

A Master Class or Another Take? How a Master Strategist outmanoeuvred an entire country

by Lorenzo Davids, Executive Director, Urban Issues Consulting



This is a piece of reflective political scepticism. About the ANC, MK and South Africa.

It was clear, after the 2021 local government elections, that the ANC was in trouble. It had dropped below 50% in the 2021 local government elections. For the ANC, that was a very sore bloody nose. But for the seasoned leaders and senior members within the party, it was a huge red flag. They saw the liability that Cyril Ramaphosa had become to the party's election fortunes. It was also a moment to act and act fast. The 2024 national election was around the corner. Once a party starts a downward trajectory, it is very hard to reverse that trend. And more impossible to do with so with only two years to do it in.

How did these seasoned leaders and senior members plot to stop the bleeding?

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The plan hatched was simple. Factionalism within the ANC is huge. Many members have major ideological, political, policy, ethnic and philosophical differences with each other and with the party, that are often hidden from plain sight in "a broad church". Many have EFF, DA, MK, IFP and other leanings, stronger than whatever the ANC itself might stand for. But the ANC payroll and popularity is what keeps them there. Many in the ANC would have much to lose should the ANC lose power: houses, private schooling for their children, security, cars etc. For people such as these, with little to no generational wealth, that is a huge crisis.

This was when the Zuma weapon was designed. The strategy was simple. Increase Zuma's persecution so that he becomes messianic in the pain he is suffering. Make the country's overwhelming politically black majority feel a deep sadness over how he is being treated.

But quietly keep assuring him that he is wanted by the ANC and that Cyril and Fikile are the problem. Then, fund the start of a new party, aligned with the traditions of the ANC.

Thereafter, work it so that Zuma can take over the leadership of that party. Paint that party in such a way that the ANC masses see it as an agent which will free South Africa and the ANC from the anti-poor and anti-transformation shackles that are busy strangling it.

Zuma, interestingly, throughout his persecution scene in this play, and his election campaign for MK, maintained that he is a loyal member of the ANC. Yes, I know. The entire country went "Wait, what, how?" But both the ANC and MK just proceeded as if there was nothing to see here. A brief "Appear for your disciplinary hearing" was met with "I'm on my way" which was further replied to with "Ok, let's do this after the elections, shall we?"

Then, another plan was hatched to launch the ANC's election campaign late. Delay it and let MK take off. Should the ANC, during the 2024 elections undergo an ongoing loss of votes, this party, MK, will be its preferred coalition partner. But the risk was and still is that Ramaphosa may prefer the DA as an election partner. His alignment with white monopoly capital is a huge risk to many within the ANC, especially the faction who love and serve Jacob Zuma. So, it's essential, immediately after the elections if the losses are heavy, that Cyril be recalled as party president. Paul Mashatile should be installed as the caretaker president of the party and oversee the coalition negotiations. Paul's first duty would be to bring Zuma on board as a senior coalition partner, and thereafter negotiate with other smaller parties.

Should MK get at least 14% in the elections, as some polls predicted, the ANC could fearlessly drop as low as 37%, and still retain power in South Africa, by forming a coalition with the MK Party.

The big project goal is to get the ANC over 51%. Only Zuma, as both an ANC member and as the 'owner' and leader of the MK Party, has the power and popularity to do that.

Zuma will then, after a while as a coalition partner, disband MK or send it to its barracks, merge with the ANC, like the Nats did post-1994, and then become the chairperson of the ANC once again. He will then determine who runs the country. And will, at 82, become the armchair king of politics in South Africa. And the ANC will have many of its defected members back in the fold, regaining the lost majority.

The MK Party was not a long-term project. It was an ANC insurance policy. Designed within the Zuma and ANC underground. By concerned part insiders. Under Zuma's guidance and intelligence.

Zuma is still the most popular ANC member. No one comes close. He is the one people vote for. What we are seeing is the marriage between the two Zumas of South Africa: Zuma the Corrupted and Zuma the Persecuted who produced a baby called Zuma the Saviour. I guess when Zuma said the ANC would rule till Jesus comes back, he was smiling to himself. About himself.

With the current predicted election outcome of the ANC dropping to very far below 50%, it appears that Cyril will be moved out quickly and Zuma will be moved in, smartly. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the ANC of the modern era. A party with a celebrity king and a fan club of millions. And Julius Malema, fully outmanoeuvred by the master strategist, will be told to take his seat, either at the ANC table or at the back of the room, close to the door. By the king.

For those who don't understand the skills of political subversion that the ANC were trained in during exile in Cuba, Russia, Bulgaria and many other countries, this may sound farfetched. But for those who know, this is a master class in political subversion. Check mate.

The Complexity of being the ANC: Does it secretly long for the opposition benches?

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The ANC spent 30 years in exile. Largely in Africa, Russia and Europe. During this time it grew its intelligence, its strength and gained global respect as a movement that stood for human rights and the freedom of all oppressed black people in South Africa.

There is a complexity in being the African National Congress that few other political parties in South Africa face. Founded on 8 January 2012, Africa's longest-surviving liberation movement was born out of a conflation of diverse political groupings and entrusted with the collective leadership of opposing the oppressive colonial laws of the Union of South Africa and later the Apartheid government by internal political movements. During its 30 years in exile, it was recognised as one of the main flagbearers of the emancipation of the oppressed masses in South Africa by diverse political, social and labour groupings and governments from across the international community.

Its formation in 1912 was organised by the elite of black intellectual and political leadership of the time. Led by Dr (hon) John Dube and Dr Walter Rubusana, people from all four of the British self-governing territories in South Africa got together to articulate the anxieties and aspirations of the black population in South Africa. They spoke with intensity about the racial, social, land, economic and political tragedy playing itself out as The Act of the Union of South Africa, which entrenched British and Dutch supremacy over the black indigenous population and began to give expression to black exclusion from all public life, other than as servants to their European masters, became a reality.

Between 1912 and 1960, a library of oppressive, white supremacist legislative pieces were placed on the statute books that began to turn being a black individual into a lesser human and most acts of political protest into acts of treason against the State.

The life of the black individual became unbearable in the land of his birth.

Sol Plaatje, journalist, founder and editor of three newspapers in South Africa, and author of 'Native Life in South Africa' in 1916 wrote:

"The gods are cruel, and one of their cruelest acts of omission was that of giving us no hint that in very much less than a quarter of a century all those hundreds of heads of cattle, and sheep and horses belonging to the family would vanish like a morning mist.

They might have warned us that Englishmen would agree with Dutchmen to make it unlawful for black men to keep cows of their own. The gods could have prepared us gradually for shock."

"Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth."

"For to crown all our calamities, South Africa has by law ceased to be the home of any of her native children whose skins are dyed with a hue that does not conform to the regulation hue."

After the passing of the Land Act of 1913, shortly after its founding, it became clear to the ANC that the black individual was no longer a landowner in the country he had lived in for thousands of years and in which he had owned land.

When the Nationalists promulgated the Unlawful Organisations Act in 1960, the ANC along with other political movements who were considered a threat to the Apartheid government's public order, were banned in South Africa. This drove the movement underground and into the enclaves of friendly host nations across Africa, Europe and Russia. The gifted leadership skills of Oliver Tambo established it as the voice of the oppressed and the de facto government-in-waiting of South Africa for over three decades.

The ANC then spent 30 years in exile. Largely in Africa, Russia and Europe. During this time it grew its intelligence, its strength and gained global respect as a movement that stood for human rights and the freedom of all oppressed black people in South Africa.

Based on the international support received for over 30 years from foreign governments – both African, Russian and European – the ANC has always had a complex stance on human rights violations when it came to some of its erstwhile foreign funders and friends of the movement. This ambiguity on right-aligned political principles has made the ANC at odds with many of its founding principles on human rights and justice. For example, the ANC government denied a visa three times in five years to the Dalai Lama on pressure from China. It has also refused to arrest President Omar Al Bashir from Sudan when he visited South Africa despite an international warrant for his arrest on war crimes. When the SA High Court ordered his arrest under the warrant, he was allowed to flee South Africa through a military airport – meaning with State assistance. It also dug its heels in on its own version of what caused HIV-Aids and over 330 000 people died.

Its muddled diplomacy on the Zimbabwe land grab matters and failure to call our President Mugabe these matters, all added to the political rights morass it found itself in.

Over the last year, the ANC has been in a similar quandary with its mild statements on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Its attempts at an African mediation in the war were, at best, an attempt to appear to be non-aligned, while it simultaneously was silent on Russia's invasion of a foreign country. Calling both sides to dialogue seemed sensible but its failure to be principled about an invasion of a sovereign State has disappointed many. Its failure to be unambiguous about Russian transgression in Ukraine is rooted in a myriad of trade, diplomatic and historical reasons, going back to those 30 years it spent in exile. Russia was one of its friends and one of its funders.

But its complex responses were best seen, not in its international human rights failures but in the way it responded to its own internal political failures. When its party members dived into corruption, it appeared as if light finger-taps were the most severe reprimand. When massive state capture was underway, everyone looked the other way.

When its own citizens and party members protested against it and its constituent communities destroyed infrastructure due to unsatisfactory service delivery or corruption allegations, the ANC appeared paralysed as a government. To its citizens, it appeared as if the ANC has found the role of being the government responsible for fixing the problems of the poor, especially the black poor, as well as being the government that is being protested against for failing the poor, as too complex for its leadership. In many ways, it preferred to be on the side of the protestors and not be the one who has the responsibility to fix these issues.

Thirty years in exile under an admired leadership sharpened the liberation movement into a respected global force for freedom that led the negotiations for a peaceful transition of power in South Africa.

In 2024 it is thirty years since it has been in political leadership of the country for which it was in exile for thirty years. Has its moral and social justice clarity become dimmed, in fact mauled, by the vagaries of political power? Has ambiguity and mediocrity replaced the clear thinking and energy that brought the Apartheid government to the negotiating table? Has rewarding lifelong foreign friends taken its toll on the clarity of vision to build a just, peaceful and prosperous South Africa?

Over the last week it has faced one of the most difficult elections of its entire time as the party who governs South Africa.

The question that the ANC must answer is: Having liberated its people and having brought together a complex country that was on the verge of bankruptcy and had 13 different administrations that had to be brought into the modern era, is it too tired to continue being the one that has to fix, manage and lead its complexity?

Does it long for its days as the much-vaunted liberation movement?

But more importantly, does it secretly long for the Opposition benches?

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