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WAITING FOR CYRIL

Nelson Mandela is said to have wanted Cyril Ramaphosa to succeed him when he stepped down in 1999, but the master negotiator did not throw his hat into the ring. Now the businessman who played a leading role in the making of South Africa's constitution has made a comeback into politics – and talk is, he is eyeing the big prize in 2012, writes **Fiona Forde**

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

From the religious bent of the Student Christian Movement in his high school days, he graduated on to Saso (South African Students Organisation) 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 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 late-comer to the ANC, only joining its ranks when it was unbanned, yet he was quickly elected secretary-general in 1991. That same year he also became the party's front man at the Codesa talks, where he skillfully helped broker a successful end to apartheid and paved the way for the 1994 democratic elections.

"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 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 in the world to this day.

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It was no secret that the "home boy" was Nelson Mandela's preferred candidate to succeed him in 1999. He had also found favour among ANC delegates who had voted him into the top position of the national executive committee at the Mafikeng conference in 1997.

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.

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



Transformation cannot and will not only be transformation of the political structure

Cyril Ramaphosa

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.

"Thabo felt that it was crucial to transformation to have someone at my political level in business," he would later say, allaying rumours of resentment on his part. "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.

Today he is executive chairman of the BEE investment

house, Shanduka Holdings, and chairman of a number of businesses, among them MTN, SAB Miller, Bidvest and Sasria, not counting his various directorships and non-executive posts.

His critics 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 Group cut one of its biggest and most successful deals when it ventured into the Middle East.

And with the exception of the cloud that hung over his days at Molohe, 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 a well respected member of the NEC.

But his presence in the ranks of the ANC irked Mbeki to the point that in the run-up to the 2002 party conference in Stellenbosch, Mbeki stunned the country when he alleged that Ramaphosa, along with Matthews 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.

Ramaphosa steered well clear of last year's contest, but he gratefully accepted his nomination to the Jacob Zuma NEC.

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 he has reportedly said "he didn't have the stomach for this kind of politics" during the succession race.

"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. Ramaphosa will never put

his neck out until he's absolutely sure."

The biographer has the impression that his subject remains an ambitious person, in politics as in every other way. "Politics really is his realm."

Friedman cautions that while Ramaphosa stood 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, noting that Ramaphosa is in "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, it would require a great deal more of political neck than he exhibited last year.

His silence was often interpreted as a weakness, and a lack of 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.