

End of Cyril Ramaphosa ‘The Consensus Man’

By Stephen Grootes - 23 August 2020



Cyril Ramaphosa has written directly to ANC members, outlining detailed steps the party must take to fight corruption. In doing so, he might well have gone over the heads of the national executive committee (NEC) in general, and secretary-general Ace Magashule in particular.

For several months, as public outrage against apparent corruption by the ANC’s well-connected upper echelon has risen to an unprecedented pitch, many questioned when President Cyril Ramaphosa would act. Now, it appears that he has delivered his first shot across the bow of the ANC’s corrupt leadership.

Ramaphosa has written directly to ANC members, outlining detailed steps the party must take to fight corruption. In doing so, he might well have gone over the heads of the national executive committee (NEC) in general, and secretary-general Ace Magashule in particular. But perhaps the most important question to ask at this moment is whether this is the end of his era of governing by consensus.

On Sunday morning, seemingly out of nowhere, ANC media WhatsApp groups lit up with the seven-page letter signed by Ramaphosa stating, clearly, that “...The ANC may not stand alone in the dock, but it does stand as Accused No. 1”.

He also spells out, “The people see how organisational principles and processes are corrupted for personal gain. They see how this deviant behaviour goes unchecked and allows unscrupulous and sometimes criminal elements to flourish. We cannot then blame the people if they stay away from our branches, programmes and initiatives.” And that the Zondo Commission reveals “a disturbing level of grand corruption” that leads to some people “siphoning” off money at huge cost to the state. He then explains that the ANC must “draw a line in the sand”.

He appears to take great pains to quote the NEC’s statement several weeks ago about its embarrassment and shame. However, the most important parts of this statement might have to do with his suggested cure.

Ramaphosa says that the ANC must:

...Implement without delay the resolutions of the 54th National Conference on dealing with corruption, including that:

- *Every cadre accused of, or reported to be involved in, corrupt practices must account to the Integrity Commission immediately or face disciplinary processes.*
- *People who fail to give an acceptable explanation or to voluntarily step down while they face disciplinary, investigative or prosecutorial procedures should be summarily suspended.*
- *The ANC should publicly disassociate itself from anyone, whether business donor, supporter or member, accused of corruption or reported to be involved in corruption.*
- *ANC leaders are required to make regular declarations of financial interests.*
- *Conduct lifestyle audits of all ANC leaders and public representatives.*
- *Develop a clear policy on ANC leaders and their family members doing business with the state. We must acknowledge that once one accepts a leadership position, a higher standard of behaviour applies”.*

In many ways, perhaps the most important point that he makes to ANC members is this:

“It is you who chooses the leadership, who sets the policies and who implements the programmes of our organisation. It is you who lives in communities, who interacts daily with the frontline of service delivery and who sees the damage that corruption causes”.

In some ways, this appears to be a direct appeal to leaders to consider their choices. It might well be an appeal to those members of the ANC who were part of the decisions of their branches to vote for Magashule and Deputy President David Mabuza, despite overwhelming evidence of corruption against them.

However, this also gets in some ways to the heart of the contradictions in the ANC. For years, branch delegates have voted in favour of resolutions aimed at fighting corruption. And for years, those same delegates have also voted in favour of people like Jacob Zuma, Magashule, and many more.

It should also be recognised that while this is an appeal directly to ANC members, there is in fact very little they can do. There is evidence that many ANC branches lie dormant for much of the time, and only spring back into existence ahead of leadership conferences (witness how Mpumalanga suddenly, and miraculously, had the second-highest number of branches just ahead of Nasrec). In 2012, there was reporting about how difficult it was for many branches simply to get a quorum to hold the meeting necessary to decide on the mandate to be given to their delegate at the Mangaung Conference.

That said, it is likely that this direct appeal will find favour with many branches. In 2016 it emerged that many branches and regions actually wanted the entire NEC at the time (the NEC chaired by Zuma) to resign because of unhappiness with the party’s leadership. Despite that finding, the NEC did not resign and completed its term. There is no reason to think that this time will be any different; for the moment, the NEC is still the structure that really matters.

However, the suggestions raised by Ramaphosa to improve this situation are important.

The idea that anyone who faces allegations should account to the Integrity Commission has been floated for many years. But it has simply not happened. And even when the Integrity Commission has made findings, they have been ignored, rendering the commission a toothless body relying on persuasion and appeals for morality in an organisation that was rotting, and rotting fast. As a consequence, even when people are brought before the Integrity Commission, it is unable to hold them to account. It was only two weeks ago that it emerged that Mabuza had not been cleared by the commission, despite his claims for nearly 18 months that he had been cleared.

So unless, or until, an “independent” body is able to force someone to step down in a way that cannot be countermanded by the NEC, the NEC will still hold the power. It was able to reinstate Florence Radzilani and Danny Msiza to their positions, despite the fact they’re implicated in the VBS scandal.

The next fight is likely to be over what would constitute an “allegation”.

Would it be only the moment when criminal charges are laid against a person? That might make sense, as it is relatively easy. This would mean, then, that at the very least Bongani Bongo would have to resign from Parliament, and Zandile Gumede would have to step down from her brand new position as a member of the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Legislature.

If it were to go further than being criminally charged, what could it be? If a news outlet makes claims would you have to answer them? That could well open the doors to even more fake news than we see now. One can imagine a Sunday in which the Sunday Times and City Press publish claims about Magashule, while the Sunday Independent makes claims about Ramaphosa.

Where would that leave the ANC?

And even the concept of forcing people who face criminal charges to step down is possibly unworkable. Gumede’s “deployment” to the KZN Legislature is proof of this. KZN ANC leader, Premier Sihle Zikalala was honest about the decision on Friday. He told an event hosted by the SA National Editors Forum on Friday that society was correct to be outraged by the decision to give her this position. And he acknowledged that this is a process of creating a problem to solve another problem. The “another problem” here is her support base in Ethekwini, which has made it impossible for the current mayor, Mxolisi Kaunda, to actually govern.

The situation in Ethekwini is complex, going all the way back to a series of incidents in 2015 when the region had to cancel three conferences and annul another. But the lesson to draw from this is that if someone has a strong enough constituency, they cannot be kept out of high office.

All of this leads then to perhaps the main question to be asked here – is this the end of Ramaphosa’s policy of governing by consensus? Is he now prepared to take on Magashule, Mabuza and literally countless others? And if he is indeed ready, how would he do that?

What is clear is that Ramaphosa is still much more popular than any of these other leaders, even as his popularity is declining, mainly because he has not acted against corruption. Were he now to act strongly against corruption, it would make him stronger in the court of public opinion. And that, in turn, should give him more political space in which to move. Unless of course his comments and promises turn to nothing, in which case public anger against him could return quickly.

But that leads to the next question. How is it possible? He himself cannot decide to remove Magashule, only an ANC conference can decide that. He cannot go against NEC decisions, as the reinstatement of the VBS accused demonstrates.

And the NEC itself could well be left unmoved by all of this. It seems difficult to imagine that those who agreed to the VBS reinstatement could now simply change their minds and decide that they themselves must suddenly resign.

What could be the most likely incident that could lead to a change? The only answer there might still be what it has been since just after Nasrec. A decision by the National Prosecuting Authority to charge Magashule with wrongdoing.

Some see this latest move as a near-desperate pre-emptive strike by Ramaphosa, as he is aware of some action being planned against him.

Last week the Umkhonto we Sizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA) held a press conference, in which they said the NEC was too divided and too weak on corruption. But the press conference also saw the MKMVA’s leaders facing

questions about their own past. Their leader, Kebby Maphatsoe, is well known for his defence of the Guptas; their treasurer Des van Rooyen had just faced a tough time at the Zondo Commission and their spokesperson Carl Niehaus has a long and tawdry history of lying.

They knew that holding this event was to invite insult. Which means there may well have been another motive for holding this event, there was some point to it.

Either way, what is clear, is that for the first time Ramaphosa appears willing to take on the fight where it matters, within the ANC. And that those elements against him are unlikely to go down without a fight.

Buckle up. AD2020 is not done with us yet. DM