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## Unravelling the cryptic Ramaphosa

A many-sided and gifted politician still remains in the shadows, writes **ADRIAN HADLAND**

suspect there are quite a few people who continue to hope that one day Cyril Ramaphosa will somehow ascend to the highest political office in the land.

Certainly in the early 1980s, such was his command over the negotiating process, his stellar reputation among ordinary people and his relationship with Mandela, that he seemed a virtual shoo-in for the job as president-in-waiting.

Not for the first time, political commentators have been caught napping by the opaque world of ANC internal politics, and Thabo Mbeki argued in the final stretch to lay claim to the title of Mandela's heir.

Those of us who remember Ramaphosa at the height of his art wonder what it will take to bring him back into contention.

Searching for love in the wrong place ...

**CYRIL RAMAPHOSA**  
Anthony Butler  
(Jacana Press)



won't stand for an elected position unless he's almost certain of victory.

In the current uncertain and divided climate that is the majority party, that was never going to be the case, this time round. And so he waits, and so do we.

Certainly, Anthony Butler makes a strong case for Ramaphosa's claim on the top job.

"Ramaphosa's political history, consistency and personality make him one of a very small number of credible candidates to lead the divisions opened up by the battle

between Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma", Butler argues.

In addition, Ramaphosa is "uniquely able to build on the moral authority (of the constitutional settlement) to restore life to the practice of democracy".

He is well placed to drive forward the black economic empowerment that he "both understands and champions". His ascension to president would ensure a visible ethnic rotation of power as many leaders consider it "unwise to choose a third Xhosa president in a row".

Butler suggests Ramaphosa's appeal cuts across racial lines to an unusual degree, and he may be uniquely able to engage with whites.

He has been strong on HIV/AIDS and "is probably the best foreign policy president South Africa could muster, equally respected and influential on the international left, in the capitals of the West, and in

Africa and the South".

That is a long string of recommendations, especially in a biography too critical to be hagiographic.

Butler writes, for instance, how Ramaphosa was outmanoeuvred and eventually evicted from media, hotel and casino group Johnnie by Hoshen Consolidated Investments (HCI) heavyweight Marcel Golding and Johnny Copejyn.

In the end, Ramaphosa was left slithering and empty-handed.

"Frankly speaking, I didn't have skin in the game," he put poetically said, referring to the fact that his own money was not invested in Johnnie.

The second tale of Ramaphosa's strategic defeat concerns his failure to become ANC deputy president in 1994. He was so disappointed by this, Butler writes, that some close acquaintances believed he decided to quit politics altogether.

sulked for days after news of Mbeki's appointment and boycotted the swearing-in of the Cabinet.

Butler is rapidly developing a reputation as one of South Africa's most pre-eminent historians and this new work adds significantly to his authority in the field.

I found interesting the manner in which Ramaphosa created the National Union of Mineworkers at a time when several unions were competing to represent them.

Somewhat Ramaphosa, the son of a policeman and with no apparent credentials, was able to persuade parties to join him, resulting in the country's most powerful and popular trade union. Not for the first or for the last time, Ramaphosa's supreme bargaining and persuasive skills came to the fore.

I was also not aware of Ramaphosa's religious roots nor of how he developed his public persona and his debating skills evangelising

with the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Only much later in life did he join the ANC.

Both the NUM and the SCM are still going, constituting further evidence, Butler points out, of Ramaphosa's capacity to establish durable institutions.

There are one or two weaknesses within the biography, not least the fact that Ramaphosa is a relatively young man (56) and his life story is far from over. In addition, while the comprehensive details of Ramaphosa's political life are evident, the work is short on personal information. Though he married three times, we are told almost nothing of his partners' lives and interests. His children are mentioned in passing right at the end of the book.

Though Butler admits he gained no access to his subject, other than a corrected manuscript, on account of Ramaphosa's deep-rooted demand for privacy, this still means great acres of personal terrain are left unrevealed.

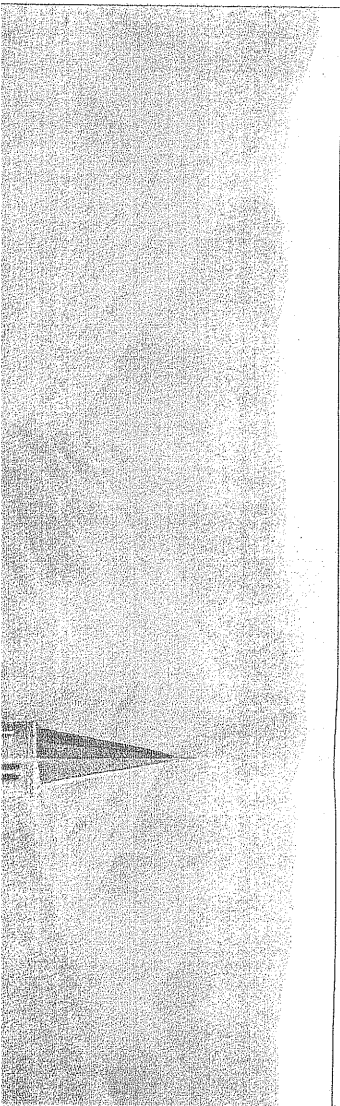
A shortage of personal knowledge inevitably leads to a lack of empathy. You don't get the idea that Butler really understands his subject. Not that admiration is a hallmark of good biography, but Butler seems, on occasion, to quite dislike Ramaphosa. He is described as deceitful, scheming, opaque and the owner of "an irresistibly charming grin behind which almost any emotion could be concealed".

Ramaphosa emerges from this work with his claim on the big title amply fortified.

As Butler says, his suitability for the highest office is evident. But does he want it?

Dr Adrian Hadland is a director at the Democracy and Governance research programme at the Human Sciences Research Council. He writes here in his personal capacity.

Still standing



*Across My Desk*  
VIVIEN HELLER

These are some of the books that landed on our Book Editor's desk this week. Some will be reviewed later.



*Portrait of a Village*, with text and pictures by Annaliese Mouton (Village Life). The little Overberg town of Stanford was once the business hub for the area, but became an almost forgotten place as it was overtaken in importance by Hermanus and Gansbaai. Today re-invented by writers after months of hard work and it is a

A PARTISAN'S DAUGHTER  
Louis de Bernieres  
(Janrell Secker)

