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Zweli Mkhize: a hard-hitter for cooperative governance

Last night's late-night Cabinet reshuffle saw former ANC Treasurer-General, ANC presidential hopeful and key player in the ascendancy of Cyril Ramaphosa as ANC President, Zweli Mkhize, appointed as Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. There is little doubt therefore that the role has been elevated and prioritised in the new Cabinet. This Personality considers how Mkhize's background is likely to influence his tenure in the role.

Developmental focus?

While our last Personality of the Month, Cyril Ramaphosa (municipaliq.co.za), emphasised the role of cities and the National Development Programme (NDP) as possible drivers in local government policy, Zweli Mkhize may possibly represent a rural counter-balance given his training as a doctor and KwaZulu-Natal background (and constituency).

A medical doctor, Mkhize was born in Pietermaritzburg where he returned to work after an internship in Durban, before going into exile in 1986, only returning to South Africa in 1991 when he began to serve as a member of the ANC's National Health Secretariat while still working as a doctor (www.anc.org.za).

Mkhize's political career took off with democracy; serving as MEC for Health in KwaZulu-Natal between 1994 to 2004, and then MEC for Finance and Economic Development from 2004 before serving as KwaZulu-Natal Premier between 2009 to 2013 (www.anc.org.za). In 2008, he took on the role of KwaZulu-Natal ANC chair and again in 2013 after being elected as a Top 6 ANC official (Treasurer General) at the ANC's 2012 Mangaung Conference (www.anc.org.za). Mkhize presented himself as an advocate for unity and radical economic transformation at last year's Nasrec Conference (www.timeslive.co.za).

As a high-profile politician, he has been the subject of recent graft allegations by former Passenger Rail Agency of SA (Prasa) chief executive, Lucky Montana, which Mkhize has denied and is taking legal opinion to contest (www.news24.com, ewn.co.za). EFF secretary-general, Godrich Gardee, has on the basis of Montana's accusations opened a criminal case against Mkhize (www.news24.com, www.timeslive.co.za).

Mkhize has also acted as Chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, his alma mater, since 2009 (whoswho.co.za). Mkhize's family has a proud lineage, with his paternal great-grandfather a hero of the Mkhize clan of Nkandla in the early to mid 19th century (en.wikipedia.org) and there is little doubt that he brings a KwaZulu-Natal identity to Ramaphosa's Cabinet that will contribute to a sense of balance and diverse representation - a quality not un-useful as illustrated most recently when Mkhize was sent to the province to consult on former President Jacob Zuma's recall (ewn.co.za).

While he has never worked directly in local government, his oversight of one of South Africa's most developmentally challenged provinces, and his on-the-ground work with communities will hopefully come to the fore in keeping in mind the issues of underdevelopment and backlogs.

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