

Succession battle and the democratic project

The succession battle and debate raises high emotions and many distortions.

Aubrey Matshiqi in considering the issues and implications provides a sober and useful guide to making sense of this struggle.

In December this year, hundreds of delegates will descend on the province of Limpopo to elect a successor to Thabo Mbeki if he decides not to seek a third term as president of the African National Congress (ANC) or the party decides not to separate the so-called 'two centres of power'.

Leaders of the ANC will have us believe that the December national conference is neither about personalities nor a narrow contest for leadership. They argue that the national conference, which will be held five years prior to the centenary celebrations of the ANC, has the significance of being the forum that will chart the policy course for the ten years between the 2009 and 2019 terms of government. But there can be no doubt that while issues of policy and organisational renewal are important, the leadership race will loom large over the national conference. This means that the succession battle will be the primary driver of political conduct and probably also of the policy and political choices that will be made by a large proportion of the branch delegates.

Because the Zuma-Mbeki dynamic has been one of the key drivers of the succession battle and tensions within the tripartite

alliance, there has been a tendency to conceive of the nature and character of the leadership battle in terms limited largely to the perceived protagonists. The fact that the battle for mindshare has become one of the key areas of contestation is giving the media and, therefore, debates in the public domain a prominence which is unprecedented in the history of the ANC regarding the influence of the public discourse on internal party debates. This is both a good and a bad thing.

It is bad to the extent that it has introduced an element of reductionism which, at times, has resulted in the 'dumbing down' of political debate. But the good outweighs the bad since the succession debate beyond the confines of the ruling party is becoming the crucible through which thought and ideas about the future of our democracy may become distilled and purified notwithstanding the reductionist impulse.

The reductionist impulse attempts to reduce explanations for the tensions and divisions spawned by the succession battle to a single and neat explanation when a more nuanced reading of the different dimensions and drivers of the leadership race is required. In my

estimation, therefore, the succession battle in the ruling ANC, like other political phenomena, is not reducible to a single explanation and a proper understanding of the complexities that surround it will enable us to understand better the impact it might have on the ANC and our democracy. To this end, an attempt is made below to disaggregate some of the issues.

The succession battle must be understood in terms of its twin dimensions of succession and continuity.

Leadership battles in political parties tend to be about succession with regard to the personalities concerned or the possibility that a new vision under a new leader will emerge. Alternatively, they can be about the perpetuation of the particular interests a certain individual leader has come to represent, in which case, an attempt is made at ensuring that the new leader consolidates and defends the interests that have coalesced around the leadership of his/her predecessor.

If Mbeki is re-elected as ANC president, the challenge for those who support him is the election as head of state of a person who will consolidate Mbeki's ideological, class, state and other projects. For



Some of the possible candidates to succeed Mbeki

his opponents, particularly those on the left of the ANC, the anti-thesis must find expression in both a new leader and vision, or in the separation of the party presidency and position of head of state (the two centres of power) in a manner that maximises their influence on policy content and the orientation of the state.

All the actors have partial access to the total reality of the succession battle.

The interface between the internal ANC discourse and the public discourse has resulted in some distortion of our understanding of possible outcomes. We must appreciate that the different actors, the candidates, their supporters, the media and political commentators, recognise the need to manage that most unstable of variables – branch delegates. Since none of these actors have full access to the total reality, there is a degree to which they will rely on Orwellian manipulation as a means towards producing a particular outcome.

The succession battle is not only about personalities.

The Orwellian manipulation alluded to earlier will in part try to respond to the dilemmas of partial access by foregrounding aspects of the succession debate in ways that advantage or disadvantage particular factional interests.

If the personality who represents those factional interests is not the basis on which a position of

advantage over other factional interests will be achieved, de-emphasising the importance of personality and foregrounding issues such as policy or ideology may become the preferred tactical approach.

The truth, however, is that ideology as one of the drivers of the succession battle may turn out to be much more important than some of us realise. The ideological battles are not going to be a contest between grand ideological narratives in the mould of Cold War ideological engagement. When policy is debated, ideological tensions will probably manifest themselves in terms of conceptual differences over the meaning of the National Democratic Revolution in a post-apartheid conjuncture of rampant globalisation and neo-liberalism.

Many of the tensions predate the succession battle.

The tensions we see today in the ANC can be explained also in terms of the complex nature and character of the ruling party, a clash of cultures, contests for power and influence during the underground and exile period, and the changed relationship between the ANC and state power as a result of the 1994 democratic breakthrough.

During the exile and underground period contests for power, influence and resources sometimes expressed themselves in terms of tensions between those in the military (MK) and the so-called

civilians, and some of the antipathy and support for either Zuma or Mbeki which are driving support for either leader in the succession battle existed even then. The clash between the military and civilian components is today manifest in the position adopted by veterans and the privatisation of intelligence resources to promote or undermine party political agendas in the leadership contest.

Different conceptions of internal party democracy as understood by those who were in exile in the military, intelligence and civilian structures, the internal political and military underground and the United Democratic Front are partly responsible for the clash of political cultures. Add to this the changing profile of ANC members and generational pressures which are beginning to undermine consensus on principles such as democratic centralism and revolutionary and organisational discipline. We must be careful, however, not to be simplistic because these categorisations do not fully take into account the cross-fertilisation between different political impulses.

The balance of forces, power and support will shift several times prior to national conference.

The reductionism mentioned earlier relates also to how we read the significance of particular events with regard to the direction and possible outcomes of the succession battle. Too much is sometimes made of single events

leading to newspaper headlines that are too enthusiastic about how some of these events are supposed to be a 'blow' to the chances of the different presidential projects. The reality is that it is difficult to read many of the variables and how political events over the next five months will impact on them.

The next president of the ANC will not be a woman.

The gender debate and how the emancipation of women relates to the quality and future of our democracy have become an important part of the succession debate despite the possibility that this aspect of the battle is being driven by an instrumentalist approach that may deliver nothing better than patriarchy in a skirt.

The capacity of our democracy to reach its full potential is in part dependent on the role of women in our society. Objectively, there is, therefore, nothing wrong with the proposal that the next president of the ANC should be a woman. The subjective conditions of the succession battle, however, militate against this happening given the suspicion on the part of some that it has nothing to do with advancing the cause of altering gender relations and has more to do with an attempt to disqualify Zuma.

Furthermore, the ANC Women's League has not showered itself with glory in how it has interacted with this matter. The Women's League seems to have become embedded with the male factional interests that have become dominant in the leadership race. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that a woman will head the ANC between December and its centenary conference.

These are some of the considerations that should shape

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our understanding of the succession battle in the ANC and its possible impact on broader society. The policy dimension of the succession debate will remain a point of interest for many until December.

The South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) have vowed to shift the ANC and the state away from its current 'neo-liberal' policy trajectory. The ninth congress of Cosatu set four criteria on the basis of which the labour movement will assess the extent to which the ANC is no longer "dominated by the interests of capital rather than the working class", and these criteria are:

- implementation of nationalisation provisions of the Freedom Charter;
- an end to privatisation and commercialisation/ commodification of government functions;
- adoption of an economic policy that ensures redistribution of wealth; and
- abolition of anti-worker legislation.

This shift can occur only if Cosatu and the SACP succeed in achieving a quantitative and qualitative presence in branches of the ANC. This will most likely not materialise before the December national conference and, therefore, means that the ruling party will after December be more or less where it is now in policy terms, that is, at the centre of the policy and ideological spectrum.

This further means that the co-existence of 'sound economic fundamentals' and conditions of underdevelopment for many in the traditional constituency of the ANC will continue. This coincidence of the fallacy of the first economy-second economy dynamic may in the medium to long term constitute one of the greatest threats to political, social and economic stability.

In the short to medium term, the impact of the succession battle will depend on effective political management. But chances are that this conflict will deepen debate about how to consolidate and defend our democratic project. This debate may lead to the enrichment of our understanding of the electoral and institutional reform that may be required to achieve this.

Since our future and that of our democracy are not written in the stars, no outcome is inevitable or unavoidable. The decisions that are made by the ANC, including its choice of leader, will ultimately determine whether the democratic project is consolidated or derailed.

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