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## Visual Political Humour as Political Dissent: South African Online Posters Under Government of National Unity

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**Abstract:** This paper examined how visual political humour functions as a weapon of political dissent on social media platform X, analysing online political posters targeting South Africa's Government of National Unity (GNU) formed after the 2024 national elections. It unravelled the visual discursive strategies within political humour and decode the underlying ideologies present in online political posters featuring political actors from the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) political parties. By employing the digital counterpublics theory, this paper examined how social media users on X, utilised visual political humour to challenge the political discourse of the GNU. A qualitative research design was adopted, using purposive sampling to evaluate 20 political posters from X, dating from June 2024 to May 2025. Critical visual discourse analysis was deployed as an analysis approach to explore the visual ideological content of the sampled images. The findings revealed that X users employed various visual and linguistic symbols, such as political cartoons, satire, and visual metaphors, to question the validity of the ANC leader President Cyril Ramaphosa and DA leader John Steenhuisen, thereby contesting the legitimacy and perceived failures of the GNU. Furthermore, the paper revealed that visual political humour transcends mere entertainment, acting as a sophisticated instrument of political resistance that crafts counter-narratives against coalition governance. This paper makes an empirical contribution to the understanding of visual political communication and the discourse of digital counter publics in current African politics.

**Keywords:** digital counterpublics; online political posters; political party actors; visual political humour; X users

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### Introduction

The intersection of digital media, political discourse, and humour has significantly changed the way people interact with governmental systems and voice their opposition in modern democracies globally. Political humour has transitioned from its origins in 18th and 19th-century satirical pamphlets and editorial cartoons to emerge as a powerful element in digital political conversations (Bakhtin & Iswolsky, 2020; Nicholls, 2020). This transformation is particularly pronounced in the realm of visual political communication, where memes, online posters, and satirical imagery serve

as powerful tools for political commentary, resistance, and identity formation across diverse democratic contexts. Visual political humour is more than mere entertainment, positioning it as a sophisticated form of visual political communication that performs multiple democratic functions. For instance, Baishya (2021) note that visual political humour simplifies complex political issues, challenge authority, mobilise public opinion and provide alternative narratives to dominant political discourse. Within the digital environments, particularly social media platforms, visual political humour has emerged as a democratising force that enables ordinary citizens to participate in political discourse, challenge established power structures, and construct counter-narratives that challenges political messaging (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2023).

While a substantial body of literature exists on visual political humour, it is predominantly in Western democracies like the United States and Western Europe. African studies (see: Mpofo, 2021; Iwata, 2020; Mukhongo, 2020) have nevertheless started addressing this deficiency, by examining single-party dominance rather than coalition politics. The subject of coalition governments is notably underexplored in visual political humour research. By their very nature, coalition politics creates conditions of ideological tensions, compromises, and contradictions for satirical commentary and visual critique. However, research has not adequately examined how digital counterpublics deploy visual humour to navigate and contest the complexities of coalition governance, particularly in the contexts where historically antagonistic political parties form governing alliances. Thus, post-2024 South Africa's electoral landscape presents a unique case for examining these dynamics. In 2024, after the ANC failed to maintain its majority for the first time since the democratic transition in 1994, securing only 40.18% of the votes while the DA received 21.81%, a Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed, including ten diverse political groups (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). This coalition bridges parties with significantly varied historical routes and ideological frameworks: the ANC, steeped in the legacy of anti-apartheid liberation, and the DA, which emerged from liberal opposition to apartheid and subsequent governance trends. This alliance has created a fertile environment for political discourse and critique, particularly in digital spaces where South Africans conduct nuanced visual political dialogues.

Expanding upon Fraser's (1990) adaptation of Habermas's public sphere theory, the concept of digital counterpublics is crucial in understanding how marginalised communities use digital platforms to challenge dominant political narratives and political actors. In the context of digital counterpublic, digital users employ humour, satire, and other humours symbolism to critique the political authority and create alternative political dialogues (Graham & Smith, 2016; Taylor, 2022). However, existing studies have not explored how counterpublic activities, such as visual political humour, function as a form of political resistance within the coalition governments. This paper therefore explores two main research questions:

- i. In what ways do X users employ visual rhetorical strategies in online political posters to challenge the South African GNU's legitimacy?
- ii. What are the foundational ideological implications of visual political humour targeting the leadership of the GNU, especially the ANC-DA coalition?

The significance of this paper transcends beyond the South African political context, contribute to broader scholarly understanding of digital political resistance, visual political communication, and the democratic functions of visual humour in contemporary coalition governance. Through examining how digital counterpublics deploy visual humour to engage with and challenge coalition politics, the paper offers valuable insights into political resistance within multi-party democracies, especially in post-colonial settings where coalition governance is on the rise. Additionally, this paper make contribution to the research methodology by demonstrating how critical visual discourse analysis can be applied examine the intersection of digital resistance and coalition politics, providing a framework that can be adapted to similar situations across Africa and beyond.

## **Literature review**

The study of visual political communication is concentrated on single political party or traditional opposition party dynamics in government. However, the drawback of the available literature points out to three critical limitations that this paper seeks to addresses: First, literature concentrate on Western democracies, use of digital counterpublics as spaces for visual political humour to delegitimise political actors. Secondly, literature focuses on coalition politics of Western democracies, neglecting post-apartheid South African coalition politics, where party politics originate from liberation movement and colonial resistance. Thirdly, although literature in visual political humour within the African settings is expanding, it remains limited.

This paper explores digital counterpublics, rooted in Fraser's (1990) idea of the "subaltern counterpublic," a critique of Habermas (1962) "public sphere" concept. The historical "public sphere" included venues like coffee houses, literary clubs, and town squares, where individuals openly discussed government related matters. Fraser and others argue that Habermas's public sphere concept ignores marginalised groups like women, the working class, LGBT individuals, and Black communities. Currently, many counterpublics have moved to digital spaces, forming digital counterpublics. In the current historical moment, many counterpublics have been relocated or extended to virtual, online, and other digitally networked spaces, resulting in the formation of digital counterpublics. These changes arise from the expansion of digital technologies, Internet growth, and social networking platforms. They also relate to increased smartphone access, which integrates phone features with computing functions like Internet, video, and app capabilities. In digital environments, counterpublics serve as an arena where individuals from marginalised communities gather to challenge and reshape mainstream public narratives. The transformation in visual political communication due to the digital era has generated a significant amount of research focused on memes, satirical content, and online political expression (La Causa, 2025; Liagusha and Larovy (2025)). For example, La Causa (2025) examines how Egyptians utilise satire and humour on social media to criticize political figures and issues.

Meanwhile, Zeb et al. (2025) explores memes as tools of cultural and political resistance in Pakistan, used predominantly to critique power, mock politicians, and undermine the prevailing political narrative. In addition, digital counterpublics is studied in the context of Black Twitter phenomenon, to assess the impact of the U.S. racial justice movements in digital spaces (Florini, 2014). However, the conclusions are not applicable to South Africa, O'Regan 2024, September 24 where racial politics are influenced by past racial intolerance stemming from White minority against the Black majority. Jackson et al. (2020) emphasise on the significance of hashtag activism in the resistance movements but overlook reactions to democratic outcomes that affect identity issues, limiting insight into racialised counter-publics responses to political challenges and the deployment of visual political humour.

Visual political humour represents a key intersection of visual communication, entertainment, and political discourse within modern political discussions. Generally, it can be described as a humorous expression related to political actors, issues, institutions, policies, and procedures (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). This type of humour includes various forms of communication such as jokes, criticism, ridicule, satire, parody, stand-up comedy, and media commentary, typically featured in late-night shows, presidential debates, campaign rallies, and more (Innocenti & Miller, 2016). Studies (see: Baishya, 2021; Hakoköngäs *et al.*, 2020) highlight that visual political humour in communication critiques the political status quo, reinforces existing beliefs, and supports common political understandings. These elements are rhetorical and aim to persuade political audiences. In the digital media spaces, visual political humour uses caricatures, cartoons, posters, videos, memes, and graffiti to satirise and critique political events, figures, or ideologies (Penny, 2022). Ramsey and Meyer (2019) identified four functions of visual political humour in visual political communication: namely, identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Identifying involves connecting with the audience through shared values or groups, fostering solidarity. Humour simplifies political issues, making them engaging and simple to understand. Enforcement uses satire to critique political opponents, highlighting their flaws subtly and effectively. Lastly, humour differentiates political actors by exaggerating contrasts, making them more likeable while depicting opponents less favourably. Visual political humour thrives during heightened political tension or polarisation (Beck & Spencer, 2025) and effectively mobilises citizens towards active participation in democratic consolidation (Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). Visual political humour has become accessible and widespread, extending beyond traditional media boundaries. Studies by Iwata (2020), Mukhongo (2020), and Adegoju (2022) provide insights into how satirical media in Japan, Kenyan digital platforms and Nigerian politics construct narratives. These studies focus on nations where the ruling parties enjoy majority support but overlook the challenges in political legitimacy and identity when liberation movements share power with parties historically aligned with minority racial interests.

South Africa's post-2024 GNU highlights gaps in literature on visual political communication. Unlike European coalitions (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020) focused on policy differences within democratic norms, the ANC and DA coalition brings together parties with opposing views on transformation and racial justice. The ANC supports radical economic change, while the DA has a neoliberal stance and backing from apartheid beneficiaries. This unique democratic development reveals shortcomings in literature for explaining the role of visual political humour when coalition partners hold different policies, historical and national identity views. However, literature on coalition politics, particularly within the context of visual political humour in South Africa, is limited. The

ANC, a liberation movement, partners with the historical white minority party, the DA. Although studies by Asher et al. (2021), Fitzgerald and McFadyen (2022), point out implications of political satire effects on political party coalitions, these studies, however, do not address the complexities of multiparty coalitions with their former adversaries as partners. On the other hand, Cheeseman and Dodsworth (2023) point out that coalition politics in emerging democracies explore citizens responses to new political arrangements via digital media. However, these studies focus primarily on electoral behaviour and party dynamics. This leaves a gap in understanding the cultural and symbolic aspects of political expression, especially when coalitions disrupt existing political narratives and identities.

In addition, the current research approaches in visual political humour, such as qualitative and quantitative visual content analysis (Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2022) and experimental studies (Verhulsdonk et al., 2022), limit their relevance to the GNU context. These methods overlook the dynamic nature of digital counterpublics where visual content evolves through collective interaction. Critical visual discourse analysis, as proposed by Rose (2022) and applied by Crilley et al. (2020), offers tools to study how visual political humour communicates resistance and creates political meaning. Addressing these theoretical and empirical gaps is important beyond South Africa. As electoral fragmentation rises globally, coalition governments unite ideological different political parties. Understanding citizens digital political expression is vital for evaluating democratic stability and legitimacy. The GNU case offers a unique chance to create frameworks for analysing visual political communication in complex coalitions, enhancing the understanding of modern democratic governance. This literature review reveals that research on the intersection of visual political humour, digital counterpublics, and coalition politics. offers valuable insights in visual political communication. However, the convergence of these elements in post-apartheid South Africa contexts remains undeveloped and underexplored. The unique dynamics of the GNU, merging liberation movement coalitions with racial minority parties occurring within digital communication spaces mainly influenced by Black Twitter, presents a unique opportunity for new research perspectives. This paper explores how digital visual political humour disrupts political identities in South African coalition government.

### **Digital counterpublics as a theoretical framework**

Theoretically, the paper draws on digital counterpublics to examine the role of X users in relation to the South African Government of National Unity Fraser (1990) defines digital counter-public as any virtual, online, digitally networked community in which members actively dissent, resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, and negotiate identities. Key to the definition of digital counterpublics is the ability of social media platform users to deploy discursive strategies in the political discourse to reject, resist, and protest the political status quo. The notion of digital counterpublics is rooted in Fraser's (1990) conception of the "subaltern counterpublic", drawn from Habermas (1989) idea of the 'public sphere', which mainly focused on public spaces such as town squares, coffee houses, and other similar spaces where citizens would gather in these spaces to discuss issues of national concern to them. However, Fraser (1990) argued that Habermas' idea of a public sphere excluded various groups that have been historically excluded and marginalised, such as women, the working class and Black people. These people hardly had a voice on political, economic, and social freedom matters.

The significance of counterpublics is to unearth biases in the mainstream publics, such as social media platforms, essentially to critique and challenge the dominant public discourses (Downey & Fenton, 2003). The proponents of counterpublics are largely the marginalised: Black people, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and individuals who are essentially distance from decision-making (Ferree et al., 2002) and their potential to bring the marginalised groups and viewpoints to the attention of the wider public and influence dominant perspectives (Downey & Fenton, 2003). For Aiseng (2025), Graham and Smith (2016) point out that digital counterpublics such as the Black Twitter on social media platform the X, have catalysed discussions about public participation in political discourses. The significance of the social media, the X, is essentially an interactive, immediate and horizontal form of communication, supporting a deliberate democracy. The circulation of the hashtags by the South African X users such as, the #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall, #ZumaMustFall, #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #CyrilMustGo, #Ramaphosamustfall, #ToHellwithANC and #ANCMustFall to mention a few. The X users suggest the presence of counterpublics that engages with similar logics of resistance, irreverence and anti-respectability (Pena et al., 2025). These users mobilise the hashtag not to appropriate political identity, but to align themselves with its discursive ethos. subverting the dominant political narratives around a political issue or

a political actor. The significance of the social media, X, is essentially an interactive, immediate and horizontal form of communication, supporting a deliberate democracy.

Fraser (1990) notes, counterpublics do not necessarily operate in isolation but can interact, overlap, and amplify one another. In this case, the deployment of the #BlackTwitter hashtag becomes a node through which multiple counterpublics converge. This layered convergence foregrounds the global nature of imperial critique and highlights how counterpublics have become a solidarity space of shared resistance, even across racial or national boundaries. Amarelo (2024, 2) observed that social media users deploy visual political communication material such as “memes”, “online posters”, “political cartoons”, “satire”, “caricature” and “online posters” to evoke humour as a counter public in a political discourse. This paper contends that X users strategically mobilise online political posters as a form of digital counterpublic (Fraser, 1990). Where visual political humour serves as a discursive weapon of resistance, to challenge and reframe the perceived legitimacy of the newly established South African Government of National Unity (GNU) following the 2024 national and provincial elections.

## **Research methodology**

This paper is rooted in a qualitative research design to examine the online political posters used by X users to challenge the establishment of the Government of National Unity. The analysis method is a Critical Visual Analysis (CVA) framework that is pertinent for examining visual political humour in digital spaces where images such as online political posters function as sites of ideological contestation and resistance. Rose (2022) defines CVA as an analytical framework that examines not only what images depict, but how they function as cultural artefacts embedded within networks of power, knowledge and social relations. Unlike traditional iconographic analysis, CVA interrogates the conditions of production, circulation and reception of visual materials, recognising images as active agents in constructing and contesting dominant narratives. In addition, CVA interrogate underlying ideologies, reinforced social hierarchies and hegemonic discourses that are framed by subversive visual strategies. Studies by Crilley et al. (2020), Steffan (2020), Farkas and Bene (2021), Peng and Lu (2023), Lukyanova and Kalashnikova (2025) observed that CVA is critical in social media platforms in that they interrogate images of political actors and political issues that are in the public domain. For this paper, CVA focuses primarily on interrogating the visual discursive practices such as satire, political cartoons, symbolism, caricature, memes, and other affective features that elicit humour on online political posters during and after the formation of the GNU on 14 June 2024, after the national and provincial elections held on 29 May.

The paper used a sample size of 10 visual images as recommended by Wutich et al. (2024), who indicate that this number is sufficient for data saturation in qualitative research. The paper purposively sampled 10 online political posters created by X users, not political parties, reflecting grassroots activism and counterpublics discourse. The paper used a sample size of 10 Inclusion criteria are: (1) content collected 48 to 78 hours post-events, such as the GNU formation on 14 June 2024; (2) humorous visual content about ANC and DA; and (3) engagement metrics indicating relevance. Exclusion criteria are poor quality, duplicates, lack of humour, guideline violations, or inadequate representation of digital counterpublics. The unit analysis focused on individual online political posters on X: (1) visual elements like visual (images, symbol representation, colours, layout), (2) textual (captions, hashtags, embedded text), (3) visual rhetorical strategies (satire, caricature, metaphor), and (4) ideological positioning (counter-narrative construction). These elements are analytical dimensions within each poster unit. Data was collected in the form of online political posters featuring mainly the ANC and the DA, was collected on the social media platform X, hashtags such as #CyrilMustGo, #FuckGNU, #VoetsekANC, #VoetsekGNU, #VoetsekDA, #Makahambe, #RamaphosaMustFall, over 13 months, from June 2024 to May 2025, following the formation of the Government of National Unity. During this period, various political parties, such as the Action SA, DA, EFF, FFP and MK rejected the ANC’s proposed Value Added Tax (VAT) increase by 0.5% for the 2025 national budget (Nyathi, 2025). The public response on X utilised various online political posters to protest the proposed VAT hike.

## **Data presentation and interpretation**

This section presents and interprets the visual and textual content of selected online political posters that circulated on X between June 2024 and May 2025. Through critical visual discourse analysis, it examines how humour, satire, symbolism, and visual metaphors were employed by X users to critique the legitimacy of the Government of National Unity and its leading political actors. The analysis highlights how these visual artefacts construct counter-narratives and express digital dissent within South Africa’s post-election political landscape.

Figure 1 shows an online political poster of South Africa's main political leaders, President Cyril Ramaphosa, the head of the state and the president of the ANC and Mr John Steenhuisen the leader of the DA opposition party, depicted as clowns, suggesting different political interpretations. Historically, clowns in Asian and European political discourse were seen as entertaining yet mentally or physically deficient figures (Laaksonen et al., 2022). The clown also symbolises the toppling of authority, pertaining to high rank and influence, expressed through language and power (Bakhtin & Iswolsky, 2020). Charteris-Black (2012) describes the clown as a visual metaphor for ideological purposes, evoking unconscious emotional responses and creative expression. Thus, the clown visual metaphor suggests anti-social behaviour, superficiality, foolishness, mockery, and situational absurdity. In online political posters, *Pictures 1* and *2* depict President Cyril Ramaphosa as a "clown," traditionally meaning a comedic performer often seen in circuses with flashy costumes and exaggerated facial makeup (Peacock, 2020). This visual metaphor functions as a visual rhetorical device revealing the underlying tensions in the digital counterpublics of the South African political discourse. Depicting the individual as a "clown" serves not just to discredit the person but also to critique the political party's stance and effectiveness (Jenkins, 1984). This label for the leader generates an alternative narrative that diminishes the leader's authority and integrity, suggesting that their political decisions are viewed as trivial or ill-judged (McCusker, 2022). Moreover, it represents the extent of political delegitimation, reflecting dissatisfaction with the GNU-led administration. These sentiments emerge against socio-economic challenges, such as high and persistent unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, increasing inequality, deteriorating social and economic infrastructure, shortages of water and electricity, and worsening urban conditions in major South African municipalities.



**Figure 1.** Online political posters depicting the main South African leaders, President Cyril Ramaphosa and DA leader Mr John Steenhuisen as clowns

Adapted from: [https://x.com/hashtag/VoetsekGNU?src=hashtag\\_click](https://x.com/hashtag/VoetsekGNU?src=hashtag_click), [https://x.com/search?q=%23Makahambe&src=hashtag\\_click&f=live](https://x.com/search?q=%23Makahambe&src=hashtag_click&f=live), <https://x.com/VoetsekDA>

In addition to the depiction (*Picture 2*) of President Ramaphosa, with a visual political metaphor of a "clown" in a South African banknote assigning the note a symbolic zero value. The visual political metaphor of a "clown on a bank note" is representational, it critiques perceived economic, and socio-political challenges and leadership issues under President Ramaphosa. By utilising the national currency, a symbol of monetary stability and national strength, it emphasizes worries about inflation, corruption and inefficient governance, and diminishing state of authority (O'Regan, 2024). This online political poster is within the tradition of political cartooning, as a means of sociopolitical critique. In addition to the depiction (*Picture 2*) of President Ramaphosa as a "clown" on a South African banknote, assigning the note a symbolic worth of zero value, this image serves as a visual political metaphor. It reflects concerns about economic, socio-political challenges, and leadership issues associated with President Ramaphosa. By using the national currency, a symbol of financial stability and national power, it emphasizes fears related to inflation, corruption, poor governance, and eroding state authority (O'Regan, 2024). Similar to President Ramaphosa, *Picture 3* depicts DA leader John Steenhuisen as a "clown," highlighting criticism of his leadership in South African politics. Serving as the leader of the DA since 2020, Steenhuisen stands as a leader of the main opposition party in South Africa. However, his tenure has been marked by various controversies, that have made him a target of social media critique. For instance, the depiction of him as a clown serves as a political satire, underscoring accusations of his leadership and failure to effectively denounce racism within his party and across South African society. Furthermore, his party has struggled to enhance living

conditions in mainly black and coloured communities in the Western Cape, and to address “gangsterism and crime in the Cape Flats, Western Cape” (Woode-Smith, 2024).

Figure 2 illustrates a visual irony involving the two main South African political figures, Mr. John Steenhuisen of the DA and Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa of the ANC. In *Picture 4*, the DA leader is shown holding a burning South African flag, whereas, in *Picture 5*, President Ramaphosa is depicted raising the apartheid National Party flag, with ANC flags situated in the background. This visual presents subtle political humour by implying, rhetorically, that the National Party flag symbolizes the oppression and White minority rule from 1948 to 1994. Meanwhile, the ANC flag stands for the liberation movement and the quest for democratic change. Furthermore, the image questions President Ramaphosa’s political legitimacy: 1) by associating himself with historical racial oppression, 2) by placing the apartheid flag at the foreground, while the ANC flag is at the background. This visual symbolism suggests an intentional betrayal of the liberation’s ideals. These visual images, essentially critique Ramaphosa’s leadership, who has strayed the ANC from its revolutionary roots and has not fulfilled its commitments to transformative change.



**Figure 2.** features a visual irony of the DA opposition party leader, Mr John Steenhuisen holding a burning South African flag, while the ANC President Ramaphosa is depicted holding the apartheid National Party flag  
Adapted from: [https://x.com/search?q=%23Makahambe&src=hashtag\\_click&f=live](https://x.com/search?q=%23Makahambe&src=hashtag_click&f=live) [https://x.com/hashtag/VoestekANC?src=hashtag\\_](https://x.com/hashtag/VoestekANC?src=hashtag_)

Placing the opposition leader next to a burning South African flag, goes beyond mere visual political humour, raising deeper issues regarding national loyalty and patriotism. transcends basic political satire, prompting more profound questions about national loyalty and patriotism. The national flag is symbolic, as it represents racial unity, pride, shared national values, identity, and patriotism forged through the dismantling of apartheid and colonial oppression. From the liberalist DA perspective, the national flag embodies the nation’s transition from apartheid to democracy, marked on 27 April 1994, the celebrated Freedom Day. However, critics of the burning of the South African national flag describe the act as “insensitive,” “unpatriotic,” “provocative,” and “inciteful,” arguing that it dishonours the hard won freedoms achieved through the fought against apartheid and colonial oppression (Bojang, 2024). In addition, the burning of the flag undermines the principles of democracy, unity, tolerance, and peace that are essential to South Africa’s social and political cohesion. Additionally, Ramose (2018) view the burning of the flag as a declaration of war against black South Africans, perpetuating their marginalisation and systemic oppression under the settler-colonial-apartheid-liberalist framework of the GNU.

*Picture 6* of Figure 3 presents a depiction of President Ramaphosa with European feature such as blond hair and blue eyes, a contentious visual political metaphor. This visual image implies that the president is detached from his marginalised Black supporters and accuses him of being a “puppet” and a “sellout” to Western interests and influence (Nkosi, 2023). Furthermore, critics of President Ramaphosa contend that he has abandoned the African

nationalist ideals that were fundamental to the ANC's historical campaign against colonialism and apartheid (New African, 2012). *Picture 7* depicts the apartheid flag integrated into the ANC logo, along with the words: THE ANC OF TODAY#THUMA MINA FOR WHITENESS & BAASKAP. In addition, elements of the DA branding, such as its logo located at the top and the party's branding features, which include bands or stripes at the bottom, present a visual representation. These symbolic elements suggests that President Ramaphosa's administration has been influences by a selected group of few White elites and owners in key sectors of the South African economy, often known as "White Monopoly Capital". This group of White monopoly capitalists has historically dominated and continues to exert control over the South African economy, stemming from the colonial-apartheid era through to the current post-apartheid period. Critics of Ramaphosa have argued that the Government of National Unity (GNU) was manipulated by White Monopoly Capital, "whose objective is to mask the class and race contradictions exposed by the 2024 electoral outcomes" (Ndenze, 2024). Moreover, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), a leading trade union, claim that under President Ramaphosa the ANC has "yielded to the demands of the South African bourgeoisie led by its billionaire President Cyril Ramaphosa" (Mabuza, 2014).



**Figure 3.** Online political posters depicting the South African president as a Black man with a Whiteman's blonde hair and blue eyes following the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU). In addition, the GNU is depicted as an ANC merger with the DA and the apartheid National Party-led government. Adapted from: [https://x.com/hashtag/VoestekANC?src=hashtag\\_](https://x.com/hashtag/VoestekANC?src=hashtag_)

Figure 4 depicts the political dynamics surrounding the formation of the South African Government of National Unity, a coalition between the ANC and DA following the national and provincial elections post-2024. *Picture 8* depicts President Ramaphosa as the groom in a marriage ceremony with the DA and the IFP political parties as the bride, featuring the speech bubble "I CHOOSE GNU!" while contrasting with the bride's reply "BUT I HAVEN'T GIVEN UP ON THEM!". This wedding image symbolises a significant political vow for legitimacy and approval through the formal attire, ceremonial backdrop and the presence of witnesses, symbolised by the other political parties. In the background, "bridesmaids" represent the Patriotic Alliance (PA), Freedom Front Plus (FFP), the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the *uMkhonto weSizwe* Party (MKP) political parties that stand apart from the wedding party, symbolising their refusal to join the ANC-led GNU. The varied expression and body language of the "bridesmaids" suggests different levels of enthusiasm and commitment to the GNU arrangement. First, this scene highlights the binary between collaboration and resistance amidst the post-2024 South African national and provincial elections. Second, it implies that the GNU's framework is based on selective integration, sidelining more radical parties such as the EFF and MKP. For instance, the MKP criticized the GNU as a betrayal orchestrated by President Ramaphosa, intended to exclude "black parties" from coalition

discussions (Manjeya, 2024). Despite political divisions in South Africa, the image in *picture 9* underscores the broader political maturity within the South African political sphere.



**Figure 4.** depicts a satirical state of the Government of National Unity (GNU) through visual political images, such as online political posters and political cartoons.

Adapted from: [https://x.com/hashtag/VoetsekGNU?src=hashtag\\_click](https://x.com/hashtag/VoetsekGNU?src=hashtag_click)

In *Picture 9*, President Ramaphosa is depicted seated atop Mr Steenhuisen's shoulders while taking the oath of office under the watchful eyes of Raymond Zondo, the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court. This imagery symbolizes the reliance of the ANC's political achievements on the DA's support within the GNU framework. Despite receiving 21.8% of the electoral support, the DA holds significant structural power, such as legislative and administrative functions important for the ANC's coalition governance (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). This visual political metaphor illustrates Mr Steenhuisen shouldering the coalition's burdens, carrying the weight of ANC leadership while still upholding his political identity and constituency responsibilities, all while facing potential criticism from his supporters. *Picture 10* depicts a political coalition known as DANC, formed between the ANC and the DA in South Africa. The visual elements merge the ANC's traditional colour symbols, the green, yellow and black, with the DA's blue and white, symbolising the union of these historically divergent parties. This alliance can be seen as a politically compromised partnership. Traditional symbols of the ANC, such as the spear and shield are contrasted against the DA's blue circle, emphasizing the conflict between historical liberation stories and present-day governance issues. Thus, labelling the coalition "DANC" adds a humorous touch while also undermining the validity of such a partnership. There's an inherent irony in combining two parties, that historically stand on opposing ideological grounds. In post-2024 South Africa, visual images used in political communication highlight the role of visual political humour in digital media. This humour serves not only to entertain political audiences but also to undermine political actors and issues like the GNU. Furthermore, it helps craft alternative narratives concerning political actors and issues. Such visual political humour plays a crucial role in creating counter-narratives within digital media spaces, creating ideological meaning, influencing political conversations, and shaping the public's views on political figures and issues.

## Conclusion

This paper addressed the underexplored question of how visual political humour functions as a form of political dissent within South Africa's Government of National Unity (GNU). Previous studies have predominantly concentrated on Western democracies or Africa's single-party systems. Thus, leaving a research gap in understanding how coalition politics, particularly between historically opposing parties such as the ANC and DA, are contested through digital media. By analysing online political posters on X through critical visual discourse analysis, this paper revealed that visual humour is not merely a source of entertainment but an effective rhetorical tool for constructing counter-narratives. The findings revealed that South African digital users employed satire, symbolism and irony to delegitimise the ANC and DA political actors, including, the coalition between the two opposing parties. On the other hand, findings exposed contradictions within the GNU and perceived betrayals of liberation ideals. These images demonstrated how digital counterpublics use visual political humour to question authority, express political dissatisfaction and dissent in political dialogue. This paper contributes into how visual political humour shapes political legitimacy in fragile coalitions.

The paper findings make the following implications: Firstly, they support the idea that visual political humour serves as a democratic tool that enables citizens to engage in the creation of counter political narratives.

Secondly, they underscore the fragility of coalition government in societies with significant ideological and historical divides such as South Africa. As visual satire exposes public discontent and the symbolic internal divisions within the GNU. However, this paper is not without limitations. The reliance on a purposive sample of online posters over a limited time frame constrains the generalisability of the findings, and the focus on X as a single platform overlooks how visual political humour is deployed across other digital spaces. Moreover, the paper foregrounds representation and symbolism but does not measure the broader political impact of such humour on electoral outcomes. Future studies should expand comparative analyses to other African coalition contexts and explore how digital satire interacts with offline political mobilisation. It would also be valuable to investigate how political humour as resistance intersects with class, race, and generational identities in shaping counterpublic discourses.

### Declarations

**Interdisciplinary Scope:** This paper makes a distinct intersection of significant scholarly inquiry: visual political humour studies, counter narratives, audience content producers in digital media spaces and visual political communication. By examining online political posters created by X users to frame visual political humour under the South African Government of National Unity, this paper bridges these disciplinary domains in ways that generate fresh insights unavailable through single-discipline approaches, making it particularly well-suited to this journal's interdisciplinary scope and mission.

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**Availability of Data:** Data is available on X social media platforms using relevant hashtags.

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