



RESPONSE

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A Game-changer or a Damp Squib?

Even before yesterday's announcement that Dr Mamphela Ramphele is to be the Democratic Alliance's 'presidential candidate', the 2014 election season had already thrown up a number of interesting developments:

- the final departure of Julius Malema from the ANC and his emergence as leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters;
- the fragmentation of COSATU, as seen in the decision of its biggest member-union not to support the ANC in the elections, and in the sidelining of its errant secretary-general, Zwelinzima Vavi;
- the booing of President Zuma during the memorial service for Madiba, and his subsequent absence from a number of the party's provincial manifesto launches;
- the increasing prominence of Cyril Ramaphosa as the real face of the ANC's campaign.

Against such a background, how important is the fact that Dr Ramphele has now joined forces with the DA?

At the levels of symbolism and principle, it is certainly groundbreaking; but when it comes to the practical essence of party politics – the attraction of votes – it is more likely a damp squib.

Up to now, the DA has attracted very few credible African politicians with anything approaching a track record in the struggle. Some of its up-and-coming African members, such as Lindiwe Mazibuko and Mmusi Maimane, are evidently capable politicians who promise much for the future; but they were children when apartheid ended.

Dr Ramphele's struggle credentials are well known and extensive, all the more so, perhaps, in that she fought apartheid from outside the Congress movement. Despite, in this sense, being twice-isolated, she built a formidable reputation as a political organiser and thinker. That someone of her background, with deep roots in Black Consciousness, should now feel comfortable to join what is still seen by so many South Africans as a white, or white-controlled, party, is remarkable. Anything that helps to break the racial mould of our politics should be welcomed; Dr Ramphele's move helps to assert the principle that politics should be about the proposing of ideas and policies, and their implementation, rather than about the race or class or creed of those who do the proposing and implementing.

It may be argued that Dr Ramphele had no choice – Agang started with no more than a mild fizzle and went steadily backwards. No-one expected it to take more than 2% of the vote at most, and she would have entered Parliament with half-a-dozen colleagues, and lacking effective party machinery. All this is true enough, but she could simply have withdrawn and gone back to the various other activities, commercial and philanthropic, that have occupied her in recent years. Her decision to join the DA must therefore be seen as something more decisive than desperate.

But at the other level, that of the dowry of votes she will bring to the marriage, the DA's excitement is misplaced. Whatever miniscule percentage of votes Agang might have earned would have come very largely from DA voters or potential voters. These votes will thus merely be 'coming home' and will not noticeably boost the party's tally. She might have moved a few tens of thousands of votes away from the ANC, and have picked up a similar number from disillusioned COPE supporters, but it is doubtful whether very many of those votes will follow her into the bosom of the DA. It is likely to be an electorally neutral move for now, but one with the potential to strengthen the DA's appeal over the five years to 2019.

Three other points are worth noting. Firstly, Dr Ramphele could turn out to be a potent force in Parliament. She cannot be dismissed, as Ms Mazibuko once was by Mr Malema, as 'Zille's tea-girl'. When she speaks on education, or affirmative action, or job-creation, she will have to be taken seriously. Any minister or official appearing before a portfolio committee on which she serves will need to be well prepared.

Secondly, all the talk of her being the DA's presidential candidate is so much puff. We do not have presidential elections. After the 2009 election the DA put forward its then national chairperson, Joe Seremane, as its candidate; it was then, and will be in a few months' time, a matter of going through the motions. To make a big deal now about having Dr Ramphele's picture on the ballot paper, rather than that of the party leader, smacks of an attempt to eke more out of this conversion that it can reasonably give. Such a display of quasi-American hype does little to elevate our politics above the level of personalities. Worse, it assumes a high degree of gullibility among the voters – but they will know that Ms Zille remains party leader, and that the so-called presidential candidate will become no more than an ordinary MP once the electoral show is over.

Thirdly, the stage has now been reached where, with the exception of Mr Maimane and of Dr Wilmot James, the DA's top public faces are those of women: Ms Zille, Ms Mazibuko, Cape Town Mayor Patricia de Lille, and now Dr Ramphele. In addition, Dr Sandra Botha, a highly respected former parliamentary leader of the party, who has spent a few years in the diplomatic service, is back on its list of candidates. In a society that still struggles in many ways with patriarchy, this is in itself significant, and further undermines the notion that the DA is somehow still a 'white man's party'.

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