lebogang Maile says the campaign was a success. "We are very happy with the res-

ponse, it was very positive," he says.

Maile says that during the campaign young people voiced concerns about issues such as unemployment and education.

"It was not easy to convince some of them, but in the end we had the biggest number of youths registering to vote."

Maile says the media played a big role in their campaign but said that direct interaction was more effective.

The GYC ran a competition on YFM inviting young people to write a letter to motivate why the campaign should come to their neighbourhood. The winner received a prize and was asked to mobilise a minimum of 50 people to attend an event at which the station would broadcast

live. "With the help of our celebrity ambassadors we helped the winner to mobilise more people," he says.

Maile says the GYC also took the campaign to taxi ranks and tertiary institutions. Last weekend, he says, the GYC managed to reach about 70 000 young people through festivals that were held across Gauteng.

Maile says recent political events in SA, including the formation of COPE, made it impossible for the youth to avoid being involved in politics. This resulted in political parties spending more money on their campaigns to reach this audience.

"The youth vote will play a critical role in helping whoever is going to win," he says.

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