



## **Ramaphosa, Gordhan and the New Contours of ANC Power Contestations**

*Dumisani Tembe*

The emerging power dynamics within the ANC, are not meant to get rid of president Ramaphosa, at least not for now, nor at the next National General Council (NGC) meeting. Rather, the strategy is to politically muscle him to take decisions in favour of the emerging political nexus of David Mabuza; Paul Mashatile; and possibly Gwede Mantashe as well. The aim can't be to get rid of Ramaphosa when no one has emerged as yet, as a possible challenger and possible replacement to Ramaphosa.

Contrary to the notion that some ANC leaders are using minister Pravin Gordhan to get to Ramaphosa, it is actually the other way round – the focus is on Gordhan through the nonperforming and parasitic state-owned enterprises. The real strategy is to force Ramaphosa to get rid of Gordhan, and possibly restructure state owned enterprises, and bring in new leadership.

Under normal circumstances, this is a governance issue. It is a call for accountability aimed at ensuring the performance of state-owned enterprises. Therefore, it is to be expected that those that have been entrusted with the political executive leadership responsibility should be called to account, and failing which, be dismissed. However, factious character of ANC internal politics, this too is subject to self-serving conspiratorial interpretations.

Ironically, Pravin's defenders are inadvertently making it easy for the political nexus pushing for the removal of Gordhan, and the restructuring of SoEs. This is the case because the main power base of Pravin, is not so much within the ANC, but within liberal capital institutions, and pronounced mainly through their mainstream liberal media. Whilst the Veterans league has come out in support of Gordhan, it is literal a frail element with the ANC structures. It is also inconceivable that Gordhan could get support from the nonexistent Youth, and the ANCWL. One alliance partner such as Cosatu, has already pronounced against Pravin, within the quest for functional and performing SoEs.

In essence, Pravin is politically within the ANC structures. At worse, the political authority, Ramaphosa, that he needs to rely on, is also politically weak and vulnerable. Both are vulnerable.

Moreover, there has been an individualization of Pravin as the one "cleaning up" state owned enterprises. The ANC collective is frequently presented as corrupt, whilst Pravin has been presented through the mainstream liberal media as the

saviour cleaning up the rot within the ANC government. In the process, he has been individualized outside the ANC collective, with some element of absolute status above everybody else.

During the Zuma regime, Pravin was able to defend himself against political challenge as Minister of Finance, by arguing that he was protecting South Africa's fiscus. And that the attack on him was an attempt to tap into the country's financial cookie jar. This time around, Pravin's defense against his detractors, is that he is being targeted through the "push back" by state capturers – a claim that borders on conspiracy theory.

Unfortunately for Pravin, there is a bit more sophistication in those that seek his removal as the political executive head of the SoEs. They have framed their challenge on Pravin as a matter of governance of SoEs. They have positioned their concern as a matter of nonperformance of SoEs. Theirs, as they will argue, is to deal with the parasitic problem of SoEs. The ongoing power blackouts as a result of Eskom's poor performance, gives Pravin detractors an ethical governance edge.

Ramaphosa's predecessors, particularly former presidents Thabo Mbeki, and Jacob Zuma, were very strong in viciously defending their ministers. But this time around, there is some absolute confidence amongst some leaders of the ANC that they can muscle Ramaphosa to reshuffle some ministers out – in this case, Pravin. This points out at the Ramaphosa's political power weakness both at the party, and state levels.

This is probably the very first time that the ruling party and state president has been challenged so early in his first term of presidency since 1994. Nelson Mandela sailed through his first and only term, well, simply because he was just Nelson Mandela after all.

President Thabo Mbeki's political power was solid in his first term mainly because of the strength of the ANC Youth League under the stewardship of Peter Mokaba that propelled him into power. Mbeki also benefitted from the then relatively strong values of political discipline that were inherent in the ANC as a liberation movement at the time.

Mbeki understood political power within the dynamics of the then ANC. He consciously and deliberately sought to consolidate his political power base from within the ANC itself. It is for this reason that even when he sought a third term as ANC president, he enjoyed a relative strong lobby within the ANC.

President Jacob Zuma also consolidated his political power base from within the ANC during his first term. He was untouchable. Virtually all the leagues within the ANC were his power base. This extended to the alliance partners: Cosatu; SACP; and the SANCO.

Mbeki and Zuma consolidated power both at the Luthuli House, and the Union buildings. That is, they consolidated their power both at the political party level, and at the state level. Both were the power focal point both at the party, and state levels.

Meanwhile, President Cyril Ramaphosa enjoys presidential authority, and not necessarily political power. That is, he enjoys the authority of the position of being the party's, and state president. He enjoys the legitimacy that he was duly elected at the party's elective conference. But he does not enjoy the absolute political power that ordinarily comes with holding the president's position.

There are a few reasons for this situation:

Firstly, Ramaphosa was not propelled into power by a strong faction within the ANC. Whilst the SACP, and Cosatu presented a useful push from within the liberation movement, the stronger push for Ramaphosa came from liberal capital institutions, liberals outside the ANC, and liberal media agencies.

Ramaphosa also benefitted immensely from the work of the then Public Protector, Professor Thuli Madonsela, particular on her unfinished report on state capture.

It is now common knowledge that a number of both domestic and international institutions poured significant amounts of financial resources in propelling Ramaphosa to the apex of the ANC, and that of the country. Overall, the elective conference that elected Ramaphosa to the ANC presidency, money had the most impact than policy and developmental persuasions within the ANC.

The sum total of all this, is that Ramaphosa rose into the ANC presidency with a weak political base. This makes him vulnerable, and easily challengeable. His political adversaries did not disintegrate. Rather, they strengthened themselves, and are now even more buoyed to challenge Ramaphosa openly so, in public.

However, it is not so much Ramaphosa's liberal driven rise to the ANC's leadership summit that has rendered him politically vulnerable at the moment. In any event, he was elected by ANC branch members in good standing. It is what he did not do after his election that has rendered him eventually vulnerable in his first term of presidency.

He did not consolidate his political power within the ANC. Just like any other president of the ANC, Ramaphosa was politically strongest within the few months of his elections. He could have consolidated his political power base within the party, in particular, at Luthuli House, across the provinces' leadership, and within the National Executive Committee (NEC).

Without grabbing the power at the party level, he has allowed oppositional tendencies against his rule to emerge from the center. Without tightening his power at the organizational level, he can't tighten his power at a state presidency level. Consequently, he is easily challengeable. In the process, it will be difficult for him perpetually defend Pravin.

What works for Ramaphosa for now, no one in the leadership has the appetite to rise up and challenge the president. There is no appetite to get rid of him. But there is absolute intention to rule through him. There is a growing intention to take and effect decisions through him. In any event, he is a prime government executive deployee of the ANC.

But then, there is nothing untoward in this instance. Those that funded his campaign, are actually driving a similar agenda. Politics is about power and influence contestation for access and distribution of resources. Thus, different groupings within and outside the ANC will constantly seek to influence decision making. In this regard, Ramaphosa as the president, will remain a focal point of power contestation. This will partly entail contestation over who becomes minister or for any cabinet position.

So, what is the way forward?

Ramaphosa's options are rather limited. One option is to reshuffle cabinet. But he can not reshuffle without moving Pravin out of SoEs. Possibly shift with without necessarily shifting him out of the cabinet entirely. This should satisfy both the lobbyists within the ANC, and Gordhan's and Ramaphosa's liberal backers outside the ANC. But this will only present a temporary reprieve. Once the political snowball is tipped at the top, it will continue rolling.

Ramaphosa's strategy of relying on systems and processes both at the party and state level is not politically sustainable for him. Rather, he should build his own network both within the party, and at the state level. He needs to apply a political power K53 – that is, work on his political blind spots.

The president needs his feet more on the ANC grounds than with his corporate allies, and the rest shall follow!