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# The phenomenal rise and rise of Randlord Cyril

It is no secret the 'home boy' was Nelson Mandela's preferred candidate to succeed him in 1999

By FIONA FORDE

Since he whet his appetite for politics more than 40 years ago, Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa has added a string of varied titles to his name.

From the religious bent of the Student Christian Movement in his high school days, he graduated to SASO politics in his university days, and later became a two-time political detainee, all before he reached the age of 24.

With a law degree under his belt, he chose trade unionism over exile and went on to launch the all-powerful National Union of Mineworkers in the early 1980s, under whose banner he led the first legal one-day strike in 1984. A year later he helped found Cosatu and laid the groundwork for the formation of the United Democratic Movement.

He was a latecomer to the ANC, only joining its ranks when it was unbanned – yet he was quickly elected secretary-general in 1991.

In that same year he also became the party's front man at the Codesa talks, where he helped broker a successful end to apartheid and paved the way for the 1994 democratic elections.



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"He was the most skilful negotiator I had ever met," Bobby Godsell later commented.

"Because the man is a pragmatist, and a realist," notes Anthony Butler, whose biography of Ramaphosa hit the shelves on the closing day of the Polokwane conference last month. "He is charming, charismatic and has the ability to win over any audience, leaving people with the feeling that he really shares their beliefs."

In researching his book *Cyril Ramaphosa*, Butler interviewed 100 people and

was left with the distinct impression "that people don't know where Cyril really lies. They don't really know his position on anything. And that's what has made him so skilful a negotiator and politician."

As an MP, Ramaphosa became a member of the Constitutional Assembly and went on to become the architect of the country's Constitution, a document hailed the most progressive Magna Carta worldwide to this day.

It was no secret that the "home boy" was Nelson Mandela's preferred candidate to succeed him in 1999. It became apparent that he had also found favour among ANC delegates, who voted him into the top position of the National Executive Committee at the 1997 Mafikeng conference.

But his rise in the ranks did not bode well with the heir apparent, Thabo Mbeki, who pulled out all the stops to ensure it was he who stepped into Madiba's giant shoes at the end of the day.

Ironically, it was Margaret Thatcher who predicted back then that South African politics had not seen the last of the former trade unionist.

Nor should it, she believed. No one, not even the intellectual heavyweight Mbeki, had the political nous of Cyril Ramaphosa, she believed. The Iron Lady wished for his comeback. Indeed, she prayed for it, wrote Hugh Murray in *Leadership* in 1997.

But by then Ramaphosa was already opening doors in the world of business as the face – and prime recipient many would say – of Black Economic Empowerment.

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"Thabo felt that it was crucial to the process of transformation to have someone at my political level in business," he would later say, allaying all rumours of resentment on his part. "Now I'm very happy at the way things have worked out. In fact, I'm ecstatic."

Indeed, he had every reason to be. He went on to make a small fortune. If Thatcher was busy privatising Britain, Ramaphosa was busy privatising himself, as Murray so wittily put it.

Today he is executive chairman of the BEE investment house Shanduka Holdings, and chairman of a number of business houses, among them MTN, SAB Miller, Bidvest and Sasria, not counting the various directorships and non-executive posts he also holds.

His critics are all too quick to note that while the man is a natural-born politician, he is but a mediocre businessman whose empire is built on BEE handouts and ready-made deals. But it is also fair to point out that it was under the Sowetan man's watch that MTN cut one of its biggest and most successful deals when it ventured into the Middle East some years back. And with the exception of the cloud that hung over his days at Molope, Ramaphosa's name is rarely linked to failure in the world of business.

It's not for nothing he has also earned himself the title of the Randlord.

Although a comrade through and through, Ramaphosa has felt at home in the world of business, arguing at the onset that he had more than a money-making role to play. The market was transforming when he stepped into it, and the former trade unionist felt he was facilitating the kind of deals

that were giving "power and opportunity to those who never had any".

As he closed one deal after another, he continued to talk about his "missionary zeal". "Transformation cannot and will not only be transformation of the political structure," he once said.

That said, he was never too far away from party politics, and all the while a well-respected member of the NEC. However, his presence in the ranks of the ANC continued to irk Mbeki - to the point that in the run-up to the 2002 party conference in Stellenbosch, the former leader stunned the country when he alleged that Ramaphosa, along with Mathews Phosa and Tokyo Sexwale, were plotting to oust him.

It wouldn't be the first time Mbeki's paranoia would speak volumes.

Yet what a difference five years can make. While Mbeki is still reeling from Polokwane, the three "plotters" are now back in political vogue, some would argue with designs already on 2012. The irony is stunning.

Although Ramaphosa steered well clear of last year's contest, he gratefully accepted his nomination to Jacob Zuma's NEC. Last week, he was appointed to the new National Appeals Committee, which will further the work of the National Disciplinary Committee. His name has also been added to the so-called ANC arms deal investigation committee.

However, political commentator Steven Friedman is reluctant to talk of any meaningful comeback. "My sense is that it's exploratory, he's putting his toe in the water."

Let's not forget that Ramaphosa was reported to have said "he didn't have the

stomach for this kind of politics" during the succession race, Friedman recalls.

"He may have appeared withdrawn in the run-up to Polokwane," Butler adds. "But that shouldn't be understood as him discounting a call to join the race."

"Remember that Ramaphosa was a late-comer to the ANC and in a sense has always had to prove himself. He will never put his neck out until he's absolutely sure. Politics really is his realm."

That's where Friedman cautions that while Ramaphosa stood a good head and shoulders above everyone else in his day as a negotiator, "we've never really had the opportunity to test him as a politician".

Butler disagrees and makes the further point that Ramaphosa is in the enviable position today of "being seen as the bridge between the Mbeki era and what seems to be a more leftist alliance now dominating the ANC leadership position", from where he can call on his trade unionism, his negotiating skills and his business acumen.

If Ramaphosa were to contemplate ANC or state leadership at this stage of South Africa's political game, it would require a great deal more of a political neck than he exhibited last year.

His silence was often interpreted as a weakness in the midst of the aggressive contest, and a lack of real courage to take on the ANC grown-ups.

All he would need is to be courted, argues Butler. Like he was in the past, during the Codesa days. "But I would imagine that many people are already doing that anyway," he adds.

That, and a few words to the Man above from the Iron Lady.