

A branding bridge too far for a demoralised nation

IT IS plausible that German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and those involved in Germany's branding campaign for the 2006 Fifa World Cup, may have been correct, initially, in their assertion that the 2010 World Cup presents SA with a unique opportunity to brand itself and shape the image of the country in a way that may not be available again.

However, while SA can learn significantly from the German experience last year, there are factors specific to SA which militate against a campaign similar to the one in Germany.

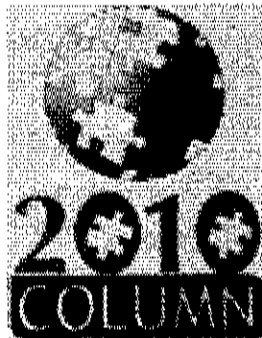
SA is currently a country in crisis, the euphoria over winning the Rugby World Cup notwithstanding. I use the word "currently" quite deliberately, as there is much to celebrate in our recent past following the transition to democracy.

The country's macroeconomic fundamentals are secure, which has contributed to economic growth rates in the region of 5% over the past five years, the competitiveness of our commodities in the international export market, a strengthening rand, and significant domestic expenditure on infrastructure occasioned by a fiscal surplus for the first time. However, at the same time we face a political, institutional and social crisis of unprecedented proportions.

Politically, the country is experiencing a leadership void, particularly as struggles over succession gain momentum and party politics assumes increasing prominence as we head towards national elections in 2009.

President Thabo Mbeki refuses to lead decisively, his cabinet ministers have been underperforming, and his top technocrats in the security echelons are biding their time as allegations and counter-allegations run their course. Retributive justice has become the norm.

The country does not have a robust enough political opposition to provide the necessary checks and balances, particularly at a time when the government is failing singularly to deliver on its



While significant social strides have been made by the government over the past decade, such as in reducing poverty, improving employment and ensuring free basic services to the poor and marginalised, its record on other social deliverables is abysmal.

Crime is rampant and getting worse, the economic gap between rich and poor is increasing. Affirmative action policies have not had their desired effect, a culture of entitlement is entrenching itself, and race still continues to play a significant role in the national discourse.

So how, given the above, do we begin a branding and image-gen-

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eration campaign ahead of 2010, with features salient to that of Germany, ensuring the kind of success our German counterparts have us believe is possible?

The answer to this question is that a branding exercise similar to Germany's, with its concomitant successes, is simply not possible in SA. Research prior to last year's World Cup in Germany revealed that most of the world perceived Germans to be unfriendly. The



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branding campaign that emanated was therefore centred on dispelling this idea, hence the 2006 World Cup slogan, "A time to make friends", was born. Germany now holds the second-most valuable country brand in the nation brand index.

If a question was posed to the global community about how they perceive SA at this moment, the answer that is likely to come back is "crime-ridden and violence-plagued". Does it follow that the branding strategy that emerges should be centred on dispelling this idea, which seems to be becoming increasingly entrenched? Perhaps. Do we have the political leadership to do this? An unequivocal "No!"

Then again, how appealing really is a strategy that has as its key tenets stopping crime and violence, instilling new political leadership and reforming institutional arrangements?

While success at the Rugby World Cup may have rekindled some national pride, in many ways we are a demoralised nation. It is difficult, therefore, for us to talk about positive branding possibilities.

In any event, as Gillian Saunders from Grant Thornton's tourism and leisure division recently observed, we have left it "too late" to start marketing SA ahead of the World Cup.

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Duplicate

mandate.

Institutionally, governance arrangements are a shambles. The national government dictates the pace of development and delivery, making the provincial tier of government redundant, save for the disbursement of a share of the national budget.

Local government is ineffective, especially in relation to its service delivery mandate. Party political structures -- in the ruling African National Congress (ANC) as well as among opposition parties -- are not functioning well, and the civil service requires a fundamental overhaul.

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