

BOOK REVIEWS

Kgalema Motlanthe: The Situation? A Political Biography

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“To volunteer leadership is the antithesis of democracy” (p. 37)

Ebrahim Harvey offers what some have called a hagiography, but, if one squints hard enough, a man which many young people like myself know very little about, emerges from the pages and his life story yields great insight and divulges a tale of a stoic, pious, complicated and dutiful member of the ANC. In declaring the preface Harvey made known his respect and admiration for Motlanthe, and his attempt to distance himself so as to produce a text which would be both critical and credible (p. x). He further hoped that the book will enable the public to get to know and understand Kgalema, “very much better than before”. Harvey declared that he would be fiercely honest, whatever the research uncovered, and “comprehensively unpack the dream itself, within which Motlanthe’s politics are situated” (p. xi). “With any political biography the author has to strike a fair balance between praising strengths and criticising failures” (p. xiv), alas from my reading, Harvey failed to achieve his own objective in this regard. I found myself desperately trying to silence (sometimes root) his veneration of Motlanthe in the pages as he vehemently crafted Motlanthe’s beautification manuscript. Harvey’s work would be described as a “critical” biography, its objectives are to analyse and explain rather than describe the subject, but biographies are often complex combinations.

In 2009 Motlanthe is quoted to have said, “In the struggle for liberation you do what you have to and can do. If you end up a leader it must be accidentally and not as a result of an ambitious goal that singularly drives you” (p. 257). And, in 2012 when the ANCYL wore T-shirts bearing his face as the next

president he rebuked them (p. 344). Through a Machiavellian lens, Motlanthe would be ambiguous and possibly flounder as a leader as, “irresolute princes, to avoid present dangers usually follow the way of neutrality and are mostly ruined by it”. Motlanthe’s reserved, measured and cognisant demeanor when considered with Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If” that he much enjoys; is possibly his trump card, but with hindsight it has turned out to be his Achilles heel. But who is this sage affectionately known as Mkhuluwa by those close to him? Kgalema Petrus Motlanthe a child of an Alexandrian tenant, was born on the 19th of July 1949 to Louis Mathakoe Motlanthe and Masefako Sophia Madingoane, and has two younger brothers (p. 3). He grew-up in Alexandra attended school at Pholosho Primary, an Anglican Missionary School, in 1956 at age eleven his parents were forcibly removed from Alexandra to Meadowlands (p. 8). Harvey writes that Motlanthe’s time at the Anglican School and as an altar boy had a huge influence on him but, but from about 1970 when he was 21, “he spent less time in church activities, more with soccer, and increasingly got into politics, specifically with the ANC” (p. 14). Motlanthe could have been a priest, as he was awarded a bursary to go study in Swaziland, but the Bantu Affairs Department turned down his application to leave the country in 1964 (p. 16). In 1969 he got a job in the Johannesburg city Council’s commercial unit, this is where he met Stan Nkosi who would be his closest friend and comrade in years to come (p. 21).

Motlanthe’s political career is most interesting and richly detailed by Harvey. By 1977 his political consciousness had overruled his religious beliefs (p. 18); he and others formed a group and established contact with the ANC (banned in April 1960), joined MK and recruited ANC sympathisers. In 1974 at age twenty-five, Motlanthe had begun taking MK recruits out of South Africa to Mozambique and Swaziland, but through information elicited from tortured comrades, his whereabouts were disclosed and he was arrested on April 13, 1976 under the Terrorism Act for MK activities (p. 28). He began his 10 year sentence in Robben Island on August the 2nd, 1977. His style of leadership was noticed by many on the Island, his foresight, pragmatism and ability to analyse problems brilliantly and evoke caution in others still characterise him (p. 38). His interest in political education burgeoned whilst on the Island, and Harvey details the “iNqindi versus Marxism” debated which circulated the cells in 1978 (p. 53).

Motlanthe’s personal and political growth is evident in the pages, as he grappled and combined African nationalism and socialism, enmeshed with

the political trajectory and maturity of the ANC. His relationship with his then wife Mapula suffered as a result of his imprisonment. She became estranged and later had an affair, but they patched things up for a while, until their divorce in 2012. He was released from prison in April 1987 and in June joined NUM as an education officer; an industrious employee especially when he became acting general secretary in 1992 (p. 72). Motlanthe had to adjust his “lofty ideas from the Island” to the reality of what NUM was up against, and NUM had to adjust to his measured stance, which was very different to Ramaphosa and Mantashe’s aggression (p. 81). It was in political education and teaching miners the history of the ANC and the labour movement that Motlanthe made his biggest mark in NUM (p. 88). He never operated solely as a unionist, he wore several hats: NUM, Cosatu, ANC and SACP for many years (p. 91). He pulled out of the SACP central committee after he became secretary-general of the ANC in 1997. His measured; discussant style of leadership was not always appreciated by NUM employees, as some saw this as a sign of indecisiveness (p. 114). Mantashe described Motlanthe as a man, “that fakes weakness...but his unassuming character is both a strength and a weakness” (p. 118).

Motlanthe served two terms as secretary-general of the ANC from 1997 to 2002 and 2003 to 2007, and in typical style was reluctant to rise to the occasion (p. 124). During Motlanthe’s second term as SG, Thabo Mbeki marginalized him, but Motlanthe denies this, he was also heavily vexed by the lack of accountability of cadres and the ANC deployment to government (p. 130). Harvey provides rich detail about this period of Motlanthe’s life and Motlanthe supposedly, reluctantly held his tongue on many issues where he disagreed with Mbeki (p. 155). Once again, some in the ANC thought he pondered too long on issues, but Motlanthe saw his position as SG as one that required him to, “think very hard and find means to intervene...and marshal arguments which would hold things together in the ANC” (p. 157).

Plato’s simile of the cave comes to mind when reading of Motlanthe, as his SG reports tended to stress the ANC’s biggest weaknesses and dangers; he was vexed that some saw the ANC as a gateway to personal riches (p. 213) in his last address as SG he openly criticised the NEC and high ranking leaders for engaging in factionalist activities (p. 223). At the June 2012 Harold Wolpe memorial lecture Motlanthe stated, “the ANC will denigrate further if it fails to carry out a rigorous self-critical review of what eighteen years of its rule have really achieved” (p. 349). Gevisser commented that Motlanthe’s

role in the ANC can be likened to a calling, “with a responsibility to lead the people because you can see further than them and it is your responsibility to educate them” (p. 300). “The ANC must go back to the masses, and restore its credibility among them and their faith in it. The people must feel the ANC is their instrument” (p. 338).

Chapter six is a chapter that many people would be familiar with as the factionalism and sediments in the ANC rose to the surface for the nation to see, and most people abruptly came to know of a chap called Kgalema. Motlanthe, a man who has big qualms and reservations about the process of cadre deployments (p. 235), in September 2008, was deployed to the most influential position in the country; the first citizen. Harvey in grappling with Motlanthe’s stance on political deployment in chapter six, seems not to garner Motlanthe’s own feelings about being a deployed cadre, perhaps Motlanthe saw himself as being skilled and right to fill the “casual vacancy” as the country’s president; a “reluctant president”. Harvey speculated that the ANC needed someone on the new NEC whom both factions trusted and Motlanthe had tenacious abilities to mediate between the still-warring groups (p. 242). He became an MP on the 20th of May, 2008, a minister on the 12th of July and South Africa’s third president on the 25th of September (p. 244).

In 2008, Motlanthe was deployed as the man needed for the job and he filled the “casual vacancy”. In 2011 Steven Friedman commented, “he found himself in a situation where if he really wanted to make a mark they would make life hell for him” (p. 81). His stoic demeanour and old school principles prevented him to do what was necessary to ensure that in Manguang, his stint filling the “casual vacancy” could offer him a more permanent position as the first citizen in 2014.

In Chapter 9, Motlanthe’s gait on his Lipizzaner stallion picks-up to a gallop, over the hedges and under the branches, in a mad dash to the finish line, where he jumps off; takes-off his hat, and positions himself on the pedestal. At this moment, Harvey kneels and extends his hands out in supplication; offering his beautification log-book to Walter Sisulu and the nation. Harvey’s work requires three pinches of salt, if not the whole spoon.