



Response

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Who Really Won?

The most obvious winner at the ANC's elective conference last night was Cyril Ramaphosa. Recent opinion polls suggest that his win would have been extremely popular among rank and file ANC supporters too, and most certainly among South Africans as a whole. But for all that, the biggest winner – in the sense of having avoided a potentially disastrous loss – may well turn out to have been Jacob Zuma.

Mr Ramaphosa has been handed an almost impossible job. The country looks to him to drag it out of the morass of Mr Zuma's depredations; to defeat state capture; to bring an end to institutionalised corruption and maladministration; to rediscover our moral centre and regain the straight and narrow road.

But to accompany him in this task, 2 500 conference delegates have given him a team entirely divided among itself. David Mabuza, Ace Magashule and Jessie Duarte are confirmed Zuma loyalists and all three have serious questions hanging over their heads when it comes to corruption. Mr Magashule, in particular, is as deeply compromised by Gupta links as Mr Zuma himself; but he is now in a far more influential position in the ANC hierarchy.¹

It was always clear that Mr Ramaphosa's supporters intended that a win for him would result in a swift recall of Mr Zuma as national president. The plan was certainly not to allow the latter to serve out the remaining 18 months of his term, during which time he could continue to wreak institutional and economic havoc on the country (as he did once again on Friday with his reckless announcement of free tertiary education). Now, the task of squeezing out Mr Zuma has become vastly more difficult, and it is Mr Ramaphosa, rather than Mr Zuma, who risks becoming a lame duck leader.

Much will depend on the people who are elected to the party's National Executive Committee. If Mr Ramaphosa commands a significant majority in that body, he will be able to move ahead with some confidence. But if the new NEC mirrors the 'top six', he will be stymied. In any event, the NEC will probably take some time to settle, and alliances and camps will develop and change as its members try to sense which way the wind is blowing. Once again, if enough of them feel that the 'premier league' is in the ascendancy with the elevation of Mr Mabuza and Mr Magashule, Mr Ramaphosa could find himself on the bridge of the ship, but with a mutinous crew.

¹ At the time of writing Mr Magashule's election – by a margin of only 24 votes over Senzo Mchunu – was being contested, and a recount was being mooted.

On the positive side for him, though, he will have the support of Gwede Mantashe who, as outgoing Secretary-General, will be able to keep a knowing and experienced eye on Mr Magashule. He also has clear majority support in five of the nine provinces, and among the ANC's Veterans' League. More than that, though, there is a growing realisation in the party that, if it is to win more than 50% of the vote in 2019, Mr Ramaphosa must lead it into the elections.

This last point illustrates the ANC's greatest point of tension – that between the seekers of short-term, personal advantage, and those who are seriously committed to the long-term good of the country. Mr Zuma has epitomised the first position; all indications are that Mr Ramaphosa represents the second. This tension is likely to intensify in the months ahead as Mr Zuma and the many cabinet ministers and senior party figures who owe their positions – and their pay cheques – to him will try to maximise their benefits in the time that remains to them. And, as they do that, they will make both of Mr Ramaphosa's key jobs – sorting out the party and winning the 2019 elections – all the more difficult.

Speaking to a group of Latin American politicians earlier this month, Pope Francis told them that politics should be *“first of all, a service. It is not the slave of individual ambitions, of the arrogance of factions or interest groups. It's a service of sacrifice and dedication, to such a point that at times politicians can be considered as 'martyrs' of causes for the common good of their nations.”*

Cyril Ramaphosa served South Africa with great dedication and distinction in the period immediately before and after 1994, and was one of the chief architects of the negotiated settlement and the new Constitution. It is widely held that he was Nelson Mandela's preferred successor, but that he lost out to Thabo Mbeki's seniority in the movement.

He has now been presented with a complex task every bit as difficult as the one he faced 25 years ago. There is little doubt about his dedication and his willingness to be a genuine servant of the country and of the common good of its people. Let us hope that he succeeds this time around, and that he does not end up being martyred before he can complete his task.

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