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THE ANC AHEAD OF 2024: MOSTLY UNITED BUT DISORGANISED

Months before South Africa's seventh general elections, the ANC is once more pulling together to do what it is best at: run a solid elections campaign.

"There are no black sheep or persona non grata. Everyone in the ANC is involved in the elections campaign," according to a veteran ANC activist in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN).

In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, some of President Cyril Ramaphosa's most vocal opponents in the party have been getting involved (it's not explicitly clear what is in it for them, but there is speculation that some rewards are financial). Former health minister Zweli Mkhize and minister in the Presidency for women, youth, and people with disabilities Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, both of whom have in 2022 and 2017 respectively contended against Ramaphosa for the ANC presidency and lost, are both onboard, as well as former president Jacob Zuma, to whom they are both close.

Under Zuma's presidency from 2009 to 2018, the large number of votes for the ANC in his province to a large extent helped sustain the party as its fortunes in other big provinces, like Gauteng, declined. He still retains a lot of support in the province and could help boost the party's fortunes nationally as well as in the province following the ANC's loss of support in the Ethekewini metro in the 2019 local elections.

Top leadership a year from Nasrec II

It is almost exactly a year to Ramaphosa's re-election as ANC president at the party's Nasrec conference, and the almost-consolidation of his power. Unlike the 2017 Nasrec conference, where the top six officials were evenly divided between the two camps, the top officials in 2022 (there are now seven, with the addition of a second deputy secretary general's position) are mostly in Ramaphosa's camp. The exceptions, one of our contacts insists, are deputy secretary general Nomvula Mokonyane, and deputy president, Paul Mashatile.

Mashatile has strong presidential ambitions and came close to challenging Ramaphosa last year, but settled on his current position when it became clear that he wouldn't get enough support to beat Ramaphosa.

Despite negative stories about his private life as well as his business and political connections, Mashatile has been publicly active as a deputy president, and he uses his media team to ensure that journalists know about it. Some of his time has been spent wooing business leaders. Business has up to now been a major part of Ramaphosa's constituency: he is a former business tycoon himself.

It is likely that there could be a push after the elections by Mashatile's supporters to unseat Ramaphosa on the back of what is expected to be the party's worst election results to date. It is not clear as yet how this will happen while Ramaphosa is still ANC president. They would either need to convince Ramaphosa to step down voluntarily - unlikely to happen because Ramaphosa still has many supporters who prefer him over the other alternatives - or get the majority of the 80-strong national executive committee (NEC), many of whom serve in Ramaphosa's cabinet, to turn against him.

The detractors could use a drop in electoral support for the ANC to argue their case. The party's fortunes are likely to decline by at least 10 percentage points and there is a ready precedent for this: a drop in electoral support was the formal reason why Zuma was ousted as president in February 2018. By that time, however, Ramaphosa had already been voted in as ANC president and had most of the NEC behind him, so it was an easy replacement.

The narrative that Ramaphosa is tired and wants to step down still persists. Other than Mashatile, ANC chairperson Gwede Mantashe and secretary general Fikile Mbalula's names have also been mentioned as possible replacements. Mashatile and Mbalula could be particularly prominent should the party have to negotiate coalitions, since both are reportedly on 'speaking terms' with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

Although Ramaphosa has thus far been more decisive in his second term as ANC president than he was in his first, his much-vaunted reform of the party has been slow, as have been his efforts to get the country's economy back on track post-Zuma and post-pandemic.

He showed enough spine to drop some detractors from his cabinet, such as Lindiwe Sisulu, who had overstepped the mark in her criticism of the judiciary, but not enough courage to fire from cabinet the last of those implicated in the report by Chief Justice Raymond Zondo's state capture inquiry, such as David Mahlobo and Gwede Mantashe. It is likely that he still needs their political support and protection too much to make any sudden moves against them.

Lies, damned lies and opinion polls

Opinion polls in the past have overstated the opposition's possible electoral support and understated that of the ANC, possibly because the ANC's strongest support tends to be in the rural areas where opinion polls might not adequately reach, but also because the ANC generally pushes a strong and convincing campaign just before the elections.

The latest Ipsos poll, conducted in June and July and reported on by News24¹ on 30 November 2023, shows the ANC's prospects are better than stated in opinion polls to date, and that it could get between 48% and 53% in next year's elections.

However, even at the top end of this prediction, it is a significantly worse showing than in 2019, when the party mustered 62% of the poll with promises of a "new dawn" under Ramaphosa.

Within the ANC opinions differ over whether the party will get over 50% of the vote or whether it would drop below, and be forced to negotiate coalition or cooperation agreements.

It is not threatened by one party in particular. Neither the Democratic Alliance (DA) or the EFF, the second and third biggest parties, are likely to get more votes than the ANC.

Smaller parties have grown in prominence in the past few years as the ANC's support declined and coalitions were formed at municipal level. Some of those, such as the African Transformation Movement (ATM), have chipped away at the ANC's support. There is also talk of at least one new splinter party underway involving former United Democratic Front (UDF) leaders such as Popo Molefe, Cheryl Carolus and Murphy Morobe, which could also draw support from those who agree with the ANC ideologically but who might be disillusioned with its lack of delivering on its promises and the levels of corruption within its ranks.

Former Western Cape party strongman Marius Fransman is also reported to be working towards establishing a political formation, further weakening the ANC in the Western Cape, while former, disgraced secretary general Ace Magashule has also launched his own party. Other smaller parties such as the Patriotic Alliance (PA) are expected to take votes from both the ANC and DA. All these developments are causing some strain and disagreements within the ranks of ANC campaigners about the direction the party should take.

Is the ANC disorganised?

During the first weekend of December the ANC held a political education workshop led by seniors like Kgalema Motlanthe, Mac Maharaj, Febe Potgieter and David Makhura. While the official

¹ <https://www.news24.com/news24/politics/political-parties/anc-support-declines-but-likely-to-keep-control-nationally-in-2024-data-20231130>

reason is to strengthen the party ahead of the elections and ahead of the finalisation of the party's elections manifesto, it was also to deal with problems around its candidate selection process.

Motlanthe, who also heads the party's electoral committee, in a report warned about the "low achievement of branch nomination results" in especially the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. Candidates for the provincial and national legislature lists are selected by the branches, a highly contested process and usually a time of tension and even violence.

A contact says the disarray can partly be attributed to old branch audit figures, which are higher than the actual current membership figures and which make it difficult to reach a 50% quorum for meetings.

The disarray is also blamed on efforts, until recently, by internal detractors like Magashule, whose power base is in the Free State. Magashule, even after his suspension in 2021, made efforts to return to his position until he was finally replaced in December 2022, while Carl Niehaus, who worked closely with him, was active in KwaZulu-Natal, where Ramaphosa has many detractors. Both have now been marginalised successfully, contacts in Luthuli House say, but Magashule's legacy still lives on in the chaos that came from a lack of effective systems and processes, something which his successor, Fikile Mbalula, is trying hard to address.

Opinions about Mbalula's efforts vary, with some describing the former party organiser's style as firm, even somewhat authoritarian; others think he is full of bluster and failing to earn respect. At least four members of the party's communications team have left in the past year, with one saying he resigned because Mbalula "follows his own head anyway" and is not sticking to the official script prepared by the media team.

Magashule's legacy is also threatening the ANC's financial survival. The party has been ordered by a court to pay the more than R100 million debt to Ezulwini Investments for campaign materials ahead of the 2019 elections, a debt entered into at a time when Magashule was secretary general and Mashatile was heading the party's treasury. The ANC faces liquidation for this debt as it is trying to prepare for a difficult elections campaign ahead of the 2024 elections. A party veteran with close knowledge of the Political Party Funding Act says the ANC would not be able to recoup this money in one year from a single donor, since the ceiling for donations from a single source is R15 million. If the party's recent declared donations to the Electoral Commission of South Africa (a late declaration of R700 000 in the last quarter) is anything to go by², it is struggling to get large, legitimate donations. This is despite treasurer-general Gwen Ramokgopa's claims in a recent Sunday Times interview that the party is flush with cash.³

² <https://www.news24.com/news24/politics/political-parties/da-makes-biggest-funding-disclosure-of-r36-million-to-the-iec-anc-makes-late-declarations-20231130>

³ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/news/politics/2023-11-05-anc-flush-with-cash-again-says-gwen-ramokgopa>

What does the ANC stand for?

The ANC is expected to give some indication of its policy directions for 2024 at its 112th birthday celebrations on 13 January 2024 in Mbombela Stadium, informed by feedback from its recent gatherings to review the 2019 manifesto, discussions during political education sessions as well as branch-level and NEC-level meetings.

However, the ANC's views on contentious issues such as Israel and Palestine, the National Health Insurance Bill, the mandate of the Reserve Bank, reform of state-owned enterprises, immigration, energy and the expropriation of land without compensation are likely to remain as decided at the party's 2022 national conference at Nasrec.

But, as a senior NEC member and long-time member of the executive said, the ANC's radical wish list isn't always practically implementable by its leaders in government. "That is why there will always be that friction, and the two centres of power will always come up," he said.

For example, the ANC had already resolved in 2012 to cut diplomatic ties with Israel, but even though the current crop of international relations department officials is fervently pro-Palestine, severing ties completely would be difficult and remove the South African government from a region where it would still want to play a role.

Incidentally, Ramaphosa personally has had cordial interactions with the local Jewish community, having addressed functions of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies before. He has also received funding for his presidential campaigns from some Jewish backers, among others.

Thus far Ramaphosa has also successfully been putting the brakes on the National Health Insurance Bill, which should have passed through the National Council of Provinces last week but which was deferred. Ramaphosa's spokesperson, Vincent Magwenya, earlier that day hinted that Ramaphosa would simply refuse to sign the bill if he agreed with those who said that the final draft did not adequately take comment from the public and the health department itself into consideration.

The ANC would have wanted to push through this bill to deliver on an election promise that had been around for over a decade, and while Ramaphosa appears to have taken the legal advice against passing and signing the bill into consideration, it is possible that a successor such as Mashatile, Mbalula or Mantashe, would not.

For now, there is apparent unity of purpose in the party, something that is in part enforced by Mbalula. "You may have noticed there are far fewer leaks from meetings now. Mbalula has dealt with them," a contact says. Mbalula has also limited media interviews by NEC members, limiting much of the communications on ANC matters to the media team.

It is expected that he will drive a strong elections campaign for the party. Mbalula is also said to have told finance minister Enoch Godongwana to hold his austerity measures back until after the elections because “the ANC needed public servants well-paid and on-side.”

While there will be unity of purpose until elections day, the battle for Ramaphosa’s position and the ideological soul of the ANC will continue to simmer just below the surface.

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