

South Africa: Mamphela Ramphele's planned merger with Democratic Alliance collapses

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Last week, Agang South Africa (SA) founder and anti-apartheid activist Dr. Mamphela Ramphele appeared with Democratic Alliance (DA) leader and Western Cape premier Helen Zille at a Cape Town press briefing announcing that she had accepted an invitation to be the party's presidential candidate in the 2014 general election.

The spokesman for the party she founded only last year, Thabo Leshilo, whose contract was terminated on Friday, attended the briefing with other Agang SA executives, but knew nothing of the intended merger between the parties. Gauteng provincial committee member Sakhiwo Yako asked, "If you cross to another party as a leader what are you saying to followers?" *Business Day* quoted Yako stating, "We were sent messages on our phones ... that there will be a press briefing... We didn't know why we had to watch a DA event."

Over the weekend, Ramphele stunned the country a second time when she reversed her decision to join the DA. She claimed she had listened to her followers and that millions of black voters would never have voted for the DA anyway. The reality is that whether in Agang SA or the DA, Ramphele represents a brand of middle class carpetbagging that has nothing to do with the wishes of the majority. Most bourgeois commentators have missed the objective basis of her actions in concentrating on her personal failings.

Columnist Gareth van Onselen, for instance, wrote, "In Mamphela Ramphele we have someone willing not just to fashion an entire political party after her own image, but to run it into the ground and abandon it, lock, stock and barrel."

Ramphele, a former World Bank managing director, founded Agang SA on February 18, 2013 (see: "Agang offers no alternative for South African working class to ANC"). It was advanced as an opposition to the ruling African National Congress (ANC), combining some democratic reforms with the ability to win the trust of global corporate investors by clamping down on corruption and nepotism—or as its publicity put it, "empowering people to govern, building effective public services, building a restructured economy, building a modern education and training system and restoring South Africa's position in Africa and internationally."

There soon followed high-profile resignations amid allegations of mismanagement, collapsed finances and the autocracy of Ramphele. Vanessa Hani, daughter of slain South African Communist Party (SACP) and ANC leader Chris Hani, is one of the most recent exits from Agang SA. She cited "the toxic nature of politics" in a farewell letter leaked to the media.

The thread of internal malaise was picked up by ANC national executive committee member and former arts and culture minister Pallo Jordan. For him, the DA-Agang SA alliance had "the whiff of an elite pact that suggests that both parties desperately need each other."

He found fault with Ramphele's attempt to plug into a well-oiled political machine in exchange for endowing the DA with the "credibility" of her anti-apartheid past. Jordan conveniently forgets the working class credibility bestowed upon an undeserving ANC by the union bureaucracies that it more and more desperately needs.

Other bourgeois politicians welcomed the DA-Agang SA link-up. Congress of the People (Cope) leader Mosioua Lekota, who has just formed the Collective for Democracy, an election alliance with three other parliamentary parties, said the DA-Agang SA combination would "go a long way in promoting...robust opposition."

A *Business Day* editorial played up Ramphele's race and gender as possible magnets for new DA voters, for whom "assertive women in key leadership positions in the opposition could be ... compelling..."

The exigencies of class interests are the real key to understanding the evolving membership profile of the DA. Not unlike those in the "broad church" of that other bourgeois party, the ANC, DA members now include everyone from former white supremacists to anti-apartheid activists. Had she stayed, Ramphele would have felt right at home in this milieu.

Herein lies a clue about the class character of Black Consciousness, of which Ramphele still considers herself an exponent. She boasts personal links to the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), having borne two children by its prime theoretician, Steve Biko. Under leaders such as Biko and Barney Pityana, the BCM grew out of black students' rejection

of white dominance of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). This led to the formation of the breakaway, exclusively black South African Student Organisation (SASO) in 1969.

Biko held that black liberation from the fetters of colonialism and apartheid had to be effected in two phases, one psychological and the latter physical. Physical liberation, like a full franchise for blacks in a unitary democracy, would, according to Biko, be hollow unless preceded by psychological freedom. In the psychological phase of liberation, black people had to reject the fiction of a white monopoly on truth. This would eradicate from black minds the received notions of themselves as doltish, lazy and prurient, replacing these with their opposites in the making of the wholesome self-image necessary for the exercise of black power.

As a means of effecting this change in the black psyche, Biko was instrumental in the initiation of a number of community projects. Mamphela Ramphele, like Biko a medical student at the University of Natal at the time, came into her own as a driver of these projects, which together with the thinking behind them embody the BCM.

By 1975, she and Biko founded Zanempilo Community Health Centre in King William's Town. At the same time, Ramphele was managing the Eastern Cape branch of the Black Community Health Programme. When Biko was banned, she became director of the Black Community Programmes in the Eastern Cape before she herself was banned.

Black students kicked off the BCM at a time of huge ferment, with youth and the poor at the forefront of struggles globally. In France, the bourgeoisie confronted a pre-revolutionary situation that began as a student strike in May 1968, developed into widespread protests over working conditions and brought down the Pompidou government after just 42 days in office. The United States was in the middle of mass antiwar protests and ghetto uprisings.

Biko must have been aware of the career of Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture), Freedom Rider and chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1966 to 1967. The two activists shared pan-Africanist influences in Malcolm X, Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. Carmichael defined his racialist ideology in his book *Black Power* after supporting the ejection of white organisers from the SNCC. For all its radical posturing, the approach of the SNCC found a reformist echo in the community-building projects of the BCM. Even in his incarnation as "Honorary Prime Minister" of the Black Panther Party, Carmichael espoused a petty bourgeois perspective that would not challenge capitalism, but only result in the allocation of greater resources to the black petty bourgeois.

This outlook intersected with establishment interests in the Nixon administration's policy of promoting "black capitalism" as a way of heading off further urban unrest. It began by creating African American mayors and police chiefs. In its

fullest expression as affirmative action, it benefited not African American workers as a whole, but a thin layer of blacks who grew wealthy by being the willing tools of the capitalist state.

On the South African scene, this gels with the experience of several figures who, like Ramphele, were nominally to the ANC's left, yet effortlessly managed to carve a place for themselves in the post-1994 bourgeois dispensation. Most prominent of these are the Azanian People's Organisation's (Azapo's) Mosibudi Mangena, the party's sole member of parliament and former science and technology minister; the BCM's Barney Pityana, former vice chancellor and principal of the University of South Africa; and Patricia de Lille, former Pan Africanist Congress leader, former Independent Democrats member of parliament and now DA mayor of Cape Town.

In all these histories, the theme is clearly one of making one's way in the world after reaching an accommodation with the bourgeois establishment. This corresponds to an objective socio-economic outlook, which is based on fear of working class power and was prefigured in the youthful African nationalist radicalism of these people. It is impressionistic to put Ramphele's opportunism down to egoism. One might as well say with the romantics that had Biko lived, he would have blazed a path that safely brought us to a more equitable, more Africanist society.

As with all pan-Africanist currents, Biko's thinking was fundamentally flawed in elevating race to a position as the primary division in society. In fact, the Zilles and Rampheles of this world are drawn together and against others not because of race, but class interests. Through the DA-Agang SA alliance, they would have made common cause against South Africa's working poor. They meant to capture whatever they could of the disillusioned ANC vote by putting a black face on what was traditionally seen as a "white" party. That they have failed this time does not alter their objective intention of heading off an independent political movement of the working class, just as other capitalist parties are doing across the globe.



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