



## *Infinite Crisis?* *The ANC's Mangaung Conference*

### 1. Introduction

*Infinite Crisis* is the title of a series of Superman comic books, featuring aliens, parallel worlds and all the usual high powered heroics that one would expect from such a distinguished franchise. Unfortunately, infinite crisis is also a fitting description of the internal politics of the ANC since the ousting of Thabo Mbeki in 2008. Following that fracas, Jacob Zuma was brought to power by a 'coalition of the wounded', various constituencies and individuals who had – or believed they had – been marginalised by the Mbeki camp. But the coalition itself did not last very long. COSATU soon began to criticise some of Mr Zuma's policies, as well as the excesses of some of his ministers; the unionists also kept pointing the finger at corruption and lack of service-delivery. More dramatically, Julius Malema, originally Jacob Zuma's key ally, turned on the new President and was eventually ejected from the ANC following a protracted struggle and an internal disciplinary process. Other significant players coalesced into pro- and anti-Zuma groupings, though their exact membership was not always obvious.

The drama has far from ended. Factionalism, rivalry and infighting have been dominant themes as the party approaches its quinquennial elective conference next week. Multiple factions are vying for control of the ANC, with a significant number of members indicating their discontent with the current leadership by forming a group that has been dubbed "Anything but Zuma". Party structures in at least three provinces were unable to meet the deadline for completing the nomination process, and there have been numerous complaints from branch members who

feel their views have been ignored or overlooked. Nevertheless, it seems more likely than not that the party faithful will give President Zuma another term as party head.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. The Cast

Jacob Zuma's main direct opponent is Deputy-President Kgalema Motlanthe, who has been nominated for the party leadership by three provinces. Cyril Ramaphosa, Tokyo Sexwale and Matthews Phosa were all named as possible contenders over the last few months, but Mr Ramaphosa appears now to have moved into Mr Zuma's camp, and the other two have not mounted any significant challenge for the top post. Mr Phosa has accepted nomination for deputy-president, presumably under Mr Motlanthe.

Mr Motlanthe has long been an enigma. Despite being tapped by the 'Anything But Zuma' faction as their chosen leader, he has remained inscrutable. This mirrors his stance during the Zuma – Mbeki saga, where he refused to pick sides until it became clear that Mr Zuma would triumph. It also reflects his determination to stick strictly to the ANC's rules against open campaigning for positions. Nevertheless, most observers see Mr Motlanthe as the chief contender for the throne despite his low profile. He has recently come out into the open and has begun to criticise the *status quo* more vigorously, but it is possible that this is too late. His cautious, academic style means that he has never stuck his neck out far enough to make it impossible to retreat from his statements. While this has provided him with the safe fallback option of

claiming that he was never seriously campaigning, it has also frustrated his supporters and made it difficult for any campaign of his to gain serious momentum. The ANC Youth League, despite backing him, has expressed frustration at his refusal to clearly step forward as a contender. Even though he enjoys the support of the Western-Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo regions of the party, it is most unlikely that he will prevail, particularly given that branches of the ANC such as the Women's League and the MK Veterans Association have thrown their weight firmly behind Mr Zuma. In addition, the incumbent has also managed to gain the support of the trade unions, despite initial attempts by Zwelinzima Vavi to steer clear of the fracas.

Tokyo Sexwale has run an open, high profile campaign, but it is doubtful he has the internal support to make an effective bid for power in his own right. ANC Branches in Limpopo have nominated him for deputy-president of the ANC, as well as tapping Kgalema Motlanthe for the top position.

Cyril Ramaphosa, initially seen as a rival, has been appearing on multiple nomination lists as a candidate for deputy-president, under Jacob Zuma. This is despite the negative coverage he received following the Marikana massacre. As a member of the Lonmin board he had written an e-mail in which he called for appropriate action to be taken against the striking miners, whom he described as 'criminals', a stance which ignited outrage.

Mr Phosa's challenge for the party presidency – if it was ever a serious one – has not developed. His close association with the now disgraced Julius Malema may well have scuppered his hopes. As for the latter, there now seems to be absolutely no hope that the Mangaung conference will see a resurrection of his career; though it would be foolish to rule out the possibility of an attempt – Mr Malema still knows how to work the media and capture the limelight.

Given the unpredictability of South African politics it would be unwise to make any overly certain predictions. At this stage it seems that Mr Zuma will most likely be victorious, with Mr Motlanthe trailing him in overt support. It is impossible to rule out some kind of deal involving these two men, although Mr Motlanthe has consistently rejected any backroom deals to date. If he stands for the presidency, and loses to Mr Zuma, Mr Motlanthe may well drop out of the party's senior leadership entirely; in effect, a punishment for

challenging the leader.

### 3. The Heir Apparent?

The most likely outcome, a few days before the conference starts, would seem to be that Cyril Ramaphosa will emerge as party deputy-president under Mr Zuma; and if this should happen, it will be the most significant development in the ANC since the ousting of Thabo Mbeki.

Mr Ramaphosa holds an almost unique position in South African politics – he has few significant enemies, and a very wide range of friends. He has remained popular with the party faithful since leaving Parliament in 1997 and has consistently been elected to a high position on the party's executive. His history as a trade unionist has kept him on relatively friendly terms with many in the trade union movement, while his high-profile business achievements have endeared him to the corporate sector. Virtually everyone remembers how he and Roelf Meyer successfully brought home the Constitution (and the flag!) in 1996. More recently, he has been the deputy head of the National Planning Commission, a body which is increasingly seen as holding the rational and pragmatic centre on vital policy questions.

Mr Ramaphosa also possesses personal qualities that set him apart from most of his peers. No-one doubts his ability to lead and his firm hand, but at the same time he is affable and approachable. There is no hint of scandal in his background, and he has never been associated with corruption or mismanagement. As chair of the party's disciplinary appeal body he dealt with Mr Malema's appeal against expulsion calmly and evenhandedly.

Many prominent commentators regard Mr Ramaphosa as the 'best President South Africa never had', but some at least are worried that this is not the time for him to rejoin public life. They fear he will be tainted by association with Mr Zuma; he will have little influence on policy and on the country's overall direction. Better, they say, that he should wait until the end of Mr Zuma's second term, when he could stand for the party leadership with no whiff of having been part of what by then will be a thoroughly discredited tenure.

We tend to take a more positive view. Behind the scenes of factionalism, personal rivalries and mutual back-stabbing, there are many very level

heads in the ANC; people who focus on the future and who are not interested in short-term gain and populist politics. It seems that this group has seen the need for a counter-weight to Mr Zuma. Someone of stature who can pull the party – and thus the country, they hope – back on track, away from the kind of venality, greed and irresponsible populism that has come to characterise so many of those who occupy office in, or on behalf of, the ANC.

There are probably a few senior ANC members who have the personal qualities for such a job; there are also quite a few whose own political history and positioning suits them to the position. However, it is difficult to think of anyone who combines the necessary personal and political attributes as well as Mr Ramaphosa does. Given the parlous state of political leadership in our country at present, with corruption worsening, and the politics of entitlement and self-aggrandizement having taken over at every level, from the smallest municipality to the Presidency itself, we undoubtedly need someone of his ability. Another five years similar to the last five will do us lasting harm.

#### **4. The Struggle**

Speculation about who exactly will win at Mangaung is, some argue, almost beside the point. As the Daily Maverick's Chris Gibbons astutely points out<sup>2</sup>, regardless of the victor, South Africa will still suffer from tremendous problems, and there is little reason to think that any of Mr Zuma's opponents have easy solutions for them.

Since Mr Mbeki's dethroning at Polokwane, the ruling party seems to have been incapable of unity and action, mired as it is in perpetual strife and jockeying for position. One of the clear messages emerging from Mr Mbeki's defeat was that the pursuit of power within the ANC is a high-stakes game. If a leader is dethroned, his political future is doomed, and his supporters are consigned to the political wilderness. Far too much energy, therefore, is spent on political machinations aimed at pleasing a constituency or securing a strong following, rather than on tackling the myriad pressing issues that face the country.

This crisis in leadership has been exacerbated by Mr Zuma's apparent inability to effectively straddle the fractures within the ANC. He is clearly distracted from his job as President by the ongoing need to put out political fires and fight off

internal challenges. Unfortunately, his propensity to promise everything to everyone has led to a significant number of ANC members becoming disillusioned with his leadership, and they are making themselves heard, most notably in the significant number of party branches and regions that have nominated Mr Motlanthe for the top post.

The leaders of the tripartite alliance have all entered the fray. Zwelinzima Vavi, the leader of COSATU, attempted to avoid this, but COSATU has been sucked into the maelstrom, and now backs Mr Zuma. As Mr Vavi himself argued, the ANC's leadership is "in a permanent campaign mode. Once an organisation does that, then we must know that organisation is eating itself up."<sup>3</sup> Despite this, at its national congress COSATU made the decision to back Jacob Zuma. Interestingly, however, this decision was not debated at the general conference, but behind closed doors by the Cosatu Executive Committee, who then announced that they had made the decision to support the status quo.

Political analyst Aubrey Matshiqi argues that in the face of the Marikana crisis, which exposes the divisions between workers and union leadership, COSATU made the decision to focus on unity and continuity<sup>4</sup>. As a result, they opted to support the current ANC leadership, reserving their energy for dealing with the upstart AMCU union, and campaigning to keep their support base happy.

The SA Communist Party has been most vociferous in its insistence on a second term for Mr Zuma, although what aspect of Mr Zuma's leadership or policy stances has so impressed them is obscure. As in the case of the Women's League, it may simply be that Mr Zuma has secured their support by giving their leaders important and high-profile cabinet positions. Whatever the reason, it appears that the ANC's major partners and its main sub-groups, with the exception of the Youth League, are content with the kind of drift that we have experienced in the place of proper leadership. The only rational explanation for this is that it perpetuates an organisational ethos of patronage, nepotism and immunity from consequences for those who fail in their duties, but who are politically well-placed.

#### **5. The Consequences**

Of course, in any democracy there is a perpetual manoeuvring and contestation of power, inside,

outside and between political parties. It must be acknowledged that the frenzy around Mangaung is an expression of democracy. It is not a national election, but there is a great deal of internal ANC organization and contestation. Branches are choosing candidates and supporting them. This is, in many ways, a healthy expression of democracy.

Unfortunately, the nomination process has been fraught with irregularities, violence and intimidation. The nomination process in KwaZulu-Natal has been particularly violent. As Professor Adam Habib explains<sup>5</sup>, this is cause for concern for two reasons. The first is the potential that it could set off major conflict within KZN, a province with a long and bloody history of political violence. The second is that violence and electoral irregularities will delegitimise any leadership that is ultimately elected. If ANC members do not see the process as legitimate, resentment among the losers will result in further conflict within the party.

This conflict also has serious implications for the rest of the country. As Zwelinzima Vavi pointed out back in June<sup>6</sup>, the severe and continuing crises of service delivery and poverty have been grossly neglected as a result of the leadership battle. The non-delivery of textbooks in the Limpopo province is an excellent example of this. At least part of the reason Angie Motshekga has managed to retain her position despite presiding over such a poorly handled crisis, is that she is a major ally of Jacob Zuma's in the run-up to the Mangaung election.

There are also unverified but extremely disturbing reports emerging from the SAPS intelligence division of internal purges and illegal wiretaps<sup>7</sup>. This is entirely in keeping with the unfortunate history of South Africa's intelligence community. The various intelligence services have been embroiled in all of the previous leadership battles, with spy tapes and reports of questionable provenance emerging from time to time, but always resulting in more heat than light. One

thing is quite clear: the involvement of the state's intelligence capacity in a party political matter is illegitimate and destructive of their ability to perform their proper function of gathering intelligence on real threats to the people of South Africa, such as organised crime.

Admittedly, there are a few isolated patches of quiet, where the frenzy has not spilled over. Notably, Trevor Manuel and the National Planning Commission have managed to draft and present an impressive strategic plan intended to put the country on the road to prosperity and stability. However, the implementation of the plan will be dependent on getting it past the political minefields within the ANC, and without political stability, there is simply no guarantee of this. In the current environment, if any political advantage can be wrung from attacking the Strategic Plan then someone will be sure to do so. And even if the Plan itself does not come under fire, anything contained within it will be placed on the back burner until post-Mangaung, and there are simply no guarantees that any of it will be carried forward under a new regime.

## 6. Conclusion

The ANC is still the political centre of gravity of South Africa. As long as it remains riven by factionalism and infighting, real national progress is impossible. South Africa needs decisive, effective and responsive leadership. Instead, it has a fractured and ineffectual governing party that is failing to deal with urgent and immediate national issues because it is too busy fighting its own internal battles. And unlike in the comic books, there is no Superman coming to save us all – merely more of the same.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reflects the nominations that had been made *and* accepted by Thursday afternoon, December 13<sup>th</sup>. Despite strong speculation, some of the main players had not yet confirmed their candidacies.

<sup>2</sup> Gibbons, C. "Mangaung doesn't matter. Or does it?" *Daily Maverick*, 29 May 2012. <<http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-05-29-analysis-mangaung-doesnt-matter-or-does-it>>

<sup>3</sup> Nhlabathi, Hlengiwe. "'Delivery sacrificed' – Vavi blasts early sacrifice for Mangaung". *Sowetan Live*. 1 June 2012. <<http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/06/01/delivery-sacrificed--vavi-blasts-early-sacrifice-for-mangaung>>

<sup>4</sup> Matshiqi, Aubrey. "Cosatu Congress – An analysis". Creamer Media. <http://hsrccpress.bookslive.co.za/blog/2012/10/26/video-aubrey-matshiqi-analyses-the-2012-cosatu-national-congress/>

<sup>5</sup> Habib, A. "The Road to Mangaung". *The Star*. 20 November 2012 <<http://www.iol.co.za/the-star/the-road-to-mangaung-1.1426741#.ULYjDKyccqQ>>

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<sup>6</sup> Nhlabathi, Hlengiwe. "'Delivery sacrificed' – Vavi blasts early sacrifice for Mangaung". *Sowetan Live*. 1 June 2012. <<http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/06/01/delivery-sacrificed--vavi-blasts-early-sacrifice-for-mangaung>>

<sup>7</sup> Potgieter, De Wet. SAPS Crime Intelligence: Frozen in the political wilderness of Mangaung. *The Daily Maverick*. 29 November 2012. <<http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-11-29-saps-crime-intelligence-frozen-in-the-political-winter-of-mangaung>>

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