



WHY DID IT TAKE SO LONG TO WAKE UP?

Twenty eight years have passed since the African National Congress (ANC) took power in South Africa and only now has the government taken the tentative step to ask for help within the citizenry to stabilise South Africa's chaotic electricity supply. In his address to the nation on 25 July this year, he asked the private sector to assist in rectifying the shambles at Eskom, the country's electricity supplier. He formulated other plans within the energy sector to get South Africa back on its feet. He gave a good speech, but doubts remain as to whether the goals defined by the president would ever reach fruition. There is good reason for this uncertainty: for years the ANC government was warned of an energy catastrophe in the making, to no avail. Under ANC stewardship, the country's power grid continued to falter to the point of near collapse. Widespread blackouts (euphemistically called load shedding) plagued the land until the populace, of all stripes, has now said "No more!" South Africa's winter weather citizens could not take one single more day of candles, cooking in the kitchen on camp stoves, washing with kettle-heated water and buying take away food to survive. Worse, South Africa's industries ground to a halt so many times that machinery became weakened and unreliable, orders were not delivered and many lost their jobs.

Some of the country's largest building management groups had kept lights on by using expensive diesel oil to feed generators purchased to replace the electricity that should have been on tap. Then many building managers became fearful of running out of the now-ubiquitous diesel, and what then? Ghost cities? War-zone type hospital care? Street lights a thing of the past? Why warnings to the ANC ruling elite were ignored is anybody's guess! Not wanting to admit they were hopeless as a government, perhaps? Maybe they were fearful of the privatisation of electricity provider Eskom and the loss of centralised control.

This latter possibility has always been a thorn in the flesh of the ruling party. Even now, after president Ramaphosa's announcement of his plan to turn the electricity tide, state control still remains an immutable policy position for the government, even though the private sector is invited to fix the power mess. Doubts have already been aired as to whether the blueprint unveiled by the president will actually become a reality. Mr. Ramaphosa's track record of action after promises is not good. As far back as 2019, he stated quite clearly

that “merit” should be the yardstick used to employ state workers, and he has repeated this pronouncement on many occasions since then, especially at election time. But nothing has been done to disband the under-the-radar Cadre Deployment (CD) committee which was exposed by Judge Zondo during the recent Zondo commission hearings. Ramaphosa was in charge of this committee from 2012 to 2017, and has held a watching brief since then. He made sure that people employed in municipalities, provincial posts and in the cabinet were politically “on side” with the ANC.

Former president Thabo Mbeki publicly declared that CD was introduced because the ANC was afraid of “sabotage” if people of merit (whites?) were hired! (Ironically it is now the blatant criminal sabotage of South Africa’s electricity infrastructure , as well as its railways and the arterial road transport attacks, which are hobbling the country’s ability to function.) The truth is that today, local government job advertisements state unambiguously that the municipality subscribes to the principles of the Employment Equity Act (read: affirmative action). This means no whites may apply.

When one compares the qualifications and lofty character traits demanded in these advertisements, it is clear that there’s something wrong somewhere, given the fact that only 26 of the country’s 283 municipalities are even functioning. This advertisement practice is in fact fraudulent: people given these jobs clearly do not match up to the qualifications demanded in the ads. President Ramaphosa knows this only too well, yet he has made no move to abolish this CD policy. Has he therefore spoken with forked tongue yet again or will he move forward honestly with his promise to attract people who can actually do the job required to save the country’s power problems? Will he give them a free hand?

WARNINGS

After the president’s July 25 announcement, opposition parties were quick to remind him that he had been warned on numerous occasions of what was imminent. “Eskom’s power crisis didn’t happen just now. It took years to develop,” said Dr. Pieter Groenewald, VF Plus leader. He reminded the president that former president Zuma had in 2014 designated the then vice president Ramaphosa to chair a “War Room” to ensure that there would always be enough power delivery for South Africa in future. Groenewald declared that Ramaphosa must take the blame that practical steps were never introduced to avert today’s crisis.

Under the five priorities highlighted by president Ramaphosa in his State of the Nation address in February of this year, was one emphasising “a swift expansion of our energy capacity”. Months passed and nothing appeared to be moving. In late April, the executive head of Eskom Andre de Ruyter declared outright that load shedding could not be stopped because SA needed 4 000MW to 6 000MW generated, “and we need it quickly”. Hardly hiding his impatience, he declared that the government was once again dragging its feet, so much so that he had decided to talk about the problem in the public domain.

One of the reasons for the continual delay in getting things moving was and still is minister of energy and mineral resources Gwede Mantashe. He and some of his compatriots continue to emphasise the use of coal in electricity generation, while the country has committed itself to phasing out this commodity because it is a heavy polluter targeted by the green community as an albatross around the neck of planet Earth. There is of course the question of South Africa's mineworkers, a huge voting block for the ANC. Hence the foot dragging in moving forward with clean energy plans. Then of course there are the BEE pals of the government who are making a fortune with their coal contracts.

"It's a crisis" said de Ruyter in April this year. "It is time for action". And once again the delaying tactics came into play. President Ramaphosa's credibility was on the line again as he ducked and dived and prevaricated. Despite the fact that the provision of electricity is complex, there are readily-available solutions and there are people in South Africa who can effect these solutions. The daily damage to the country's economy caused by the non availability of reliable electricity supply on ordinary citizens is immeasurable, declared Beeld in its April 21, 2022 editorial.

THE FOX MONITORING THE CHICKENS

A national energy crisis committee would be established, said the president. It would operate under the auspices of the director general of the president's office. Red flags immediately went up – who would be on this committee? The Democratic Party opposition spokesman declared their concern as to whether this committee would include current ministers concerned with energy who would "monitor" those who had been handpicked from the private sector to get things on stream again. Would the engineers and other technical staff have to report to, say, minister of energy Gwede Mantashe who has been against clean energy from the beginning, not to mention his apparent lack of concern about polluting South Africa with his preferred coal, for reasons we have already mentioned. A monitoring committee with minister Mantashe as a member is like putting the fox in the coop to watch the chickens!

"South Africa cannot afford to have individuals like Gwede Mantashe and Pravin Gordhan on a committee to solve South Africa's electricity crisis" said the DA opposition party after the president's announcement. The DA wants a parliamentary committee created to monitor the monitors!

Minister Mantashe could be a serious obstruction to the president's plans for a renewed Eskom. Mantashe wears his resentment on his sleeve. He is quoted as saying Andre de Ruyter is not the man needed to get Eskom back on track. He said de Ruyter is an "alfa type" executive and is more suited to lead Eskom once it has been rescued. Mantashe was rebuffed quite smartly by an opposition party VF Plus official who said by the same token, Mantashe is definitely not the right type of person to have been minister of energy affairs, given his track record, now being exposed. How minister Mantashe's party has fared in the energy sector should be the yardstick with which to measure Mr.

Mantashe against Mr. de Ruyter.

The effect on South African industry, for example, also provides proof of Mantashe's party's abysmal failure. One example among many is the steel group Arcelor-Mittal South Africa (AMSA). It is prepared to invest its own capital in locomotives to carry its manufactured products to overseas markets. The breakdown in reliable rail services and electricity are two of the main problems responsible for AMSA's 30% less steel produced in the period ending 30 June this year, compared to a year earlier. AMSA's woes included no suitable locomotives available, plus a strike and the ubiquitous lack of electricity.

Will president Ramaphosa be able to fix South Africa's other problems besides the provision of electricity? Eskom doesn't work in a vacuum. AMSA's woes include other failing sectors of the ANC's South Africa – rail traffic and strikes. It will be of no use bringing in qualified people to sort out the power mess, while leaving the other areas of South Africa struggling with incompetent ministers and even worse employees. We can't forget that the cadre deployment policy still exists, so nothing much will change where real change is needed – safety and security and good policing, control over rampant illegal strikes and the myriad other sectors that are crippled. This is the nub. South Africa's numerous sectors cannot operate unilaterally. None of them exist in a vacuum. Holistically South Africa will fail by bringing in merit as a yardstick for some sectors, but not in others. It doesn't make sense.