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The Election of Mmusi Maimane as Leader of the Democratic Alliance: a New Era for the Opposition in South Africa

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Introduction

At the end of the Democratic Alliance (DA)'s federal congress held in Port Elizabeth on Sunday 10th May 2015, Helen Zille was replaced by Mmusi Maimane after eight years as leader of South Africa's largest opposition party. This passing of the baton had a significant impact both nationally and internationally because of the colour of Mmusi Maimane's skin: for the first time, the party will actually be led by a black man. More than 20 years after the end of apartheid it may seem surprising that this event has excited people's curiosity and interest, but it demonstrates that until now South African politics have often been polarized along race lines.

This meant that for many years the DA suffered from an image problem as it was considered the party which represented minorities, particularly the dominant white minority which was responsible for segregation. This classification stems primarily from the party's origins. It was created in 2000 after the Democratic Party (DP) joined forces with the New National Party (NNP). Subsequently they were joined by the Federal Alliance (FA). These three parties emanated from mainly white parties which already existed during the apartheid period, and their union was the fruit of a strategy which aimed to form a wider opposition group with an electoral base comprising both whites and *coloureds*¹. As a result, the new party's leadership and activist structures were essentially white and included both conservatives and progressives.

Although Western partisan categories can rarely be transposed wholesale to an African context, it could be said that today the DA is a centre right party which advocates liberal economic and social policies. Its political position is founded on strict adherence to the Constitution – particularly chapter 2, which contains the *Bill of Rights* – and condemnation of corruption.

In spite of a vision of society which is clearly multiracial², since its inception the majority of the party's elected representatives and its main leaders have been white. The idea that the DA is a white party was significantly bolstered by the strong support it receives from the province of Western Cape³ and its electoral success in white areas.

1. Between 1948 and 1994 the National Party (NP), the NNP's ancestor, dominated the South African political stage. Over the same period the DP's predecessors formed the white parliamentary opposition to the left of the National Party.

2. In particular, certain unequivocal passages from the party's Federal Constitution can be cited: "South Africans can and must overcome the historic divisions of race and ethnicity, and unite in our diversity around a shared South African identity". DA Federal Constitution, 1.2.

3. Western Cape province and Cape Town itself are demographic exceptions in South Africa, as they do not have majority black populations

Furthermore, its detractors have no hesitation in stating that the DA is a racial party, meaning that its sole purpose is to protect minority interests.

Whereas the electoral strategy pursued by the DA's first leader, Tony Leon, was clearly aimed at "consolidating" the minority vote, Mmusi Maimane's election as party leader, which was both striking and symbolic, is a clear indication of a determined strategy of openness towards the black electorate, something that Helen Zille initiated at the start of her first term of office as party leader in 2007. We will see that in tandem with the DA's steady electoral progress the party has consistently implemented this strategy – which has been far from easy. While the party won 12% of the votes in 2004, it won 16% in 2009 and 22% at the last general election in 2014. This score is by no means negligible but remains too low to give the ANC cause for serious concern, since the latter still benefits from an undisputed historic legitimacy and has received more than 60% of the votes at each major election since the first free democratic election in 1994. The DA's ambition is thus to transcend its basic electorate by converting a significant number of black voters. This is the arduous task awaiting Mmusi Maimane over the next few years if he wishes to put an end to the ANC's hegemony on the South African political stage.

A clear strategy for achieving diversity in the party leadership

The DA's image problem in South African politics is chiefly due to the fact that for a long time its principal leaders were white. To become a party of government the DA has to target the black electorate, and must increase its internal diversity so as to present a multiracial public image in keeping with the discourse and type of society it promotes. The party is obviously keenly aware of this issue, which has become one of its major strategic challenges. Thus as early as 2006, Ryan Coetzee, then one of the party's chief strategists, published an internal report entitled "Becoming a Party for All The People: a New Approach for The DA". Ryan Coetzee encouraged the party to reflect deeply and critically on the reasons for the absence of support observed among black voters. He made a point of highlighting the party's weaknesses in terms of internal diversity and advocated a new approach. Helen Zille, who was elected as party leader in May 2007, also took most of the report's findings on board and thus encouraged the party to reflect on where it should position itself in terms of ideology and strategy. Her discourse made plain her intention to change the party's image by increasing diversity and attracting people who had not historically been supporters of the DA.

To put these new directions into practice, the party also devised the "Young Leaders" programme, which sets its sights on replacing party executives with new blood. This programme began in 2007 and has become an annual event, with the aim of training a group of young executives from all walks of life who have the required skills for managing public affairs and who could thus take on leadership roles within the party in the future. The programme focuses on the party's priority target – young people – a generation which has not been subjected to apartheid. The candidates selected are primarily from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. The programme is thus clearly designed as a tool for effecting internal transformation since it enables the party to promote racial diversity while simultaneously supporting the meritocratic values which the party tries to disseminate. In 2014 the party's lists for the national and provincial elections included 33 candidates who had completed this programme. The number of executives who have completed this programme is highly likely to increase in the next few years.

Mmusi Maimane's election as party leader can therefore be considered a logical consequence of the strategy put in place by the party during Helen Zille's first term of office. However, this strategy was not applied in a simple and linear manner.

A difficult transformation process

Since 2007 and Helen Zille's arrival as leader of the DA, in spite of the party's public affirmation of its determination, the process of party renewal has faced some significant setbacks. Particular mention must be made of the reaction to the provincial government which she formed the day after the 2009 general election. It contained principally white men and was dubbed a "pale male cabinet" by the other political parties and the media. Helen Zille's defense, indicating that despite her best efforts she had been unable to find alternative candidates of appropriate quality, was at best clumsy and at worst offensive. In 2010, shortly after the party's federal congress, Helen Zille herself spoke of her disappointment. Although her speech on that occasion asked her activists to "cross the racial barrier", once again delegates chose to entrust the party to national leaders who were mainly white.

These difficulties in transforming the party's "façade" are linked, in particular, to the fact that the majority of party activists are still whites. This means that the determination displayed by certain party leaders is not always visible at every level of the party. Moreover, some ambitious candidates from minority backgrounds are sometimes reluctant to give up their places to candidates who have been chosen in order to encourage diversity. This demonstrates very clearly that the party is finding it difficult to achieve a significant transformation without abandoning some of its values. Indeed, the Democratic Alliance promotes the idea of a post-racial society where there is no discrimination, and is simultaneously attempting to promote the emergence of a particular section of the population. Thus there is a contradiction between the vision, the public discourse and symbolic and electoral requirements. The party tries to promote excellence by asserting that the best candidates should be recruited and that there should be no discrimination whatsoever. When the party draws up its electoral list or appoints leaders, the primary criterion must be that of merit. This means that the party pays attention to candidates' qualifications and to the universities attended. Yet decades of segregation have left their mark on South Africa, notably in relation to access to education. As a result, 20 years after the system collapsed, a generation of individuals who suffered from discrimination are of an age to play important roles in South African society, but lack the relevant qualifications. This means that a delicate balance must be found between the search for excellence and the promotion of diversity.

Not long after these problems surfaced, Lindiwe Mazibuko began to occupy an increasingly important place in the media and in the party structure. This young Zulu woman, a very talented communicator, received considerable encouragement from Helen Zille, and her rise was publicized to show how the party was changing. She was elected to the national Parliament in 2009 and quickly became the party's spokesperson and then leader of her

party's parliamentary group and thus of the parliamentary opposition. Many observers considered that these various promotions, together with Helen Zille's public support for her, were a sign that the latter was grooming Lindiwe Mazibuko to be her successor. So it was a great surprise when in May 2014 Lindiwe Mazibuko announced that she was leaving the party to study at Harvard University in the United States. Nothing was said in public about a falling-out with Helen Zille, but it seems highly likely that it was the result of differences between the leader and her *protégée*. The media made much less of another departure – when Ryan Coetzee joined the British Liberal Democrat party in September 2012 – yet this was just as important in the light of his extensive influence on the party's strategic direction.

Among the setbacks encountered by the Democratic Alliance over the last few years, the 2014 merger episode involving the Agang party deserves a mention. This party was created by the former anti-apartheid activist Mamphela Ramphele. Helen Zille had suggested that Mamphela Ramphele should be the DA's presidential candidate at the 2014 general election. This alliance was applauded by many commentators; however, it created discord among Agang's supporters and was demonstrably ill-prepared since it only lasted a few days⁴.

Despite these setbacks, Helen Zille did not abandon her fight against the party's "white" image. She even seems to have tried to speed the process up, which is probably what caused the resounding failure of her alliance with Mamphela Ramphele, and also her unexpected decision not to seek a second term of office as party leader, thus facilitating Mmusi Maimane's rapid rise.

Mmusi Maimane's early days and today's new challenges

At 35, Mmusi Maimane, originally from Soweto – the bastion of the ANC and the struggle against apartheid – developed his political engagement in opposition to the President, Jacob Zuma. Initially a supporter of the ANC, he only joined the DA after Thabo Mbeki's resignation in 2009. He has a degree in theology and is a regular preacher at a conservative evangelical congregation which is part of the Liberty Church in Johannesburg. He appeared in the higher echelons of the party not long after Lindiwe Mazibuko, and his rise was similar to hers. Thus he led the DA list at the city of Johannesburg municipal election in 2011, before becoming the party spokesman, a member of Parliament and the leader of his

4. The Agang activists were particularly resentful that they had not been consulted in order to ratify this alliance. In addition, the choice between a simple electoral agreement and a merger of the two parties had not been clearly established; this caused confusion until Mamphela Ramphele withdrew.

parliamentary group as well as a candidate for the post of *Premier* in Gauteng province in 2014⁵. Considered as Helen Zille's protégé, this accomplished orator built his national reputation as party spokesman, especially during the 2014 election when he spoke at numerous political meetings and appeared on posters and in campaign advertising. In Parliament the DA was eclipsed to some extent by the disruptive behavior of members of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)⁶, Julius Malema's party, but nevertheless Mmusi Maimane distinguished himself by his regular sharp attacks on Jacob Zuma.

Most observers considered that it was crucial to have a black leader to head the Democratic Alliance if the party was to compete seriously with the ANC for more black votes. Mmusi Maimane will need to develop the DA's discourse and positions if he is to persuade black voters and particularly the middle class that the DA is "their" party, while at the same time retaining and reassuring voters from the white and *coloured* minorities. This delicate balance requires him to be a strategist but also to display real *leadership* qualities, especially in relation to internal party interests. In more general terms, he needs to show that his election as leader of the DA was not merely symbolic, superficial and a ploy to catch votes, but is proof that the party's identity has undergone a profound transformation. So he must espouse the movement aimed at renewing the party's leaders, and broadcast his party's image and ideas throughout South Africa. Finally, he must ensure that wherever the DA has administrative authority, the party is governing in a satisfactory manner.

Mmusi Maimane has inherited a very well-structured, professionalized party with substantial experience as the main opposition party. Nonetheless, to establish himself fully as the new leader he will need to break free from Helen Zille's influence and convert the different branches of the party. There is a particular issue with regard to the support he will get from his own party and his ability to embody a strong opposition; although he rose rapidly through the party ranks, he is still a very inexperienced player on the South African political stage. In the campaign for a new leader of the DA, Mmusi Maimane's opponent was Wilmot James, a well-known and well-respected academic. The latter considered that he, rather than his opponent, was capable of making the DA a viable alternative to the ANC rather than a party which looked no further than the electoral situation and paid scant attention to values and ideological principles. Furthermore, since entering office, Mmusi Maimane has already faced criticism for his ambiguous position on the death penalty and

5. Note that he failed to win the city of Johannesburg and Gauteng province – though his results were honorable.

6. Especially at the beginning of the year, during Jacob Zuma's state-of-the-nation speech: <www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/02/13/coups-de-poings-et-invectives-au-parlement-sud-africain_4575809_3212.html>.

homosexuality⁷. It may be surmised that when he has to adopt positions in the near future⁸, a number of incompatibilities may emerge between his religious commitment and his party's defense of liberal values.

7. Same-sex marriage was enshrined in the South African Constitution in 2006, and the death penalty was abolished in 1997. In the course of a televised debate Mmusi Maimane had indicated that if he was in power he would not exclude a referendum so that the population could express their opinion on these topics. However, in recent years the DA has always defended the Constitution, gay rights and – less clearly – the abolition of the death penalty.

8. This is the view of the journalist and former influential member of the DA, Gareth Van Onselen: <www.rdm.co.za/politics/2015/05/04/alloysias-mmusi-maimane-pastor-vs-politician>.

Conclusion

The next local elections in 2016 will provide the first indication of any electoral repercussions linked to Mmusi Maimane's arrival as leader of the DA. Although for the present this nomination symbolizes the beginning of a new era for the opposition in South Africa, the next few years will show whether it is also more generally a new era in terms of political power-sharing. This is a very important distinction, and the second of these scenarios would require Mmusi Maimane's DA to be different to Helen Zille's party and the party led by previous opposition leaders. The party will need to offer a clear political programme with a vision of South Africa and political proposals which are likely to attract young people and the black middle class, to go beyond simply criticizing the ANC and become something more than a stable, calmer alternative to the demands of Julius Malema and the EFF.