AFRICA 20.12.2017 | William Gumede

‘Ramaphosa needs to win the trust of ordinary people’

Bestselling author and commentator William Gumede on the new leader of South Africa’s ANC

Newly-elected ANC president Cyril Ramaphosa has promised his party will emerge ‘united, renewed and confident’ under his leadership. The anti-apartheid campaigner turned business tycoon secured the top job on Monday, during a fractious conference which saw him secure 179 more votes than his rival, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, out of 4,708 cast.

South Africa’s ruling party has seen its reputation crumble under President Jacob Zuma, thanks to a string of corruption scandals, and a failure to deliver the opportunities and level of equality people expected following apartheid.

Political commentator William Gumede says the new ANC leader will have a tough job bringing the party – and his country – into shape.

Cyril Ramaphosa has been elected the new leader of the African National Congress (ANC). What does he stand for?

> The ANC is a broad church. It has many different strands, from African traditionalists and conservatives at one end of the spectrum, to Marxists at the other. Cyril Ramaphosa represents the social democratic wing of the party. He wants to forge a social pact between business, government and civil society. I think that will form a pillar of his presidency.
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> Under his leadership, we will also, I think, see a strengthening of South Africa’s constitution. He was one of its architects after apartheid ended, so he is strong on constitutional values.

What do you mean by a ‘social pact’?

> Well, about a year ago Ramaphosa helped unite business and labour

around a minimum wage. Negotiations were long and difficult, but both sides eventually accepted it.

I think we'll see other, similar initiatives affecting different sectors. South Africa is facing a number of crises. Ramaphosa's way of dealing with these crises will be to get all the partners together, and come up with compromises that everyone can accept.

At the top of his agenda is the State itself. The South African State is in crisis. It has been hollowed out by systematic corruption.

Ramaphosa will first have to fix this corruption – the poor governance, mismanagement and waste.

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He will also need to make the civil service more efficient. That means appointing more capable people. Up till now, many people have been given government jobs not on account of their skills or competencies, but because they are members of the ANC.

Thirdly, he needs to restore trust. Zuma has struggled to build partnerships between business, government and labour because these sectors distrust the government. They see all the mismanagement and corruption.

Everyone's essentially on investment strike. Nobody's creating jobs, nobody's building any factories. And people are actually moving their money out of the country, to Europe and the US, to mitigate the risk.

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I want to go back to the corruption issue, because we know Ramaphosa was running against Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, President Jacob Zuma's ex-wife. A lot of people were worried that if she came to power then the corruption of the Zuma years would continue.

She lost out to Ramaphosa of course, but three of her allies still got elected to top positions in the ANC. Given their high standing, do you think Ramaphosa will actually have the power to tackle party corruption properly?

You know, that's the difficulty. The ANC is divided into two factions, as are the six people at the top. They're split between

Ramaphosa's group – the reformers – and the old guard of Dlamini-Zuma, Zuma and their supporters. That makes things very difficult for Ramaphosa – he's taken a poisoned chalice.

Reform can happen, but the divisions mean it will be much slower than some would hope for. His opponents will try and water down any measures to tackle corruption. There won't be a 'big bang' response, and a lot of people will find this very frustrating.

However, one of Ramaphosa's biggest strengths is that he's probably the most experienced politician in the entire country in handling this kind of crisis negotiation.

I mean he has been there. He was there as a union boss in the 80s, massing the mine workers. He was there leading the Codesa negotiations [to end apartheid]. He's faced almost every kind of crisis over the last 40 years.

Going back to Jacob Zuma, does Ramaphosa have the intention or the power to kick him out before the 2019 elections, or will we see a Zuma presidency up to then?

Well I think for the country's good, Jacob Zuma needs to leave as quickly as possible. And the best case scenario would be for him to resign of his own will.

If he doesn't do that, I think Ramaphosa will ask him in private to resign.

You have to remember that Jacob Zuma's big fear is that he's going to be prosecuted. That's why he wanted to get his ex-wife in the top job so she could protect him. Now he's got second best – his faction controls the party. So he may take the gamble and leave, knowing his people in the ANC leadership will protect him.

How popular is Ramaphosa among ordinary South Africans?

It depends on who you ask. Many middle class blacks who have been leaving the ANC will want to give Ramaphosa another chance. And a lot of ordinary people would also argue that Ramaphosa is a safe pair of hands, because he has already made his money [in business] so he's not going to be corrupt.

Even poorer blacks tend to look up to black people who have made a lot of money. In our country, power comes through wealth – whether you're white or whether you're black.

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But there's also significant opposition. The unions, for example, are very critical of Ramaphosa. They say he's become rich off the backs of blacks, through his work in the mining sector, and that he hasn't done enough to change the lives of ordinary people. They also criticise him for being part of the Zuma administration and doing little to tackle corruption.

Then there are the Economic Freedom Fighters – a breakaway left-wing party led by Julius Malema – who portray Ramaphosa as a puppet of white monopoly capital.

What about the media? Does he enjoy their support?

The media is very much behind him. In fact, his opponents within the ANC have attacked him on that basis. They say he's being supported by what people call the white-owned media and white business.

Which groups supportedNkozana Dlamini-Zuma for ANC president?

Her support base is very much in the rural areas. Her message, and Zuma's message is simple: you're going to have the land [that currently belongs to white people].

The Dlamini-Zuma camp says that whites are the problem because the whites are racist.

You can see why this message has appeal. Racism in South Africa is systemic.

When you work on the farm, you're treated as if you're an animal. In the workplace you see the same set-up as you did under apartheid: white managers, white owners, black workers, and apartheid wages. If you're black you get less money for similar skills. The injustice of it all is staring you in the face.

So Dlamini-Zuma and Zuma can easily make the case: 'we may be corrupt, but look at the whites – they're even worse'.

The challenge for Ramaphosa and democratic reformers in the ANC is to dispel the argument used by many implicated in corruption that because apartheid governments and white businesses were corrupt and benefitted from the apartheid system, black corruption should be excused. Corruption of whatever colour should be fought.

What does Ramaphosa's leadership mean for other African countries and for the international community?

I believe Ramaphosa's victory will strengthen the hands of democrats across Africa.

Zuma really moved away from Nelson Mandela's aims of partnering with other democrats and strengthening civil society. He aligned South Africa with some odious regimes – Sudan, Guinea and so on. And he is very much into the idea of protecting African leaders rather than the ordinary citizens.

What is more, South Africa's political and economic decline has had massive implications for the region. Its economy is strongly linked to those of the Southern African Development Community, and its influence is spreading northwards, to countries like Kenya and even Nigeria.

Ramaphosa promises a return to something much more positive, more visionary, more forward looking.

One has to understand where he comes from. In the early 90s, he was seen internationally as the engine behind Nelson Mandela. Mandela was the face, while Ramaphosa did the hard graft behind the scenes – he was the one actually striking the deals. So his leadership of the ANC really will give a confidence boost to Africa, and internationally.



William Gumede

William Gumede is Associate Professor at School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He is Executive Chairperson of Democracy Works Foundation and former Deputy Editor of *The Sowetan* newspaper. During the anti-apartheid struggle, Gumede held several leadership positions in South African student, civics and trade union movements. His more recent books include: *Restless Nation: Making Sense of Troubled Times* (Tafelberg); and *South Africa in BRICS – Salvation or Ruination* (Tafelberg).