

“End of an error”

18 December 2017

That is the caption on a picture of Jacob Zuma which circulated widely on Whatsapp as the results became known. It is an apt summary. It is certainly the beginning of the end of a long nightmare. There is no doubt that the eventual replacement of Zuma by Ramaphosa as head of the government is a big change for the better. The country has taken a step forward – at least now muddling through will happen with a better captain at the helm.

The results for the Top 6

One can summarise the result of the Top 6 in two phrases: there is something for everybody; and it was a close-run affair.

Something for everybody

Three of the top 6 come from the Ramaphosa slate, three from the Dlamini-Zuma slate (she herself has disappeared from the Top 6 altogether); two from the “premier league” provinces and rural SA, four from Gauteng of whom at least three are from modern and urban SA. The slate is not the first prize for either the Ramaphosa camp or the Dlamini-Zuma camp – it is a compromise.

In fact, the Top 6 is so finely balanced that some people are even suspicious that the results were rigged. If rigged means that the votes were counted and then adjusted to achieve the announced outcome, I do not think so. There were too many checks and balances in both the voting and counting process. What is more likely to have happened is that trade-offs and negotiations took place beforehand, leading people to switching their votes between different candidates.

These negotiations and trade-offs are the result of a party trying to unite before the 2019 elections. Ramaphosa is obviously the better person to lead the ANC into those, but he had to accept Mabuza as deputy-president and Ace Magashule as secretary-general.

One could also call the negotiations and trade-offs “a pact with the devil”, as some disappointed supporters are indeed doing. That is how elections are won – politics is the art of the possible.

The final judgement on how finely power is now balanced in the ANC will only be known once the NEC (National Executive Committee) has been elected. That should be known by the end of the week.

A close run affair

It was a close-run affair – the biggest margin of difference was for Mabuza (8%) and Mashatile (7.2%); whilst only 24 votes – a mere slither of 4 701 voting delegates – separated Magashule and runner-up Mchunu.

The division of votes and majorities were as follows (numbers do not add up to 100% due to abstentions and spoilt papers):

President: 51% for Ramaphosa against 47.3% for Dlamini-Zuma (179 votes)

Deputy President: 53% for Mabuza against 45% for Lindiwe Sisulu (379 votes)

Chairman: 50.6% for Mantashe against 47.5% for Mthethwa (149 votes)

Secretary General: 49.4% for Magashule against 48.8% for Mchunu (24 votes)

Deputy Secretary General: 51.8% for Duarte against 46.3% for Losi (261)

Treasurer General: 52.7% for Mashatile against 45.6% for Nkoana-Mashabane (339)

If some “pact with the devil” was not made, Ramaphosa and Mantashe would likely not have made it.

Is a win a win?

Given the closeness of the results and the fact that there is something for everybody”, can Ramaphosa govern effectively?

Here one must distinguish between the party and the country. What the country needs most is some certainty and coherence after the Zuma years. As a colleague once put it “Mandela gave us freedom, Mbeki gave us discipline, Zuma gave us chaos”. Ramaphosa can provide some order and lead us out of the chaos: create policy certainty; co-ordinate better implementation; promote stability; effect some administrative efficiency. That is both within his ability and his power.

Consider that once he has taken the reins, he will have the power:

- to appoint cabinet ministers and hold them accountable (Zuma never did that);
- to appoint qualified senior civil servants (Zuma did his best to disrupt with mediocrity);
- of the bully pulpit (Zuma got to it late in his tenure when he discovered “radical economic transformation”);
- to launch various initiatives that can promote cohesion (remember any Zuma launched?).

Ramaphosa may be restrained, but he is certainly not a lame duck. Once you have your hands on the levers of power you can do a lot with them (as Zuma has shown in a negative way).

His biggest test will come when he has to clean up corruption and go after the looters. Here his hand is strengthened substantially by the fact that the courts have already mandated him to appoint a commission of inquiry into state capture (he now controls the terms of reference) and a new director of national prosecutions. Between those two actions he can lay the foundation for visible action against corruption, despite some of his colleagues in the Top 6. That of course can become a new political platform, strengthening his position further with the broad electorate.

No doubt Ramaphosa would have to use his famed negotiation skills to the utmost in dealing with the country’s problems and his colleagues. But he is not alone: Gwede Mantashe will be a strong chair and manager of processes and Paul Mashatile will certainly help.

I am less convinced that the party can get cleaned up with the current Top 6. That remains to be seen.

Will Zuma be recalled?

The closeness of the results makes a Zuma recall in the short run unlikely, but the basic forces remain active. Under the lid the cauldron is bubbling. Zuma is thoroughly unpopular with the SA electorate and an election is due in 18 months’ time. The ANC will not want to go into that election with the Zuma albatross around its neck; they will want to put some distance between themselves and him. That would have happened even if his ex-wife had won. Secondly, Zuma could still face criminal charges and that could spark his recall. Thirdly, if he does things that embarrass the party (like announcing unfunded free higher education), it may result in a recall.

Some observations

It is useful to cast our minds back and see the journey that has been travelled.

- At the beginning of this year no pundits or party insiders gave Cyril Ramaphosa a chance to become ANC president. Dlamini-Zuma was the favourite and the flavour of the succession; Ramaphosa was dismissed as not having a constituency, carrying the albatross of Marikana, being a capitalist, not having a power base and so on. Indeed, when he re-entered politics five years ago it was on Zuma’s slate. But the results showed that he managed to build his own power base and won against the very same Zuma machine that brought him to power. (No wonder Zuma looked so unhappy when the result was announced – just watch the video of his stony face and motionless hands when the Ramaphosa result was announced and people around him burst into applause.)

- Equally, many pundits predicted that the conference would not happen; or would descend into chaos; or would simply collapse; or that Zuma the master tactician would pull a rabbit from the hat in the last minute to ensure Dlamini-Zuma's victory; or that a state of emergency will be called by Zuma if his candidate lost. The conference happened; a successful election was held; Zuma's candidate was not elected; and the process and outcome was accepted, if not welcomed. Perhaps SA's body politic is more mature than people allow for.
- I would submit that open society dynamics clearly played a big role over the last year in shaping the public mood that led to this result. The ANC simply could not step too far away from the dominant mood. Dlamini-Zuma lost as much because she was seen as a continuation of the Zuma administration, as for her own weaknesses. Open society dynamics helped Ramaphosa and tripped Dlamini-Zuma. A closed, arrested or stagnant society SA is not.

So What?

- There is no question that Ramaphosa's victory is a change for the better for the country. He can restore some order in government, establish policy certainty and build basic administrative efficiency. After the chaos of the Zuma years it is a huge step forward. "Mandela freedom, Mbeki discipline, Zuma chaos, Ramaphosa order".
- It will take some time before he has his hands on the levers of power; Zuma remains president for now; but the basic dynamics suggest a handover could very well happen before the 2019 election.
- I wish you a happy festive season and a much better 2018.