



RIGHTS OR WRONGS?

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS MORAL VALUES

By Stephen Rule

Are South Africans apathetic about their beliefs or highly tolerant of diverse opinions and behaviour? South Africa is renowned for having one of the most liberal constitutions in the world, but an HSRC representative national survey of 4 980 adults (aged 16 and older) during September and October 2003, indicates that Government policy on “moral” issues is more “progressive” than the attitudes of the electorate.

Since the 1994 change of Government, the Termination of Pregnancy Act has been passed to permit abortion. Similarly, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and capital punishment for persons found guilty of murder, have been made unconstitutional. But according to the survey, most South Africans oppose abortion, same-sex adult sexual relationships and support capital punishment.

All three issues are, however, hotly contested in civil society. Pro-life activists are objecting strongly to the termination of 300 000 pregnancies since 1996. Divisions exist within the Christian community with respect to consensual sex between adults of the same gender. The re-introduction of the death penalty is policy for several political parties.

Public opinion gauged by the HSRC’s 2003 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) reflects this contestation. More than

half (56%) of South African adults think that abortion is “always wrong” in the event of it being discovered that there is a strong chance of serious defect in the unborn child. Only 21% think that it is “not wrong at all”.

It is acknowledged that the way in which a moral-type question is asked and the context in which it is placed, can influence the response. In this case the questions were phrased in the same way as those that have previously been used in European, British and other social attitudes surveys.

Although the two dominant political parties, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA), support the liberalisation of abortion policies, recent debates suggest some shifts in thinking. In contrast, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) has consistently been outspoken on the topic. An ACDP member of the National Assembly, Cheryllyn Dudley, has stated that many politicians are actually against abortion in principle, but supported the Termination of Pregnancy Act because “they wanted to be politically correct”.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of black Africans oppose birth defect-related abortion, a much higher proportion than among the other races (coloured 41%; Indian 37%; white 23%).

Opposition to abortion if the family concerned has a low income and cannot

afford more children is even higher. Seven out of ten (70%) think it is “always wrong” under such circumstances. Only one in ten (10%) think that it is “not wrong at all”. More than three-quarters (75%) of respondents in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Limpopo think that it is “always wrong”. Whereas almost three-quarters (74%) of black Africans think that abortion is always wrong under such circumstances, this is the case with 59% of Indians and 57% of whites and coloureds.

In respect of the death penalty, 50% of South African adults (aged 16 and older) “strongly agree” and a further 25% “agree” that capital punishment should be imposed on someone convicted of murder. In contrast 7% “strongly disagree”, 11% “disagree”, 5% are neutral on the issue and 2% do not know.

The survey found that more females (78%) than males (72%) “strongly agree” or “agree” with the death penalty, as do more of those aged 35 and older (79%) than those in the below 35 age group (72%). “Agreement” or “strong agreement” ranges from 72% among black Africans and 76% among coloureds to 86% among Indians and 92% among whites. Pro-death penalty sentiment is strongest in urban formal areas (78%) and in the Western Cape (81%), Eastern Cape (80%) and Gauteng (78%).

Regarding sexuality, more than three-quarters (78%) of adult South Africans feel that sexual relations between two adults of the same gender are “always wrong”. Disapproval is at the 64% level among coloureds, 70% among whites, 76% among Indians and 81% among black Africans. These attitudes do not vary significantly by age or gender. Geographically, 90% of Limpopo residents and 88% of Eastern Cape residents hold this view, whereas this is the case among only 64% in the Free State and 68% in the Western Cape. One in twelve (8%) of urban formal residents think that same-gender sexual relationships are “not wrong at all”, this being less so among urban informal dwellers (5%), those in tribal areas (5%) or rural formal areas (2%).

In more than half of the countries in Africa, the practice of homosexuality is illegal for gay men and/or lesbian women. Such sanction is most prevalent in the Muslim-dominated north and the Christian-dominated south. South Africa is one of the exceptions; others include Burkina Faso, Gabon, Comores, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo Brazzaville, Eritrea, Reunion, and São Tomé and Príncipe. South Africa is thus comparable with many “developed” countries in this regard, where intolerance of homosexual lifestyles is relatively rare and the media is used widely to promote acceptance thereof.

Contrasts are evident from comparable research in Britain, which has found that 60% of adults are in favour of abortion if the couple concerned is in agreement. This varies from only 52% approval among the 65 and older age group to 72% among people aged between 25 and 34 years. In contrast to South Africans, 27% of British adults feel that sexual relations between two adults of the same gender are “not wrong at all”. Reinstatement of the death penalty is favoured by 50% of adults in Italy, 52% in the Netherlands, 60% in Britain, and over 60% in Canada.

So are most South Africans tolerant or apathetic? Perhaps the answer is that it depends who you ask.

Traditionalism is strongest among the religious, black African, married, pre-matriculation sector of the population, while the “progressives” are more likely to be found in

BY PROVINCE, THE PERCENTAGE OF SOUTH AFRICANS AGED 16 AND OLDER WHO SAY THAT ...

BY PROVINCE	EC	FS	GP	KN	LP	MP	NC	NW	WC	Total
It is always wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations	88	64	72	81	90	84	73	75	68	78
Abortion is always wrong if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby	61	53	58	62	65	67	27	61	25	56
Abortion is always wrong if the family has a low income and cannot afford any more children	76	66	69	75	83	79	50	69	48	70
They strongly agree or agree that people convicted of murder should be subject to the death penalty	80	72	78	75	67	68	53	73	81	75

BY RACE GROUP, PERCENTAGE OF SOUTH AFRICANS AGED 16 AND OLDER WHO SAY THAT ...

BY RACE	Black	White	Coloured	Indian	Total
It is always wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations	81	70	64	76	78
Abortion is always wrong if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby	64	23	41	37	56
Abortion is always wrong if the family has a low income and cannot afford any more children	74	57	57	59	70
They strongly agree or agree that people convicted of murder should be subject to the death penalty	72	92	76	86	75

COMPARISON OF ATTITUDES IN SELECTED COUNTRIES TO THOSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

	Chile	Phillippines	RSA	Poland	Portugal	Switzerland	Netherlands
Abortion is always wrong if there is a strong chance of a serious defect in the baby	58.5	70.7	56.1	30.7	13.7	13.7	7.8
Abortion is always wrong if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children	76.5	70.9	70.3	44.4	44.5	25.9	36.4
It is always wrong if a man and a woman have sexual relations before marriage	31.8	64.9	50.6	18.1	22.8	6.0	7.4
Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always wrong	87.7	84.6	78.0	74.4	73.8	26.1	15.8

Source: ISSP (1998) and SASAS (2003)

the urban areas where respondents have at least a matriculation qualification, are less religious and unmarried.

Even among those South Africans who consider the “progressive” aspects to be “wrong”, however, this rarely results in activism and has a minimal influence on voting behaviour. •

Dr Stephen Rule is a Research Director in the HSRC's Surveys, Analyses, Modelling and Mapping Research Programme. This article is based on a chapter, authored by Rule and Bongwiwe Mncwango, which analyses the results of these questions asked in the South African Social Attitudes Survey, 2003. The chapter is scheduled for publication in a book later this year.