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THE SEMINAL CHALLENGES CONFRONTING PRESIDENT RAMAPHOSA

By FW de Klerk

Cyril Ramaphosa's election as President of the ANC at NASREC in December 2017 was the second great turning point in the history of the new South Africa. The first had come at the ANC's elective conference at Polokwane in 2007, when Jacob Zuma had defeated an astonished Thabo Mbeki in the election for the ANC's presidency.

Zuma's victory had its roots in a decision that was taken at COSATU's 9th Congress in 2006 when the organisation decided to launch a battle for the 'heart and soul' of the ANC. It resolved, among other things, that *"the working class must re-direct the NDR towards socialism and jealously guard it against opportunistic tendencies that are attempting to wrest it from achieving its logical conclusion, which is socialism"*.

The resolution arose from the ANC's decision in 1996 to abandon the socialistic RDP and to adopt instead the more orthodox free market GEAR programme. GEAR had achieved significant economic and social success. Under the guidance of Trevor Manuel, the economy grew at over 5% between 2005 and 2007; there was a budget surplus and the national debt was reduced to only 23% of GDP.

After taking control of the ANC, it was just a question of time before the new leadership would force President Mbeki to resign. Ominously, one of their first decisions was to abolish the Scorpions - the highly effective and independent anti-corruption unit within the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), which had begun to exert considerable pressure on Jacob Zuma and other members of the ANC leadership.

After Polokwane the left wing thought that they would be able to control the avuncular Jacob Zuma. They were so busy with their own plans to capture the State for the advancement of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) that they failed to notice that the wily old President was well on the way to capturing the State for himself and his associates.

Zuma's depredations cost South Africa not only countless billions of rand - but also came close to undermining its standing as a constitutional state.

All this elicited a response from growing ranks of deeply concerned ANC members - including highly-respected ANC stalwarts. At the 2017 NASREC conference they were able to defeat the Zumaites by the narrowest of margins - and ensure the election of Cyril Ramaphosa as the new president of the ANC - and subsequently as the President of the country.

This was the second great shift in the destiny of the new South Africa.

After his election by so narrow a margin, President Ramaphosa realised that he would be called upon to be all things to all factions: he had to endorse the ANC's policy of radical



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economic transformation without unnecessarily alarming its proposed victims - the white middle class; he had to go along with the ANC Conference's decision to expropriate land without compensation without terminally scaring off investment and jeopardising food production; he had to take a firm stand against corruption and State capture, knowing that some leading culprits are among the ANC's top office bearers. Above all, he needed to unite and inspire a deeply divided and demoralised organisation.

Perhaps President Ramaphosa's most important contribution so far has been the concerted action that he has taken to combat State capture and corruption. Soon after his election as ANC President he declared that:

“Strong and efficient law-enforcement agencies are critical to the fight against corruption and crime generally, and to the restoration of the integrity and legitimacy of the State. In this regard, the ANC is of the firm view that the country's intelligence services, the police and prosecutorial authorities should be strengthened and fortified to act with professionalism, and without fear, favour or prejudice.”

He is implementing his undertaking to clean out the Augean stable that he inherited from his predecessor. He has appointed a new Board for Eskom and new leadership in the NPA - and is taking steps to revive an independent investigative unit akin to the Scorpions. Many of the worst offenders from the Zuma era are fading into the background - as the Zondo Commission continues relentlessly to expose the enormity of the abuses that occurred during South Africa's nine lost years.

Nevertheless, some criticise President Ramaphosa for not having taken a stronger stand in opposing State capture while he was Deputy President. Had he done so it is probable that he would not have remained as Deputy President and that, accordingly, he would not have been elected as ANC President at NASREC.

President Ramaphosa's challenge remains the consolidation of his power within the structures of the ANC. He must, at all costs, ward off the threat of any attempt by the Zumaites to have him recalled - as they did with President Mbeki.

Beyond that, the core question will be whether he will be willing and able to return to the pragmatic and successful economic policies of Trevor Manuel and President Mbeki. Ultimately the acid test will be whether he will commit the rest of his presidency to the achievement of the founding values in the Constitution - or whether he will revert to the racially-divisive and economically catastrophic goals of the NDR.

The answer to this question will determine the future success and happiness of South Africa and all its peoples.

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