

9 of 12 DOCUMENTS

Business Day (South Africa)

February 13, 2007
Business Day Edition

Still basis for worry over who leads SA

BYLINE: Ralph Mathekga

SECTION: OPINION & EDITORIAL; Pg. 11

LENGTH: 799 words

Still basis for worry over who leads SA

SA IS entering one of its most difficult years since 1994. The African National Congress (ANC) will be holding its national conference later this year, which will determine who becomes the president of the party and, quite possibly, the president of the country.

Essentially the problem is that it remains very uncertain who will assume the ANC presidency. Prospective candidates have cautiously denied media reports that they have interests in the position because they are aware that it is still a long way to go before the December national conference.

President Thabo Mbeki, on the other hand, has not come forth to dismiss talk that he might make himself available to stand as ANC president, although the constitution bars him from attempting a third term as the president of the country. Regarding his intention, or lack of it, to run for the ANC presidency, it is likely that Mbeki will remain silent long enough to exert influence on the outcome of the national conference.

It is difficult to imagine Mbeki making himself available for the ANC presidency beyond the two terms he will have served as the president of the country. Mbeki has devoted much of his presidency to the task of re-establishing international trust in African leadership, and for this reason, it is unlikely that Mbeki will risk his legacy by making himself available as the president of the ANC. More opportunities and challenges await him at regional and international level. So then what is all the fuss, within and outside the ANC, regarding the succession?

The main explanation for this has to do with uncertainty and democracy. For the first time since the end of apartheid, South Africans are uncertain about who is going to be their leader. In every leadership battle, there are disfavoured candidates whose success, the argument goes, would undermine the gains that have been achieved. In this situation it seems democratic processes of leadership selection cannot be trusted to weed out such candidates. Once in a while, societies get frustrated with some of the results their own democracies produce.

What is the alternative? The only other way seems to be to change the rules to block the emergence of the unlikable candidate. This is a short-term solution, however, with potentially disastrous long-term consequences. Do we have to change the rules whenever they produce results that we don't think we can stomach? Do we have to change the whole game simply because our societies produce the type of leadership we do not desire?

These questions are more important for new democracies such as SA, where institutions of democracy are not yet

independent from office incumbents. As much as we pride ourselves on being one of the most robust democracies in Africa, there is no doubt we are still in the process of consolidation. While there is no risk of the breakdown of the state into chaos, there is always a risk of democratic stagnation.

A country reaches stagnation when it cannot advance in its democratisation process and yet does not slide back into dictatorship. Democratic stagnation is a state of no war and yet no prosperity. This risk is threatening to any new democracy, particularly ours, built as it is against a history of intolerance and racial inequality. SA is still in the process of internalising some of the democratic institutions and practices, such as the oversight role of parliament and having respect for opposition parties without insinuating that they have a narrow race-based agenda, for example. Further, and particularly in the case of SA, a ruling party cannot claim to represent a permanent majority but rather a temporary majority rallied around shared objectives and concerns.

In western societies, where democracy has been practised for hundreds of years, it does not matter much who occupies office since democratic institutions are so entrenched that they dictate the behaviour of incumbents. Presidents come and go, but the institution of the office of the presidency, its powers and responsibilities, cannot be changed with each term.

The reason why the question as to who will be the next president in SA is creating such a problem is that our democratic institutions, including institutions of accountability, are weak or have been weakened. Efforts should rather be placed therefore on strengthening democratic institutions in the country. In that way, the issue of who occupies the highest office becomes rather a secondary question. We could then thrive on the uncertainty as to who the next president is going to be and focus on broader policy issues rather than personalities and potential risks.

Mathekg is political science lecturer at University of Western Cape and a PhD candidate, New School for Social Research, New York.

LOAD-DATE: February 13, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper