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Tiptoeing his way to political power

Cyril Ramaphosa plays his cards close to his chest and insists on testing the water before committing himself to anything – but his ambition is undoubted

BY FIONA FORDE

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

After gratifying his religious bent in the Student Christian Movement in his high-school days, he graduated to the South African Students' Organisation and politics at university, and twice became a political detainee – all before he reached the age of 24.

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

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

In that year he also became the party's front man at the Codesa talks, at which he skillfully helped broker an end to apartheid and pave the way for the first democratic elections in 1994.

"He was the most skillful 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 skillful 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 as the most progressive Magna Carta worldwide to this day.

It was no secret that the "home boy" was Nelson Mandela's preferred successor to him in 1999. It became apparent that he had also found favour among ANC delegates, who voted him into the top position on the national executive committee at the party's Mafikeng conference in 1997.

But his rise in the ranks did not sit well with the heir apparent, Thabo Mbeki, who pulled out all the

stops to ensure that it was he who stepped into Madiba's giant shoes.

It was Margaret Thatcher who predicted back then that South African politics had not seen the last of the former trades unionist.

Nor should it, she believed. No one, not even the intellectual heavyweight Mbeki, has 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.

"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."

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.

Thatcher predicted that SA had not seen the last of Ramaphosa

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 holds.

The 55-year-old's critics are all too quick to note that, though the man is a natural-born politician, he is 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 this Sowetan's watch that the MTN Group 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 that he has also earned himself the title of The Randlord.

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Though "a comrade" through and through, Ramaphosa has felt at home in the world of business, arguing at the outset that he had more than a money-making role to play. The market was transforming when he stepped into it and the former

trades 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. But 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 Matthews Phosa and Tokyo Sexwale, was plotting to oust him.

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

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

Though Ramaphosa steered well clear of last year's contest, he gratefully accepted his nomination to the Jacob Zuma NEC. This 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 list of members of the so-called ANC arms deal investigation committee.

Yet political commentator Stephen 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," biographer Butler adds. "But that shouldn't be understood as him discounting a call to join the race. Remember that Ramaphosa was a latecomer 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."

Butler has the strong impression that his subject remains ambitious, in politics as in every other way.

"Politics is his realm."

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

Butler disagrees and makes the 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" from where he can call

on his experience in the trade unions, his negotiating skills and his business acumen.

If Ramaphosa were to contemplate ANC or state leadership at this

stage of the political game, it would require a great deal more exposure of political neck than he exhibited throughout last year. His silence was often interpreted as 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, as he was in the

Codesa days. "But I would imagine that many people are already doing that anyway," Butler said.

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