

## BOOK REVIEW

### Kameel Premhid

is a Researcher at the Helen Suzman Foundation. He holds a BA and LLB from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, and recently completed an MSc in Education (Higher Education) at the University of Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. Kameel has recently returned to Johannesburg and hopes to pursue a career at the Bar

# *Mmusi Maimane: A New Way for South Africa* by Sello Mbatha

*Sello Mbatha's book comes at an opportune time. Published shortly after Mmusi Maimane's election as Leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA), it is the first book attempt to put Maimane and the DA's journey into context. With the 2016 local government election just around the corner – and the party hoping local gains will lead to Provincial ones – Mbatha's task is unenviable. Regrettably, despite the relevance of the book's focus, it fails to substantiate the claim in its title.*

Frankly, this is not a serious book. The author's intent to provide "a grassroots account by a grassroots person" is neither particularly new nor incisive.

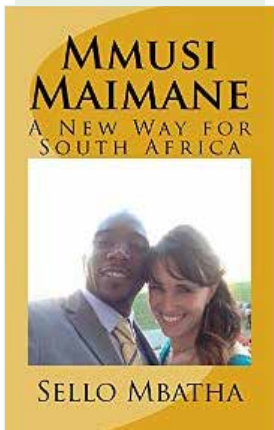
Being self-published, with minimal professional assistance, this book is 'Mbatha uncut'. The lack of honesty in assessing the African National Congress (ANC), the near hagiographic analysis of Maimane, and serious formatting flaws (including 38 unreferenced pages of DA policy) are an indictment on Mbatha's authorial prowess. Ironically, this book provides ammunition against the increasingly popular self-publishing model. Professional assistance may have righted these wrongs.

Self-publishing has, to a degree, rebalanced the asymmetrical power that publishers have in platforming and publishing certain points of view. This is good. In a vibrant society, where intellectual rigour is valued and ideas are given the greatest import, less restrictive means to contribute to public conversations must be welcomed. But, like the comments section on Politicsweb regularly demonstrates, free speech also needs limit. Self-publishing should never come to replace our standards of what is acceptable in debate, nor cloak the questionable beliefs and prejudices of authors in greater moral legitimacy than it deserves.

This book is a damp squib. Whether it is a metaphor for, rather than a reflection on, Maimane's political career will hopefully fall to another author to do more judiciously.

In spite of its weaknesses, Mbatha's offering is the vignette against which the DA under Mmusi Maimane may be analysed.<sup>1</sup>

First, Mbatha's widely shared race reductionism of what Maimane's blackness means for the DA, and South Africa, must be rejected. That Maimane is black is important. It partially neuters the DA's detractors. It may also offer new perspective. But, a change of leader is one thing. What the party looks like in Parliament, for example, is quite another. The act of boxing Maimane into a predetermined idea of what he must necessarily be by virtue of his race, including that it necessarily



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equips him to better speak to black voters, is deeply illiberal. It buys into the ANC's problematic conception of transformation as a bean-counting exercise which, by-and-large, benefits privileged and politically connected elites rather than the masses it is supposed to serve. The challenge, then, for the DA and others – including Mbatha – is not to treat black voters as a homogenous group that will now swing to the DA because it is led by a black man.

Secondly, Mbatha – and the DA – must avoid the tempting race-reductionist comparisons of Maimane with other notable black leaders, especially Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama. Equally, they must avoid positioning the party as the inheritor of Nelson Mandela's ANC. These comparisons perniciously serve as a blue print for Maimane's legacy. Paradoxically, it is not a limitation that white males face. None should. That Theresa May – a potential British Conservative Party Leader – is consistently compared to Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel proves the point. Demographically similar leaders should not be held up as prototypes who determine the trajectories of those who follow them. Differences between the individuals aside, these contrasts are inauthentic. In the second case, the DA runs the risk of becoming an 'ANC lite'. The canonisation of Nelson Mandela, and the ANC and South Africa under his leadership, is either intellectually lazy or dishonest or both. Nelson Mandela was no saint and his interpretation of reconciliation is, poignantly, being contested by many black people today. The eagerness with which the DA is willing to adopt 'Mandela's mantle' is ahistoric and self-serving. It creates a meretricious linear progression from Mandela's politics to Maimane's conveniently ignoring the DA's long liberal tradition along the way.

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Thirdly, there are also questions about how Maimane and the DA handle criticism. Their dealing with *Business Day* columnist, Gareth Van Onselen, is troubling if instructive. Maimane has curiously maintained radio silence even though he has been happy to engage weaker opponents – wielding racial tropes or gossip – have sought to undermine him. He has been less keen where Van Onselen, among others, has been surgical in his scrutiny. There are lessons to be learned in over-engaging one's critics, but deferring to lieutenants also has its drawbacks. Whereas Maimane's predecessor, Helen Zille, caused consternation for her trigger-happy pot shots aimed at those she disagreed with – whether via Twitter or her newsletters – Zille's obstinacy to have her own voice heard won begrudging respect. When mouthpieces for Maimane start defining how he thinks and what he believes, then it is natural to doubt their authenticity and his capacity to engage. In an age of stage-managed politics being rejected in favour of genuine 'self-ness', a la Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn on both sides of the Atlantic, Maimane should consider the same. And, this should be the case even where his views are questionable. He and the party should be brave enough to admit error and be open to correction. Strength lies in rectifying obvious problems, not trying to deflect attention away from them.

Maimane's race is no substitute for the challenge the DA faces. And the DA attempting to be a better version of the ANC similarly does not wash. The scars of Apartheid run deep and the psyche of liberation, actively perpetuated by the ANC, has a strong hold over many. The DA's real challenge is how it makes its liberal agenda the countervailing narrative to the ANC's nationalist one. It is not an easy task but, as the ANC becomes more ideologically divided and their

crisis of governance grows, there are opportunities which can be capitalised on. As the flagship liberal party of South Africa, it would do well to demonstrate its philosophical commitments in action, starting with how it represents itself to South Africa – warts and all. In a political environment where trust is missing, the DA taking South Africa into its confidence and seeking their goodwill for its honesty does not seem amiss.

Mbatha – and the DA – would benefit from a thorough think-through of these issues. If Mmusi Maimane and the DA are the new path that South Africa needs to buck its downward trend, we stand to gain a great deal more from acknowledging political realities and taking difficult, though necessary, decisions to address them. In an age where policy and personality are dictated by polls and popular opinion, having the courage of one's convictions would be a welcomed change.

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NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> This article was written in early October and, thus, does not take recent events into account like Maimane's handling of the Dianne Kohler-Barnard affair and the #FeesMustFall protests.