

Few problems, no worries

Interview with ANC secretary general, Kgalema Motlanthe



Soon after the ANC's local government electoral victory in March, **Ebrahim Harvey** an independent political writer interviewed the ANC's secretary general, Kgalema Motlanthe, to get his views on ANC successes and failures in the local government arena.

What do you make of the almost one thousand township protests over the past two years in South Africa?

People feel that they have not been heard. There is also local political dynamics, where we find lots of competition for positions and others perhaps exploiting the genuine grievances of poor people for their own ends.

Do you agree that the ANC-led government's social policies in the area of basic services is partly responsible for the ongoing eruptions?

No, our policies are correct but the problem lies with its implementation. But there is an

obligation on the part of citizens to pay for services. Monies have to be collected for water and electricity, otherwise we could have more serious problems. Where people need more services and they are too poor to pay for it we have the indigent policy to take care of that, but it can only alleviate their burden.

Against the background of unrest in black townships, which is ongoing in some areas, the ANC's victory in the recent local government elections is not very comforting for the party. Is this correct?

We know there are problems and the victory in the elections does not and will not make us arrogant. It's not that we are unaware of what is happening, but we are confident that we will solve these problems, given time. About our overall policy, we think it is right under the circumstances.

Would you agree that on the whole the past two years have probably been the hardest ever for the ANC, certainly since 1994, with so many allegations and scandals involving the party?

It has been difficult years but [I'm] not sure if it is the worst ever. The ANC has faced many difficult challenges over the years and we have come through it, but there will always be difficulties, given our history and the enormous challenges we face as a result.

Where to for the alliance with Cosatu and the South African Communist Party, after many of the latter's activists have been eager to contest elections on a separate platform. For how much longer can you keep the lid on a boiling pot?

No, this is not a serious problem for us. At the conference of the SACP last year they resolved not to contest elections against the ANC now or ever in the future.

Never? Are you sure because I am unaware of that.

Yes, they said never.

The difficulties the ANC has faced over the past two years, and more recently around the elections surely indicates that there are serious problems inside the party. Would you agree with this assessment?

No, we do have many problems but we don't have a crisis. What we have to do is learn how to coordinate and properly manage our collective work. Take the election ANC lists. We sent out a notice that if there are any objections to the names on it the branches need to inform us. We did what we had to do and went about it properly but sometimes there are complex dynamics which we cannot always foresee in certain areas, but this is all about developing internal democratic practices.

How are you going to deal with a multitude of serious internal problems before it has even more serious consequences for the ANC?

It is my job to attend to these problems, and I am confident that we are equal to the task. We work daily on these problems.

And what about Khutsong? Do you believe the crisis is over?

No, you're wrong, there never was a real crisis. Yes, there were problems there but even if we had three people voting in Khutsong, three or thirty thousand, we would win the election. However, not everything is resolved there but we are working towards a good solution.

What about claims that you are close to, and supportive of, former deputy president, Jacob

Zuma, in his hour of crisis, and opposed to President Mbeki for a third term? Are these just wild rumours?

Absolutely no comment.

Do you have any presidential ambitions?

Absolutely not.

But your name is increasingly being mentioned after the disgraceful fall off Zuma. Do you think it is possible that your name could be put forward by the ANC and its allies for the presidency of the ANC at the 2007 conference, which would virtually assure you the presidency of the country?

No, no. I will convince them that I don't want that and that I can better serve the ANC in this or another position. I really do not

have presidential ambitions. I am an organisational man.

Coming from a strong trade union background are you not concerned about the fact that the ANC's economic and social policies have had a negative impact on the working class, both in the factories and in the townships? Even Cosatu, which is where you also come from, says this.

My approach is that all alliance components can take any decision they like on any matter

But you must realise that there is a big difference between having to deal with serious practical problems and theorising about it. Besides, I am convinced that the ANC has pro-poor policies, but agree that we can do much better, and we will.

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Surely, you cannot deny that the ANC's economic policies since 1994 have been mainly to the benefit of big business and not labour and the poor. Even President Thabo Mbeki admitted this in his state of the nation address this year, saying clearly that things have been good for business since 1994.

Look, we live in a capitalist society, so when the economy thrives it tends to benefit the rich more than the poor. Those who are already rich will thrive more, while the poorest of the poor have not benefited. But don't forget that since 1994 we have done a lot for poor people, in so far as various grants are concerned, without which their plight would have been worse.

Do you accept that despite the ANC's best efforts since 1994 black poverty and unemployment has grown over the same period, although there have been many positive democratic changes?

Look, we have a basket of interventions by the state to attend to problems and needs. Particularly for rural areas these grants have been a huge help, although not perhaps to the same extent in the urban areas. But we cannot sustain grants indefinitely. Therefore our longer term solution is in creating more jobs.

Coming from a labour background do you not think it is possible for SA to see the emergence of a workers' party, along the lines of what happened in Brazil a few years back?

Anything is possible, I believe, but there are differences between this country and Brazil.

Do you think it would be fair criticism to say that you have changed since your days as a trade union leader?

No, I have not changed. My job has changed, yes.

Are you still a committed socialist, as you were when you were in the unions?

Absolutely, still a socialist, although the ANC itself is not and has never been a socialist organisation.

But how do you reconcile your commitment to socialism and the cost recovery policies of your party, even for basic services?

Even Minister of Provincial and Local Government, Sydney Mufamadi, concedes that the hegemonic discourse on service delivery in this country is in the grip of neo-liberalism. But the reality is that 12 years ago we had economic problems not of our making. We had to adopt the policies we did to achieve the kind of stability we today have, which is why we are now going to emphasise the needs of the people above all else.

Do you not agree with me that the ANC should not be demanding payments for very basic services from poor black people, as they have been doing, and supporting cut-offs when they cannot pay?

Yes, well there is the indigent policy to help really poor people. But remember that it is not only basic services, like water and electricity, but tarring roads, parks and so on are also important. The environment is also important for our development.

But the indigent policy has serious flaws and does not work properly.

That is why I say we have problems with implementation.

Do you not agree that a big part of the problem is that the basic services the government does provide freely is just too little, especially for big black working class families and that the government has to considerably increase these free basic services to help the poor more.

We have to work out how much we have available for this, in relation to many other competing and pressing needs. We have no ideological position against improving basic services, but today the earlier fiscal burden we had is no longer there. So we can talk to the South African Revenue Services and see how much more we can devote to improving basic services.

In a healthy spirit of self-criticism what would you say is the biggest weaknesses of the ANC?

Since I am an organisational person I think our biggest weakness is our branches, where admittedly we have had serious problems. In fact if our branches were stronger we would have even bigger election victories.

Finally, to what do you attribute the ANC's continued electoral success despite a growing social crisis, affecting its own supporters, and growing unemployment and poverty?

Most importantly, is our direct voter contact through door-to-door visits, listening to people's problems and suggestions and showing that we care.