

Mandela's heir finally takes over South Africa, but key challenges to remain

By SEBASTIAN SPIO-GARBRAH DEC. 21, 2017

South Africa is back! Or is it?



Deputy President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa is widely expected to succeed Jacob Zuma as president after winning election as president of the ruling African National Congress.
GCIS photograph

South Africans in the diaspora who have long despaired that their country was being misruled by an un-ashamed polygamist high school dropout, Jacob Zuma, have finally exacted their revenge. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) has elected a new urbane leader, billionaire Cyril Ramaphosa to lead the party into the 2019 election. In line with recent ANC traditions, Zuma will likely be pushed out and forced out of office ahead of the official end of his tenure.

Ramaphosa, a taciturn former trade unionist turned mining billionaire, won 51 per cent of the total votes cast at South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) December 16-18 congress. He narrowly defeated Zuma's ex-wife, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the respected former president of the African Union. Zuma won 48 per cent of the vote, but fell short of her dream to become the first female leader of the ANC. Of the top 6 ANC posts, 5 went to men with the party reversing its recent commitment to gender balance.

Ramaphosa, however, has his work cut out for him.

South Africa's economy in U.S. dollar adjusted terms is effectively in a recession. Unemployment remains at around 30 per cent. The promise of free university education made by the party congress will cost the country several billions of dollars which it cannot afford. The country's mining sector lies in doldrums, with financial services and the non-mining sector dominating. Radical land reform which has been postponed several times since the end of the Mandela era is back on the agenda. Ramaphosa has very little fiscal room to move.

Beyond the larger economic issues, Ramaphosa, whose own independent political base is relatively narrow, will have to deal with several Zuma legacy issues – corruption allegations swirling around Zuma, the issues of 'state capture' by Zuma's corrupt associates and family, and various ongoing legal moves to eventually charge and sentence Zuma for corrupt acts dating back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Managing Zuma may become one of Ramaphosa's biggest headaches. Much like former US President Gerald Ford, who pardoned President Nixon and lost the next election, Ramaphosa is likely to come under similar pressures to pardon Zuma, only for that issue to become an albatross on his neck in 2019.

Ramaphosa, unlike Zuma, Mbeki or Mandela before him also inherits a much weaker ANC organization. Paid membership has dropped precipitously in recent years. The young unemployed no longer relate to the increasingly ossified and bourgeoisie party. The ANC faces stiff competition on the left from the radical Economic Freedom Front (EFF) led by a former ANC youth leader. The EFF, unlike the ANC, calls for a total immediate redistribution of land, which is more than 70 per cent controlled by whites. The EFF also calls for a total nationalization of foreign mines and the independent central bank.

To the right, the ANC has the Democratic Alliance, which maintains a more centrist liberal course in economic and political affairs. Under Ramaphosa, a formal alliance with the DA is now very likely, with the disgruntled leftists in the party eventually migrating to the EFF.

Canada was one of the loudest international voices against apartheid. When the HIV epidemic broke out, Canada again stepped forward to help with billions in aid. Tens of thousands of South African's have migrated to Canada over the past two decades since the end of the Mandela regime.

Ramaphosa, having inherited the mantle of Mandela to finally deal with all the unresolved socio-economic structural challenges of South Africa, will need all the help he can get from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Canada's example of building a modern liberal, interracial, inter-ethnic and prosperous economy has much to commend to Mr. Ramaphosa.

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