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Solly Msimanga: new kid on the block

There is little doubt this month as to which local government politician has created the most waves - Tshwane's newly-elected DA Mayor, Solly Msimanga. Unlike DA metro mayors Patricia De Lille, Herman Mashaba (municipaliq.co.za) and Athol Trollip (municipaliq.co.za), Msimanga arrived on the national stage as a relatively unknown player (www.dailymaverick.co.za). Msimanga's news-making imprint since August has been tremendous (municipaliq.co.za, municipaliq.co.za). This Personality of the Month considers Msimanga's background and how this may influence his management style in the term ahead.

From an Atteridgeville shack to City Hall

Msimanga entered the political ring with a bang - opposing blue light brigades (probably outside of his City's mandate, municipaliq.co.za), decrying the costs of additional protection for the President and Deputy President, as well as laying criminal charges against contractors responsible for poor work (labelling work on the City Hall as "Nkandla 2", and going so far as to allege state capture at the council level (www.enca.com, ewn.co.za, www.iol.co.za)).

Msimanga and his family know hardship - born to a young mother, Dora, in 1980, he lost his father at the tender age of 11 and moved into a shack in Atteridgeville which was without running water or electricity - a home his mother left only 6 years ago (www.enca.com, citizen.co.za). The lot of shack dwellers is one that Msimanga has not forgotten, and has vowed to improve.

The tools at his disposal were no doubt imparted by tertiary study in marketing and accounting after matriculating from Atteridgeville's Saulridge High School (www.tshwane.gov.za). Working as a waiter, Msimanga managed to obtain a Diploma in Marketing Management, as well as a Bachelor of Accounting Sciences in Financial Accounting (BCompt) from the University of Pretoria - the launch pad for jobs at the Liberian then American Embassy where he developed an interest in politics (citizen.co.za, www.tshwane.gov.za, www.dailymaverick.co.za, da-gpl.co.za).

Msimanga's entrance into the DA (after 2006; the year he married his wife, Monde) is a curious one, prompted by Tony Leon's visit to Atteridgeville that saw Msimanga write a critique that ultimately resulted in him being offered a job (www.enca.com, citizen.co.za, en.wikipedia.org, www.tshwane.gov.za). The move was not uncontroversial - according to Msimanga:

It wasn't the easiest of things to do. In certain family corners, you know, people saw me as a sell out and my uncle who was involved in the struggle, actually was very very very unhappy with me and actually stopped talking to me for quite a while

(www.enca.com).

Msimanga was elected to Tshwane's council as a PR councillor in 2011, moving on to the Gauteng Provincial Legislature in 2014 (where he acted as DA spokesperson for sports and served on education and economic development portfolios), before being elevated to the DA's provincial chairperson in 2015 and leader of the DA's Gauteng North region (en.wikipedia.org). Aged 36, a young Msimanga is still two years older than his predecessor, Kgosientso Ramokgopa, was when he took over the City's chains five years ago.

It is apparent from Msimanga's various statements that he sees himself as a champion of the poor, intent on delivering better services to shacks, title deeds and housing, all within a safer environment. This priority must win him much-needed support from the EFF, which secure his election as Mayor in August. At the same time, Msimanga is pro-business and believes on focussing on growth, as one would expect from a rising DA star (www.dailymaverick.co.za).

While Msimanga's corruption-busting approach grabs the most headlines, it will be interesting to see how, once forensic audits have been carried out and acted on, Msimanga will focus on uplifting others from the same humble roots as his. The capital city, with its substantial sprawl, notwithstanding a robust rates base, presents a significant delivery challenge.

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