

## A Fresh Start for South Africa?

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In my book *The Arrogance of Power: South Africa's Leadership Meltdown*, published four years ago, I argued that the crisis of leadership in the country's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), ran deeper than President Jacob Zuma's corruption. Too easily we forget how controversial Zuma's predecessor Thabo Mbeki was, especially over his denial that HIV is the cause of AIDS. Criminal charges recently reinstated against Zuma after his resignation under pressure this February have their origins in an infamously corrupt arms deal that was concluded during the presidency of Nelson Mandela in a process overseen by Mbeki. In that deal, the South African government purchased arms the country did not need for billions of rands in order to line the pockets of the party's senior officials.

Since Mandela's departure from office in 1999, his successors have slowly been eating away at South Africans' trust and goodwill. This resulted in a decline in the ANC's electoral majority from 70 percent at the height of Mbeki's popularity in 2004 to 62 percent under Zuma in 2014. In the 2016 local government elections, the ANC lost control of the major cities, including the country's economic engine, Johannesburg. It was almost a foregone conclusion that the party would sink even lower in the polls if it went into the 2019 general election with Zuma at the head of its ticket. The ANC's action to replace Zuma as president before his term was up reflected those fears.

The question now is whether the new president, Cyril Ramaphosa, can restore the people's trust in the party after the damage of the Zuma years. This question is complicated by the fact that the ANC's rank and file voted to surround Ramaphosa with some of Zuma's staunchest backers—including the controversial strongman of Mpumalanga province, David Mabuza, as deputy president and Ace Magashule, premier of Free State province, in the powerful position of the party's secretary-general.

Magashule was accused of graft after the Free State government granted an allegedly corrupt contract to one of the sprawling businesses of the Guptas—an Indian-born family that allegedly had Zuma in their pocket to the extent that their influence was often described as “state capture.”

The presence of these individuals on the ANC's new leadership team has sent all the wrong signals to an already jaded electorate. Also, the party may yet be punished for failing to elect an African woman to any of its highest leadership positions, the so-called top six. The posts of party president, deputy president, chairman, secretary-general, and treasurer are all held by African men. The only woman among them, Jessie Duarte, who is colored (of mixed race), holds the position of deputy secretary-general and is a strong Zuma ally.

Meanwhile, the opposition parties, especially the radical Economic Freedom Front, continue to draw attention to Ramaphosa's role in the August 2012 shooting of striking miners in Marikana, at a mine run by the Lonmin company. As a shareholder in Lonmin, Ramaphosa had called the minister of police asking for an intervention to end what he considered to be criminal conduct by the miners. When the police opened fire, 34 miners were killed.

But South Africans know that Ramaphosa did not call the police to demand that they shoot at the miners—otherwise he would not even have been elected president of the ANC. He is still a very popular figure, thanks to his years as leader of the biggest trade union in the country, the National Union of Mineworkers, in the 1980s and the role he played in the negotiations to end apartheid, working side by side with Nelson Mandela. By all accounts, Mandela preferred Ramaphosa as his successor over Thabo Mbeki, but was overruled by the leadership of the party and by leaders of other African countries. No one is likely to fill Mandela's shoes any time soon, but Ramaphosa is heralded as an approximation of Mandela's celebrated era—the period before Mbeki and Zuma.

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South Africans run the risk of repeating history and reexperiencing disillusionment by forgetting that there was as much excitement when both Mbeki and Zuma were elected. Mbeki, let us recall, was greeted as the Renaissance man who would do what Mandela had failed to do—confront the continuing legacy of racism head on. Mandela’s biographer Anthony Sampson captured the growing discontent with Mandela in the ANC:

In his first months as President, he enjoyed a brilliant honeymoon, particularly with white South Africans, to whom this tolerant old man came as a wondrous relief. . . . It was a normality which carried its own dangers, as black militants saw the revolution betrayed; and younger ANC leaders including Thabo Mbeki knew they must soon make reforms which would offend the whites.

There was similar enthusiasm when Zuma skillfully presented himself as the man of the people challenging Mbeki’s increasingly autocratic leadership of the ANC. In both cases we ended up with tears in our eyes, having been fooled by their populism and betrayed by the ways in which they presided over an increasingly corrupt government. And so, hopeful as we might be over Ramaphosa’s rise to the presidency, we also ought to keep up our guard against excessive individual adulation by focusing on the larger structural challenges that must be overcome to sustain democratic leadership.

## IDEAS FOR RENEWAL

Even a well-meaning Ramaphosa could be undermined not only by the Zuma holdovers in the party leadership and his cabinet, but also by the many corrupt individuals in government departments throughout South Africa’s vast bureaucracy, especially in the country’s far-flung provinces. He might be tempted to reach an accommodation with them and turn inward to tend to his own survival as party leader. In that case, and if the electoral trends I have mentioned are anything to go by, he might just win the party but lose the nation.

The power of the ANC even in decline is not to be underestimated. Its use of patronage for the deployment of party cadres to government positions makes Chicago’s Democratic machine under former Mayor Richard J. Daley look like a Sunday picnic. George Washington was so disdainful of

political parties that he described them as “potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government.” But if powerful parties are a reality of modern politics, elections are one way of keeping them in check.

Ramaphosa will have to demonstrate that he is serious about breaking with the ANC’s nepotistic and corrupt practices or face the wrath of the electorate—if not in 2019, in subsequent elections. And so here are a few strategic changes for Ramaphosa to consider if he is to succeed.

First, he may have to reshuffle his cabinet ahead of the 2019 elections by removing the corrupt politicians that surround him. Appointing a woman as his deputy president would be another good move. As one of the longest-serving cabinet ministers, Lindiwe Sisulu has the government experience, intellect, and charisma to fill such a role.

Second, Ramaphosa must protect the integrity of the nation’s institutions by appointing the right people to head them. As things now stand, the pilaging of public institutions resembles the “tragedy of the commons” as party members rush to secure as many resources as possible for themselves in the shortest possible time. This is because they do not trust fellow party members to abstain from the same behavior.

Third, Ramaphosa must become the education president. The student uprisings of the past few years have exposed a breach in the relationship between the older leadership of the ANC and the younger generation of South Africans. These young people are now filling the ranks of the electorate, and shaping the public discourse in ways that are not always tolerant of different opinions. The president could establish a national platform for regular discussions with student leaders, not only about funding for the universities but also about the aims of higher education. However, we need to consider a larger campaign to instill a culture of learning in our communities. Another possibility would be the addition of a civic education component to the high school curriculum.

Fourth, Ramaphosa must return the ANC to its old multiracialism by electing more non-Africans to its leadership structure. I deliberately use the term multiracialism rather than nonracialism because the latter concept has been cynically used

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to deny the salience of race as a social category in South Africa. This has fueled resentment and extremism within the black community. The establishment of racial justice and goodwill should be an explicit policy goal of Ramaphosa's government. Ignoring these challenges will not make them disappear.

Fifth, in order to make these strategic changes, Ramaphosa will have to redefine the presidency. Over the past twenty-five years we have labored under a technocratic view of presidential leadership. In this view, the role of the president is to lead the government in developing policies that will grow the economy, create jobs, and fight poverty and inequality. However, even more important than this is restoring public trust, without which there can be no business investment, no educational achievement, and no common national purpose that transcends group and individual self-interest.

Ramaphosa must look beyond the party for advisers who will tell him what he might not always want to hear, instead of surrounding himself with sycophants as past leaders have done. He must also build direct linkages with the public, instead of reaching them only through party structures.

Very few leaders in history were able to transcend their political party affiliation to become truly national figures: Abraham Lincoln, Charles de Gaulle, Julius Nyerere, Mikhail Gorbachev, F. W. de Klerk, and Nelson Mandela are some of the exceptional ones that immediately come to mind. What they had in common was the ability to use their personal charisma and the institution of the presidency to fashion a new nation. But as the historian Jeremi Suri points out in his recent book *The Impossible Presidency*, the ability of US heads of state to perform this role has decreased over time because of the growth in the responsibilities of the modern presidency. Suri notes that this has made the role almost impossible for any one person.

As technocrat-in-chief, the South African president is similarly hobbled in his ability to use the position as a bully pulpit to articulate the nation's core values and aspirations. Perhaps a new position of prime minister could be created to run the government—and the first to hold it ought to be a woman. This would free the president to play the kind of strategic leadership role I have outlined. He or she would be the articulator-in-chief of the nation's most cherished values and aspirations—just like Mandela. ■