A New Leader for South Africa’s ANC Won’t Guarantee a Break From Zuma

James Hamill | Wednesday, July 5, 2017

In December, South Africa’s ruling African National Congress will elect a new party leader to succeed beleaguered President Jacob Zuma and lead the party into national elections in 2019. Within the ANC, the campaign to replace Zuma officially has not started. But, in effect, it has been underway since the beginning of the year, with political maneuvering and jockeying behind the scenes.

This is a product of the ANC’s arcane internal procedures, a hangover from its years of exile when members viewed elections for party positions with suspicion and preferred so-called consensus candidates in order to avoid “disunity.” The fiction continues to be preserved that open competition for the party leadership is dangerous and that senior ANC figures should therefore wait to be called to serve, rather than openly seek party positions.

Despite these official protocols, which are more akin to those of the papacy than those of a political party in a modern constitutional democracy, two early front-runners have emerged, both of them with close ties to Zuma: Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Zuma’s former wife and the chair of the African Union from 2012 to 2016; and Cyril Ramaphosa, South Africa’s deputy president under Zuma. If the contest becomes too divisive, another compromise candidate could step forward, but for now it looks like a race between Dlamini-Zuma and Ramaphosa.

Zuma himself has already violated party convention by essentially endorsing Dlamini-Zuma in January, when he said that the ANC and South Africa were ready for a female leader.
This attempt to couch his support for her in the progressive language of gender equality conceals more nefarious agendas and is particularly spurious given Zuma’s own track record on the gender debate in South Africa. In 2005, Zuma was charged with rape, and his defense during the subsequent trial was rooted in deeply sexist justifications for his behavior. His supporters gathered outside the courthouse daily to unleash torrents of misogynistic abuse at his female accuser, whose charges were later dismissed. Zuma never called for his supporters to stop their heckling.

Zuma’s desire to lever Dlamini-Zuma into the leadership of the ANC, and by extension the presidency of South Africa, is driven by baser motives, as he believes that his ex-wife will protect his core interests in two main areas. First, Zuma hopes that Dlamini-Zuma would ensure that the 783 charges of corruption, fraud and racketeering that have been threatening him for over a decade now never translate into a formal criminal prosecution. If they do, and he is convicted, he believes she can be relied on more than Ramaphosa to issue a presidential pardon.

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Second, Dlamini-Zuma represents continuity and with it the preservation of the patronage networks that have become so entrenched under Zuma. Over the past year, South African politics have been dominated by discussions of the systemic political corruption orchestrated by Zuma and the private interests that cling to him. Zuma and his lackeys view access to the state, particularly state-owned enterprises, as an opportunity to loot and plunder with impunity. Unlike Ramaphosa, who is projecting himself as the reformist candidate, Dlamini-Zuma has yet to make a meaningful contribution to this debate. This sends a powerful signal to the patronage faction now embedded at every level of the ANC that they have little to lose and everything to gain from her presidency.

Dlamini-Zuma also has considerable historical baggage. Although she can boast major administrative experience as the former minister of health, home affairs and foreign affairs, she had an undistinguished record in each position. As the health minister, she was embroiled in scandal around the misuse of public
funds for a theater production designed to raise awareness for AIDS. As the minister of foreign affairs, she was extremely partisan in her handling of relations with Zimbabwe, stating in 2003 that Zimbabwe’s long-ruling ZANU-PF party would never be criticized as long as the ANC remained in power in South Africa.

During her four years as chair of the African Union, she barely left a footprint in its three priority areas of democratization, the creation of a new security architecture and economic development. She did, however, succeed in mobilizing support behind a proposed African withdrawal from the International Criminal Court over its indictment of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for crimes against humanity in Darfur and its alleged fixation with prosecuting African leaders. This all points to a depressing prioritization of solidarity with African regimes—no matter how autocratic and dysfunctional—at the expense of African citizens.

Her conservative candidacy seems principally aimed at shoring up ANC support in South Africa’s rural heartlands, with no coherent strategy for halting the recent hemorrhaging of party support in urban areas. She already has the backing of the ANC Women’s and Youth Leagues, both important constituencies in previous leadership contests. Given her closeness to Zuma, she is likely to secure the endorsement of ANC branches in those provinces most loyal to him: North-West, Free State, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, where the ANC has its largest membership. But tensions in KwaZulu-Natal over Ramaphosa’s candidacy, which is making advances in the province, could make it a tighter contest. Dlamini-Zuma could also benefit from some clandestine interference on her behalf by the security establishment, given the extent of their politicization and open partisanship during Zuma’s tenure.

Yet closeness to Zuma is a double-edged sword. Just as it provides access to finance and a considerable support base, it exposes Dlamini-Zuma to guilt by association with what one observer has called the “mongrel mob of charlatans, opportunists and grisly gangsters that has inveigled itself into power in some parts of the ANC over the past two decades.” And if Zuma is ousted ahead of December—a no-confidence vote is now set for August—it would leave her acutely exposed.

Dlamini-Zuma is ultimately an uninspiring candidate with no compelling vision for the country and no policy depth. She offers continuity at a time when South Africa urgently needs a fundamental break with a venal and ossified political culture. But her contacts and allies within the ANC give weight to her candidacy, and the ANC’s repeated refusal to remove Zuma from the presidency despite his myriad scandals confirms that his camp remains
organizationally strong. The situation also reveals the growing disconnect between the ANC’s political behavior and how it is perceived outside of South Africa.

For the major opposition parties, however, a Dlamini-Zuma victory would have its consolations. It would provide more political opportunities by allowing the opposition to characterize her presidency as little more than the continuation of Jacob Zuma’s by other means. That is an unlikely recipe for an ANC recovery.

*James Hamill has been a lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester since 1991. He has a long-standing research interest in South African politics, particularly in the country’s post-apartheid development, and is a frequent visitor to the country. He has published articles on South Africa in International Relations, Diplomacy & Statecraft, The World Today, Politikon: The South African Journal of Political Studies and The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs.*