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CYRIL RAMAPHOSA ON LAND - TURN-AROUND OR SPIN-AROUND?

By Dr Theuns Eloff: Executive Director, FW de Klerk Foundation

The last week's developments on the land and expropriation without compensation (EWC) debate were, to say the least, interesting. Firstly, there was the "toenadering" between the ANC and South African agriculture (Agri SA and Agbiz), and then we heard President Ramaphosa answer questions in Parliament on the subject. In comparison to last week, some farmers and business people are breathing much easier today. From "we will give our people the land back that was stolen from them, without compensation to the thieves" a mere few months ago, to "we will never expropriate productive agricultural land" last week, is quite a jump. One does imagine that the EFF and the Zumaites in the ANC are slightly worried about this change in message. Was this a turn-around on land and EWC, or merely a spin-around?

As is usually the case in politics, there are a number of different answers to this question. Factors to be considered in this include the distinction of Ramaphosa speaking as ANC president, or President of the country. He is now on record saying that his late-night statement of 31 July was one as ANC leader, not as President of the country (incidentally making the commanding of SABC airtime much worse). Another factor is the tendency of politicians to shape their messages for their audiences, resulting in different emphases to different audiences on the same theme. A third factor is the possible utilisation of the land issue as a party-political platform in the run-up to the 2019 general election. And the fourth factor is the old tactic of the ANC to "send up a kite" on difficult issues. If the public opinion is against the idea, withdraw it softly and if not, pursue it. In ANC language it is called the "balance of forces", which must be in their favour before pushing through. But once encountering resistance, withdraw with the most possible grace, while handling such issues with "firmness of principle and dexterity of tact".

Four possibilities exist in answering the question: turn-around or spin-around?

Possibility one is that the whole debate on land and EWC was started by the EFF and forced upon the ANC - first at Nasrec and then in Parliament. Ramaphosa's previous pronouncements must be seen against the background of wrestling the initiative back from the EFF. It must therefore mainly be seen as part of the pre-election strategy. This does not, however, explain the apparent turn-around of the past week.

Possibility two is that although the debate was started by the EFF, it was taken forward by the Zumaites in the ANC. This happened on the last night of the Nasrec conference, when it was forced upon the Ramaphosa group. It could have been avoided in the parliamentary motion, but the Zumaites in Parliament decided not to say "no" to the EFF (as they had done twice with regard to motions of no confidence in Zuma), but rather amend the EFF's motion in a rather clumsy way; and leaving out two of the crucial conditions of Nasrec, i.e. harm to the economy and harm to further investment in the economy. It also unleashed on the country a series of land hearings, from which race relations will not easily recover. In this possibility, Ramaphosa is speaking primarily to ANC members in the Zuma camp, trying to



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prevent them from calling a National General Council meeting and removing him as president of the ANC with a mere 51% majority. This possibility alone also does not explain the past week's events.

Possibility three is that the ANC (and specifically the Ramaphosa camp) had “suddenly” realised that there would be high economic costs to be paid for EWC in its original form. The voices speaking out against it included not only the “usual suspects” like the opposition, the white right, the liberal middle and the farming community, but also the Land Bank, the commercial banks and influential black opinion-makers (for example Mondli Makhanya). It therefore decided to start a new campaign of talking to some of these organisations. In this possibility, one can imagine that Ramaphosa told Mabuza: “The farmers seem restless - go and placate them a bit”. The result was the highly-publicised (and welcome) discussions not only between Mabuza and Mashatile on the one hand, and Agri SA and Agbiz on the other, but also between Ramaphosa and Dan Kriek, the president of Agri SA. Obviously, as was reported in the media, a number of behind-the-scenes meetings contributed to these discussions and the assurances that were given on productive agricultural land and land-grabs. What this possibility fails to explain, is how Ramaphosa is going to sell this new (softer) stance to the Zumaites in his own party and the EFF in Parliament when it comes to voting on section 25.

The forth possibility is that Ramaphosa (as the “long game” strategist) did all of this rather deliberately. Play the populist game (“radical economic transformation through EWC”) to get the issue on the table in a glaring and emotional manner, win support from your left, scare all property owners with the possible consequences, and then wait for the property establishment to respond in a constructive manner. In getting Agri SA and others to understand the imperative of land reform “better”, he now has excellent allies to help him to implement the land reform that the government did not do during the past 20 odd years. And, according to the High Level Panel Report under the leadership of former President Kgalema Motlanthe, could not do because of a lack of political will and capacity and also widespread corruption. The other element is that he could say to his left that in now working with the farmers and property owners, land reform could be implemented more effectively. It is a bonus that this has forced the various agricultural bodies (including the African Farmers Association) to cooperate better.

This may be an effective strategy to placate the farmers, but as Stephen Grootes recently pointed out *“there is no harmony in the ANC on this. If he has to change his position again, to the point where his message to Agri SA is shown not to be honest, or he cannot live up to his promises to them, it would be a sign that he has lost control of the party on this issue completely”*.

Life and politics are never simple and explainable from only one possibility or perspective. Although the third and fourth possibilities can explain most of last week's events, elements of the first two possibilities may be needed to explain all. And even if three and four cover most of it, it does not mean that those who have responded in a constructive way and those who have welcomed the assurances are in PW Botha's language, “useful idiots”. It means



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that concerned citizens have seen the bigger picture and are willing to cooperate. This also does not mean that those who have followed (and are still following) other strategies to resist EWC, are wrong or not constructive. We may not like it that AfriForum claims success through the Trump tweet, but it is another factor in preparing the ground conditions for proper negotiations on this most crucial issue of land reform and EWC.

In the end, motives don't matter, outcomes do. This is true of all stakeholders in this debate. As we said in a previous article: give President Ramaphosa a chance, but watch him closely. We are still watching you closely, Mr President...