

1 of 12 DOCUMENTS

Business Day (South Africa)

June 09, 2007
The Weekender Edition

Sexwale's ins and outs

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SECTION: OPINION & EDITORIAL; Pg. 5

LENGTH: 942 words

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The ANC is stuck between tradition and change when it comes to the election

Combining his bona fide party-faithful status with a record untainted by allegations of corruption, the businessman might be the man of the hour, writes **RALPH MATHEKGA**

IT IS possible that Tokyo Sexwale will not emerge from the African National Congress (ANC) December national conference as the party's president. He might not have convinced ANC structures that he is a suitable candidate to succeed Thabo Mbeki as the president of the party and the country.

But one thing is certain: his bid has already taken the ANC presidential race to new levels, for two reasons.

First, he has taken the presidential campaign outside of the ANC. Second, he has openly used the media to launch it.

Sexwale opted to announce his candidature on Hard Talk, the acclaimed BBC talk show. In so doing, he introduced himself to the international community, and the response has been positive, judging by coverage of the move by the media.

But the announcement has sparked criticism. The central argument from members of his party is that he has sought to build a political support base through the media, rather than through traditional ANC structures.

Adding force to this argument is that it is not known exactly who inside the ANC is lobbying him to stand for leadership.

Of course Sexwale is not a political novice: he is aware that he needs support within the ANC if he is to emerge victorious at the December conference.

The support he gains through the media inside and outside SA will not suffice to win the presidency of the ANC: he would have to find considerable backing from the ANC structures themselves.

The perception that exists - that he is too popular, and far too cozy with the media - may prove a costly one for Sexwale.

Convincing ANC branches, known for their often arm's length treatment of the media - will be exceptionally difficult.

It is therefore important to ask whether Sexwale's campaign is in touch with the processes that are usually followed when ANC presidents are elected.

Is Sexwale's primarily media-based campaign somehow paralleled by some sort of lobbying within the ANC?

It is not only up to Sexwale to reach out to the ANC and its members. It is also necessary for ANC members to realise that the party has been so bruised by the succession race that the elected leader should be seen as a unifier, and be able to restore the party's credibility in the eyes of the public.

This analysis is based on the observation that some of the problems the ANC has experienced in the past few years - service delivery shortfalls, allegations of corruption around the arms deal, and the manner in which the party has handled these problems - have not rendered the party an immediate electoral winner.

This is not to suggest that the ANC will lose the next general election. However, what we might see is that the beating the party has taken lately will result in a drop in its electoral share, or a decrease in voter turnout.

Since the ANC is the party with the biggest support base - a base so big that it almost matches the voter turnout of the entire country - any abrupt drop in the voter turnout would mean that the ANC is losing voters.

The party needs a president who is both an insider and an outsider: an insider in the sense that he or she enjoys support from within the party, and an outsider in the sense that he or she has not been an active part of a government that is seen as having made political and policy mistakes.

Once elected to the helm of the party, such an individual would then serve as the party's new face of hope.

There are a couple of individuals who fit this profile, but only one has come forward so far: Sexwale. Unconventional as his presidential campaign may seem, he is definitely not an electoral liability to the ANC.

The party is caught between tradition and change. If it follows its tradition by electing someone who is a party heavyweight, and consequently has been part of the infighting, such an individual may struggle to bridge the gap between the warring factions and, even worse, may not be able to restore the party's credibility before the 2009 elections.

Sexwale's relationship with the general public - developed over the years on the streets and on television screens - is important in assuring citizens that he is accessible as an individual.

His interactive attitude lays to rest suspicions that he may be hostile to criticism.

Sexwale has been likened to assassinated US president John F Kennedy; in my opinion he is more like the late Canadian president and prime minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, a hard-working, media-friendly individual who enjoyed the glamorous life as much as Sexwale appears to.

As for the Batho Bonke shares Sexwale distributed to individuals who are well placed within the media - there should be nothing wrong with that as long as everybody knows about it, and the statements of recipients of these shares are viewed with a critical, informed mind.

After all, is it not so that every opinion has to be approached with such an attitude.

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MANY FACES: Tokyo Sexwale has broad appeal - a media-friendly image, business success and political credentials. Sexwale in The Apprentice, left; taking ownership of a stake in Northern Platinum; and at an ANC function.

IN THE RUNNING: Tokyo Sexwale has launched an unconventional campaign.

LOAD-DATE: June 12, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper