

Mamphela Ramphele:

Speaking For The Voiceless... Standing For The Marginalised

By Anna Majavu



Mamphela Ramphele Businesswoman, medical doctor, academic, founder member of the Black Consciousness Movement
Photo: Gallo Images

Businesswoman, medical doctor, academic, founder member of the Black Consciousness Movement with Steve

Bantu Biko, and author of several books, Mamphela Ramphele has emerged as South Africa's leading voice of the voiceless.

Recently voted the country's top intellectual in a poll conducted by 'The Weekender' newspaper, Ramphele has not shied away from making statements that challenge the government. She was one of the first to blame the government for the xenophobic violence that swept the country in May last year, telling Agence France Presse that South Africa was not "conducting itself in a proper human rights manner".

"Government should do much to educate South Africans about other Africans," Ramphele told AFP, adding that "Home Affairs department officials treat our African migrants as a nuisance and without respect," she added.

Ramphele has also been critical of the South African government, saying Pretoria was most to blame for "promoting a culture of impunity in Zimbabwe".

She told a panel discussion at the University of Cape Town that South Africa

was "messing up big time in some areas". At the same meeting, Ramphele criticized ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema's threat to "kill for Zuma", saying it was problematic that Zimbabweans and South Africans had handed too much power over to leaders. She urged the audience to recognize that they had the "power to set the limits of impunity".

In an initiative that is certain to ruffle feathers Ramphele plans now to go to court in support of axed national director of public prosecutions, Vusi Pikoli. Along with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Ramphele has asked the high court to admit her as 'amicus curiae' or a friend of the court in support of Pikoli's bid for reinstatement.

She is often critical of the government, and is a favourite of the Congress of the People who nominated her recently for a position on the SABC interim board, supported by the DA and ID.

The nomination evoked fierce debate, with all the opposition parties eventually withdrawing their support for the entire interim board over the ANC's refusal to agree to Ramphele's nomination. She did not make it on the final list.

She also criticized the government when,

earlier this year, she chaired a group of 35 influential people who debated South Africa's present and came up with three likely scenarios for the future. Dubbed the "Dinokeng Scenarios", the group found that "weak state capacity, and an unwillingness, or inability on the part of ordinary citizens to challenge and engage government" had led to a situation where South Africa was in the grip of unemployment, poverty, safety and security problems, and poor public health and education delivery.

Ramphele and her group concluded that South Africans could continue to "walk apart", with problems escalating, resulting in protests that the state would clamp down on. Or citizens could "walk behind", with the state taking more control, and becoming more authoritarian. The third Dinokeng scenario was one promoted by Ramphele, where citizens would "walk together" and lead a strong civil society that would "become the key to fixing social problems that will become deadly if unaddressed".

In announcing the outcome of the project, Ramphele urged ordinary people to take control. "South Africans are standing at a crossroads.

Each one of us, citizens and leaders, must choose how we walk forward.

Through the steps we take, we will create our future" she said.

Speaking on radio in February this year, Ramphele accused the ANC of "seducing" and "demobilising" civil society through the promises of jobs and houses in 1994. "They had underestimated what it will take to run a modern democracy with the size of the economy that South Africa is, but also there was a gross underestimation across the whole society of what it would take to deal with the legacy of the past" she said.

She questioned why too the citizens of South Africa regarded themselves as "unimportant".

"How can a citizen of a democracy be a small cog in the wheel? We regard ourselves as citizens as insignificant. What's important are the people who are running around with blue lights. So what we need is really an education in citizenship, in what it means to be a citizen of a democracy. You are the owner. You take charge. That's the only way

democracy is going to become strong" Ramphele said.

Dishing out praises...shying away from political affiliation although she is often critical of the government, and was nominated by COPE the SABC board position, Ramphele does not seem to fall into any of the party political factions.

She does not mince words in jumping to the defence of anyone's human rights, but she also hands out praise where it is due – along with advice.

Ramphele has also praised the government at times – and dished out advice to them. After the ANC and President Jacob Zuma won the elections in April this year and announced an enlarged cabinet criticized by many as "bloated", Ramphele praised Zuma. She said then that Zuma

every South African has some duty to perform, and that they should do this well. She urged the media, at the sixth annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town, not to "underperform". "The watchdog, investigative, and educational roles of the media need further impetus," Ramphele said.

She also told police, at the same lecture, to slim down. "How have we come to the current disturbing trend of overweight police officers with their uniforms literally bursting at the seams? How can they catch criminals when they look so unfit?" she asked.

In an earlier interview with GROWTH, Ramphele, Chairperson of Circle Capital said the Broad-based Black Economic


away, but Ramphele opened her window and listened while Meinert described how TSiBA was in great need of a skilled patron who could help the college secure enough funds to continue offering its programmes well into the future.

Just a few years later, Ramphele had helped TSiBA broker a R15 million BEE deal with JP Morgan Worldwide Securities Services South Africa. Under the deal, TSiBA was loaned enough money from JP Morgan to buy a 15% stake in JP Morgan. With the companies share price rising from 28 US dollars per share at the time the deal was struck to 35 US dollars now, TSiBA said the deal would help a great deal in ensuring the school's sustainability well into the future.

She is not uncritical of broad based Black economic empowerment (BBBEE) though. She said in May that BBBEE needs to be completely overhauled so that it benefits not only a small elite, but the majority of South Africans. And speaking on Lotus FM earlier, she said BBBEE was not being used for its intended purpose, which was to "add to the economic activities that are already there".

"Not we slice and sub-divide the small cake that's there among a few people so that more people become wealthy. That's the kind of BEE that I would like to see stopping" Ramphele said.

A unique intellectual – Ramphele is respected and adored by both the educated and non-educated alike because of her ability to straddle and reach out to both at any given time. She started life as a medical doctor, working closely among rural communities. Under apartheid repression and banning orders, she set up clinics in different townships as far apart as Tzaneen in Limpopo and King William's Town in the Eastern Cape.

In her autobiography 'Across Boundaries', Ramphele says: "It was not the desire to serve which influenced my career choice, but the passion for freedom to be my own mistress in a society in which being black and woman defined the boundaries within which one could legitimately operate." She has used this freedom to benefit more people than can be counted. Over the past 18 months Ramphele has consolidated her reputation as a champion for the people and a voice for the voiceless stimulating vibrant debate about issues outside of the ruling party. The good news is that as the 62 year old Ramphele heads towards the age when many others would be retiring, there is no sign that she is planning to slow down 

(Anna Majavu is a political journalist of the Sowetan newspaper in Parliament)

"It was not the desire to serve which influenced my career choice, but the passion for freedom to be my own mistress in a society in which being black and woman defined the boundaries within which one could legitimately operate"

was merely "responding to the reality" of needing more people to lead service delivery.

She also praised the new Ministry of human settlements, which replaced the ministry of housing. "We have created monsters all over South Africa of huge RDP housing settlements without any texture of what life is about. Tokyo Sexwale [the new minister] will get it right," she said.

Ramphele also welcomed Angie Motshekga's appointment as Minister for Basic Education, saying that the Ministry had desperately needed someone with the "political clout to be able to get teachers to perform better".

Her powers of incisive political analysis are well known, and have been well rewarded over the years. Ramphele has been a director of IDASA, a board member of Anglo American and Transnet, the first Black person to head the University of Cape Town as Vice Chancellor in the late nineties, and one of the five managing directors of the World Bank.

But it is not these titles and positions, but the activist in Ramphele that makes her the voice of the voiceless. She insists that

Empowerment (BBBEE) needs to be completely overhauled so that it benefits not only a small elite, but the majority of South Africans. But above all, Ramphele is passionate about encouraging ordinary people to get involved with ensuring that their children have the best possible education. Recently, Ramphele said that parents must organize themselves to go to schools every day and lock the gates at 8am, so that absent teachers would not be able to get in and have their pay docked.

Ramphele is also open to listening to proposals from complete strangers – as long as these proposals are about quality education for Black children. She is a patron of the Tertiary School in Business Administration (TSiBA) – a five year old non-profit school that offers a fully funded Bachelor of Business degree for previously disadvantaged students with leadership potential.

TSiBA's managing director Leigh Meinert told GROWTH that while parked at a petrol station a few years back, she recognized Ramphele, who she had never met. Barefoot, she ran over to Ramphele's car, and knocked on her window. Many people would have driven