

Interview with PWMSA convenor Hlengiwe Mkhize



Hlengiwe Mkhize is also the deputy minister of economic development and professor of psychology at the University of South Africa. She is also treasurer-general of the African National Congress Women's league.

According to the Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa (PWMSA) website, the organisation is Not-for-Profit, and was launched in Bloemfontein on 8 August 2006 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1956 march of 20,000 South African Women to the Union Buildings to protest against apartheid.

It was launched to create 'a broad front for the development of SA women - one that would enable women to speak with one voice and to address their concerns using a single platform of action irrespective of race, class, religion, political and social standing.'

The organisation's membership is made up of 'more than

35 national organisations and institutions that represent civil society, labour, faith-based, political parties, business, arts and culture and professional bodies' non-governmental organisations (NGOs), political parties, professional bodies and faith-based organisations.'

The organisation says it has provincial and district structures that cater for 'mass participation of women especially at grassroots.'

Fundi Nzimande: Thank you for availing your time to the *Labour Bulletin*, we understand you are very busy. Can you tell us a little bit about your background as an activist?

Hlengiwe Mkhize: I cut my political teeth at Morris Isaacson High School through Tiro and the South African Student Movement (SASM), which was organising students in high schools. SASM was creating awareness about the apartheid system and especially how it had designed an inferior education system for black people. When we went to university we became part of the South African Students Organisation (SASO). In SASO we held regular discussions relating to the state of the nation at that time and what should be done. By 1976, the student movement was highly mobilised. It was from that time that I became an activist to this day where you now know me as an African National Congress (ANC) and ANC Women's League activist.

FN: What do you carry with you into PWMSA from your past experience as an activist? What have you learnt from your past activism that you believe will serve you well in your post as the national convenor?

HM: What I have learnt is that 'progressive' is not a fashionable word. PWMSA should not be a fashionable word. It has a deeper meaning as it comes from the international forces that are opposed to injustice of any kind. For South Africa, this came out sharply after the Sharpeville Massacre. That incident mobilised the world against the apartheid government. These progressive forces were deeply committed ideologically. For them, although they had never been to South Africa, they felt the crimes committed against black people in South Africa very deeply.

The PWMSA has that deep history of those high levels of commitment that come from the love for justice. In the 1960s we saw progressives coming together. An association called AWEPA emerged in Europe, particularly to oppose apartheid in South Africa. These progressives used parliamentary bills backed by individuals to push for awareness amongst their parliamentary peers who were not all convinced that the apartheid government was an illegitimate government and should go.

That is the kind of progressives that we should have in our movement. So, for us as the PWMSA one of the questions we should be able to answer is: How do we then identify our forces? How do we consolidate the agenda so that we can all stand together as though we are in a beehive? From that experience, we have to be able to talk about gender equality in a basic way, beyond numbers. Women's opportunities in all sectors such as churches, political parties, business and all kinds of organisations should be looked at.

There is a role for men in the struggle for genuine gender equality. Men like Samora Machel and Thomas Sankara have left a very important legacy for Africa. Samora is the one who brought the strongest point that our societies will not be free from colonialism and backwardness if women are not free. Thomas Sankara is the one who through his leadership ensured that women rose to positions of authority and had access to education. He was the activist who tried to show men the harsh impacts of patriarchy for development and advancement of society. In South Africa as well we need more men like him.

FN: Who forms the membership of the PWMSA? Where does the membership of the PWMSA come from?

HM: Members of the PWMSA are organisations that follow a progressive ideology on the question of women empowerment, women emancipation and gender equality. These organisations are and should be heavily committed to the improvement of the lives of women socially, economically and politically. They should be committed to the transformation

of society and the elimination of patriarchy. The Women's National Coalition (WNC), our predecessor, delivered a quota on representation and developed a policy which included gender mainstreaming.

In Cuba, for example, they have the biggest women's movement. This is so because the women in government and in every other sector are committed to this movement. We should be able to follow the Cuban example here in South Africa as well. We have to deliver even better than the WNC because women are now decision-makers and should be able to direct different types of resources to building the women's movement and the transformation of society.

Whether women are located in government, business, community-based organisations (CBOs), NGOs or the trade union movement, women are becoming or have become decision-makers. Once we are in agreement about these progressive forces we should clarify the values that bind us together. If, for example, hunger is a big thing for us, we need our moment as the PWMSA where we take the issue of hunger head-on.

We need these organisations to have the following values of leadership: focus on people, commitment to the plight of women especially in the rural areas, informal settlements and townships and honesty and integrity.

FN: There is a perception in some quarters that the PWMSA has evolved into an organisation for elites that excludes poor and the working class broadly. Do you think this is a fair assessment and how do you think the current leadership intends to respond to this perception?

HM:

Every assessment should be made with a fair consideration of the context in which organisations are operating. That being said, our commitment as the PWMSA is to continue to draw women's organisations from all walks of life on the basis of what I have said earlier that they must be committed to the elimination of patriarchy in our society, the improvement of women's status and women's lives economically, socially and politically, irrespective of whether these women are located in suburbs, rural areas, townships or informal settlements.

I have also indicated that we are now going to focus more on the qualitative and substantive issues where women are concerned. We have come a long way in pushing for representation of women, but we note the challenges that still exist. But our major pre-occupation will be leveraging our positions and our policies to push for deeper gains for women and to push for a deeper transformation of our society on all fronts. For this we will need a lot of support from the men as well.

FN: What are the challenges of the PWMSA currently?

HM: The lack of resources for the Progressive Women's Movement has been a major challenge and it has produced other challenges as well. Due to this the organisation has had to rely on individuals who were not fazed by the challenge. It has then created an individualist culture which has then undermined organisational coherence. This latter development has made other women extremely cautious and sceptical about the value of the PWMSA.

PWMSA should look to the future and have the guts to say this is where women are going. We have to eradicate patriarchy and deepen non-sexism in our community. We need to re-invigorate the enthusiasm that women's organisations had for the PWMSA when it was launched.

FN: How does the current leadership plan to respond to these challenges?

HM: We see the need for a resource mobilisation drive based on a unitary organisation; unlike in the past where each provincial structure tended to do its own thing. We need to build dialogue on an ongoing basis on different aspects. We need to develop a programme that will rebuild the enthusiasm of members. We need to focus on the most marginalised sections of women.

FN: What do you see as the role of the PWMSA 18 years after the democratic breakthrough of 1994? Where and how do you see PWMSA plugging the gaps that still exist?

HM: Most of the gains of our democracy have gone to white women, if you look at the issue of employment equity. A small number of black women have also benefitted from this. Economic opportunities, although still very insignificant, have also gone more to white women and to a lesser extent to black women.

The gaps that we still need to plug are for the majority of black women, rural women, township women, and disabled women, women in informal settlements and young women. We are concerned about women's

access to education, economic opportunities and other social services.

FN: What do you see as the five key priorities that need to be addressed by the PWMSA in the current period?

HM: One of the priorities is *rural development*, because a majority of the rural population is made up of women and we have not been able to push for a holistic or integrated rural development programme.

Another is *education and skills development*, because the majority of women are not able to leverage their skills, knowledge and values to access economic opportunities or even the social services that are already provided by government.

There is also *gender-based violence (GBV)*, because women are still the overwhelming majority of victims in GBV regardless of their sexual orientation. Women are still being battered and sometimes killed by their partners. Lesbian women are increasingly being targeted by a patriarchal society for harassment, assaults and even murder.

There should be peace campaigns and popularisation of UN Resolution 1325 because this is crucial for socio-economic development. We are concerned even about the current violence in our country as it is having an impact on some of our programmes.

Patriarchy should be demolished. Therefore, it is important for us to form partnerships that seek to undo patriarchy as it is so dominant in society, influences how women are perceived and what opportunities women will access,

it influences how seriously women's issues will be addressed and it influences the standard of living that women will have. Worst of all even women themselves are not immune to patriarchal tendencies.

FN: What role do you think the PWMSA constituencies need to play going forward?

HM: We expect them to build unity on the issue of women emancipation and gender equality. We expect them to build the PWMSA, support its programmes in a multi-pronged approach as well as to push for the attainment of the goals of the PWMSA throughout all sectors of society.

FN: How does the PWMSA intend to influence government policy and programmes to the benefit of women going forward?

HM: We are looking for a point of leverage where our interests could be catered for. We'll admit that we can't do everything; but we have to campaign for a number of things such as a family institute. We have to look at the Child Protection Policy and Legislation. We have to look at different types of families that include child-headed and female-headed households. This will help us develop a clear understanding of pockets of poverty in both rural and urban communities. We are pushing for the five priorities and for resources for the advancement of women and for champions in government and elsewhere who are committed to the emancipation of women. ^{LB}

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Review

Restless Nation: Making Sense of Troubled Times by William Gumede

Published by Tafelberg, Cape Town

Reviewed by Elijah Chiwota

Many academic writers struggle to write in simpler ways that are easily understood by readers, especially those who would not have had the opportunity to go to institutions of higher learning, but with Gumede that is not the case. The book, made up of a number of articles that were published in local and international newspapers and magazines in the last seven years, is written in an accessible style that is easy to follow – probably benefitting from the author’s experience as a journalist in earlier years.

The articles are also short and up to the point. Although the author uses this style, the reader does not lose the main arguments, and is engaged on the main issues that are raised.

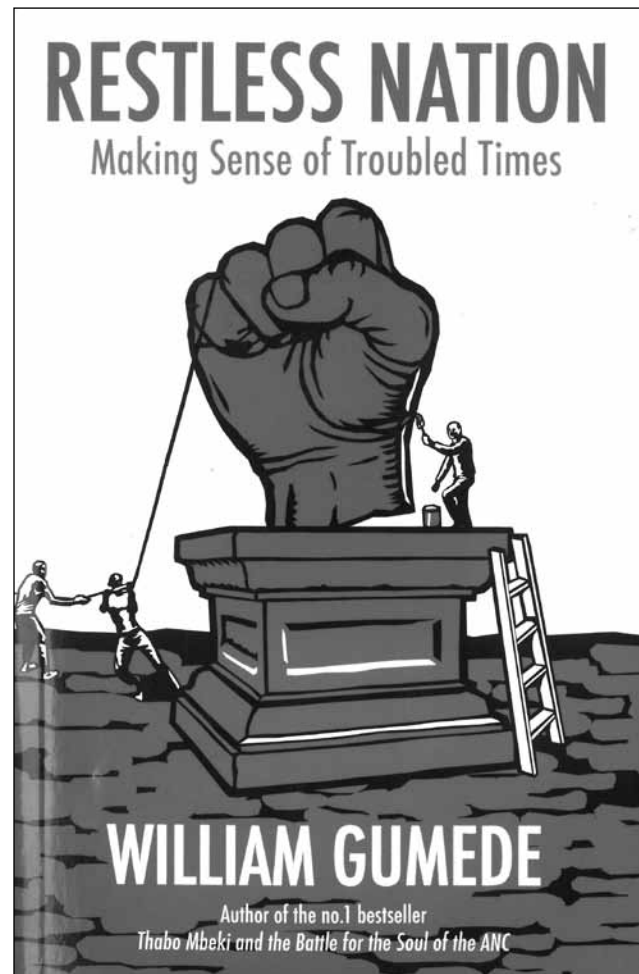
The other notable feature of the book is that the articles can be read as stand-alone pieces or as a whole, depending on the reader’s preference.

When reading through the book one notices a thread that runs through it which is the issue of better governance by former liberation movements in Africa and how this is important for development. Although most of the articles are on South Africa, the author provides a constant reminder that what is taking place in South Africa is not unique to the country, but is typical of most post-colonial African governments.

The topics covered in *Restless Nation* include the politics of the African National Congress (ANC) and how this plays out through the Tripartite Alliance with the Congress of South African Trade Union (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party. In one of the articles he advises Cosatu to cater for the interests of the poor, the jobless, the homeless, the peasants and the youth. Otherwise ‘with a small base, the trade union federation will face the danger of becoming a “labour aristocracy”, of organising a small working class base that have jobs.

On the other hand, he sees the SACP as ‘an elite movement with a relatively small membership, typically trade unionists, students and those working in civil society.’

Other Tripartite Alliance members such as the South African National Civic Organisations (SANCO) are seen as out of touch with the communities they are supposed to lead. Commenting on SANCO’s absence



from community protests, Gumede writes: ‘In fact, rapid changes in society, associated with increased poverty and alienation – and the SANCO leadership’s inability to respond to this – are partially to blame for the organisation being on the verge of extinction.’

Other issues that are raised in the articles include what is meant by South Africanness and who is a South African, transformation, crime accountability of government, corruption, service delivery, crime, xenophobia, skills shortage, racism, poverty, inequality, harmful cultural practices, women’s rights and many more.

POST-COLONIAL STATES

The post-colonial state in Africa has been the subject of many studies most of which have concluded, like Mahmood Mamdani's, that the state that emerged with the end of colonial rule and apartheid was a 'bifurcated' state of 'citizens' and 'subjects'. In *Restless Nation*, William Gumede, makes the same point by analysing the failure of liberation movements of yesteryear to transform their countries and to build democratic institutions.

However, opportunities still existed to transform African states into democracies that were accountable to their citizens, and with this change, economies could be given a new lease of life. For instance, civil servants could improve some of the ways they served the public and become more efficient. Appointments to fill government vacancies could also be based on merit and not 'cadre deployment'. Furthermore, Africa could take a leaf from the 'Asian Tigers' on how to transform their economies.

'The difficulty for many African countries is to reverse the negative impact on the state if the political culture of the dominant movement turns undemocratic, autocratic or authoritarian. Given the nature of the independent and liberation struggles, these movements are organised in top down, secretive and military like fashion, with power in the hands of a small leadership group. When the group decides, the members are expected to obey according to the principle of democratic centralism.'

Despite the bliss of independence, the liberation movements' now ruling parties have carried along with them, the gear of colonialism's brutality now laced with the glitter of bling

often brought about by largesse made possible from the proceeds of corruption and government tenders. The liberation movements have become transformed overnight to become embodiments of institutionalised corruption. In this scenario it is not surprising that service delivery has become subjected to the back burner. Fortunately the communities have not taken this lying down.

ANC POLITICS

For those interested in getting an understanding of the ANC's politics the book is a good place to start. Though not a historical account per se Gumede takes snap shots on the history of the ANC as in the article Where will the ANC be in another 100 years. Most of the articles review the successes and tribulations of an organisation that has produced leaders, including a radicalised youth league of 'the generation of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu'.

Gumede writes on the importance of the ANC which to its members is more than a political party. 'During the struggle for liberation, members, activists and supporters of the ANC did not see the movement as simply another ordinary political party. It was supposed to have soul.'

'The soul of the party was, of course, not easy to define. Yet it was easily understood that what made the ANC stand apart was its genuine commitment to internal democracy, accountability, honesty and its compelling vision of a caring, non-racial government in the broadest public interest.'

The Polokwane conference that ousted Thabane Mbeki is analysed as well the debates on President Jacob Zuma's first and second terms.

The problem child of the ANC, former ANC Youth League president Julius Malema's rise to power within the movement is also discussed. Besides playing candidates against each other Malema's power lies in the fact that the controversial views he expresses are at least partially resonant with significant numbers of black South Africans. If he calls for nationalisation, the truth is that there is widespread anger that distribution to the poor has not worked. Of course, the answer is not traditional nationalisation, but finding ways to make existing government departments work more efficiently - by reducing cronyism, doing away with jobs for pals and encouraging business to be more proactive in terms of job creation and skills transfer.'

While the ANC is popular its members have not shied from service delivery protests. Writes Gumede: 'The protestors are mainly ANC supporters, sympathisers and voters. They are protesting because the democracy has failed them. It is likely that many have approached local elected representatives over slow service delivery, mismanagement and corruption and were arrogantly rebuffed. Others have most probably also approached local branch leaders of the ANC to complain, but their complaints have fallen on stony ground. In such circumstances taking to the streets is often the only option remaining.'

Restless Nation is worthwhile reading for those interested in the dynamics of what makes up the 'rainbow nation' as the author makes efforts to define the South African identity. 'Our common South African identity, and shared future, will have to be built as a mosaic of the best elements of our diverse present and past, histories and cultures.' ¹⁸