

# Political accountability and succession debate

## What will win the race?

While the media and political structures engage in fervent speculation around the ANC's future leaders, **Nomalanga Mkhize** questions our priorities in the face of poor accountability.

**T**he African National Congress (ANC) succession race is the news story of the year. The media have reported extensively on political personalities offering themselves as candidates to lead the ANC, and possibly South Africa to 2010 and beyond. However, the race, much as it affects our future, should be secondary to a more important debate on the strength of our democratic institutions and the progress government is making in realising basic human and socioeconomic rights.

Thirteen years have passed since South Africans put democracy into action. At the time the most pressing concerns for the country were building national unity, adopting the Constitution and devising socioeconomic policies, which would reverse poverty entrenched over two centuries of white supremacist rule. These concerns were related to each other. The new South Africa could not stand on one, but on all three.

In 1999, when President Nelson Mandela handed over to the next generation of ANC leaders, led by President Mbeki, there were strong expectations amongst South Africans of all backgrounds, that this government would get down to business and implement policies

to realise 'a better life for all'.

Eight years on, government has delivered many services to citizens. However, there have also been problems in critical areas of our political system. The emergence of the term 'service delivery' reflects this. The way it is used depicts citizens as passive, end-receivers of government action. What ought to happen is ongoing interaction between government and various groups or civic actors, guided by the Constitution.

While interests may compete, it is ultimately the spirit of our Constitution and the needs of our democracy which should determine the healthiest path for government. The strength of any democracy lies in the ability of its institutions to withstand the factionalism of party politics. What ought to concern us is how to close the wide gap between our constitutional ideals, and the actual political system. We must interrogate the extent to which our state institutions are subject to political patronage as opposed to serving the people.

One way to assess the strength of our democracy is to look at how political accountability mechanisms fare. Recently, the Public Service Accountability

Monitor (PSAM) at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, commented that Eastern Cape government departments do not take the Auditor-General (A-G) seriously enough to follow its recommendations for improving financial management. This despite the A-G being a constitutional body which audits the books of government departments to see if they are complying with the Public Finance Management Act and attendant regulations which govern the use of public resources.

Departments' disdain for the A-G means that their financial records are poor and few people are held to account for this. The PSAM highlighted accountability problems in the Eastern Cape Department of Education noting that it had received ten audit disclaimers from the A-G. This means that for ten years it could not produce enough basic evidence in the form of receipts, vouchers and invoices to prove how money was spent. While government certainly has massive challenges, it is an indictment on officials and politicians that basic financial record-keeping is not in place.

This poor accounting reflects a wider malaise within government

administration. Few officials are held accountable for irresponsible management and work-related misconduct. This means that the AG's role in guarding and strengthening democracy on behalf of citizens is undermined because its recommendations fall on deaf ears.

This disregard for accountability institutions has a direct effect on citizens who hold rights to access public services and resources. An example is the failure of the School Nutrition Programme in the Eastern Cape. The department has failed to ensure that learners in targeted schools receive daily meals, despite the allocation of hundreds of millions of rands to this project since its conception in 1994.

The core problems associated with the collapse of this vital programme have been corruption, mismanagement and maladministration. In its 13 years, little corrective action has happened to bring those who squandered millions of rands meant for children, to book. In June 2006, when the programme collapsed, former Eastern Cape health MEC, Trudy Thomas, stated, "There was also undue interest by politicians and civic leaders who called endless meetings - very puzzling until their links with the business side of the feeding scheme began to emerge. Now the state is formally dignifying the hijacking of the R234 million-a-year nutrition programme for the benefit of business and communities."

The failed programme exposed the inverted priorities of players involved. Thomas commented that adults involved in the scheme, "... asserted a primary claim on the

nutrition millions to boost their interests and relegated feeding of the children to secondary or even optional status. They have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to let children go hungry while they fight their self-interest battles."

The inability of government, including parliament and the provincial legislature, to hold those involved accountable is a dismal failure of democracy.

What then is the significance of the succession race? The question is who does the succession battle benefit? Whose interests are being contested? Thus far, few candidates have offered a word on the state of our democracy. The focus is on the ANC itself - the type of leadership style preferred by members, the party's historical roots and the need to overcome factionalism. But little is argued on behalf of 'the people' and the future of our democracy. The irony is that the masses expected to focus on succession issues are the very people who suffer most when elected officials act with impunity.

An example of the disregard for the well-being of vulnerable citizens and lack of accountability, was health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's, denial that too many babies were dying at the Frere Hospital in East London due to poor care in its maternity wing. The president and minister were more concerned with managing public perceptions of government failure, than with using the situation to address structural deficiencies in the Eastern Cape health system.

The province's health system suffers from a massive shortage of staff. There are not enough hospitals and clinics and there is a

shortage of equipment. Supply-chain systems to deliver medical supplies to correct destinations are also weak. The minister chose to ignore that over 200 babies had died in the hospital in 2005 and 2006, and instead fiddled with statistics and definitions to prove that Frere's situation was not unusual. Children's constitutional rights to life, dignity, security and healthcare were not a consideration.

The fervent speculation on the next ANC president has also led to political fatalism. Some people comment that they feel like powerless bystanders in a race that will determine their future president. However, the feelings of marginalisation are a self-fulfilling prophecy. Seeking 'heroes' or 'saviours' from the ANC assumes a disempowered position. In public debate, we must shift away from the ANC's internal needs, to the needs of our country at large.

The real work lies in individual citizens and civil society using existing democratic mechanisms to further transform the society. More important than the run up to Limpopo, is how ordinary South Africans are going to act to further our democracy. This means we must know our laws, rights and institutions and be willing to invoke them when confronted with state failures. Who heads the ANC is important, but more important is whether we exercise our civic duty to hold that person to account. LB

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