

Book Review

Super President: The History and Future of Executive Power in South Africa

Bhaso Ndzendze

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Bhaso Ndzendze describes South Africa as a country that is ‘either ... in stagnation, crisis or even decline.’¹ This negative but warranted characterisation of the contemporary South African (SA) political landscape is the motive for his well-researched book, *Super President: The History and Future of Executive Power in South Africa*.

The title illustrates the author’s view that “super presidents” (political leaders who had ministerial experience before they led cabinets, and assumed ministerial roles while serving as prime minister or president) characterised the executive political leadership¹ in South Africa before 1994, and his belief that the same can be true for future executive political leaders in South Africa. For Ndzendze, the post-1994 ‘presidents without portfolio,’² from Nelson Mandela through to the current incumbent, Cyril Ramaphosa, occupy the time between the SA past and the kind of future for which he advocates. According to Ndzendze, these presidents could and should have, but failed to exploit the power at their disposal to pursue the realisation of the potential of South Africa fully.

With his knowledge of and insights into historical and contemporary examples from home and abroad, Ndzendze assesses the executive political leadership in South Africa after 1994 with a view to shaping a different kind of leadership for the future. For the author, leadership, and more specifically, the post-1994 presidential leadership in South Africa, sits at the heart of the ‘stagnation, crisis or ... decline’ in the country.³

Ndzendze outlines four broad reasons scholars and commentators have given over the last three decades for why SA presidents ‘have ... fallen short of their ... commitments to the nation’⁴. Firstly, their ANC comrades prevented them from leading effectively.⁵ Secondly, their commitment to ‘leading and affecting policy’ is questionable because they were ‘aloof’, ‘undereducated’, or more ‘committed to their own power and self-enrichment’ than they were to ‘the discharge of their duties’.⁶ Thirdly, they were leading a party that has a ‘poor grasp of statecraft’, and finally, ‘the challenges [are] so vast – and

¹ “Throughout this review, the terms “executive political leadership” or “leaders” refer specifically to the offices of prime minister and/or president.

² “Whether it is accurate to say that all SA presidents after 1994 had ‘commitments to the nation’, meaning each president was sincerely invested in promoting the collective good, is questionable. It would have been more appropriate if the author had referred to the presidents’ “constitutional mandates”.

the apartheid inheritance so stubborn – that there is no hope of a single administration undoing centuries of selective development.⁷

Ndzendze criticises these historical explanations for failing to point to what he calls ‘a cross-cutting structural solution.’⁸ *Super Presidents* advances what Ndzendze believes to be such a solution, as he argues that, ‘to affect change and institute transparent and effective [political] leadership, SA presidents,³ regardless of [political] party, should assume ministerial positions within their own cabinets.’⁹ Ndzendze goes so far as to advance this argument as ‘the remedy’ for South Africa.¹⁰ How precisely having a president assume ministerial leadership positions, alone, remedies the post-1994 challenges cited in the preceding paragraph, some of which inhibit democratic governance, is unclear.

Ndzendze makes three observations or arguments in support of his proposal that SA presidents after 1994 adopt ministerial leadership positions. Firstly, their predecessors did so – and they did so effectively. Secondly, there are states in the contemporary world that Ndzendze believes are comparable to and more complex than South Africa, in which former (in the case of Canada and Nigeria) or existing (in the case of India and Nigeria) executive political leaders have served or still serve as ministers. Thirdly and finally, Ndzendze argues that the SA Constitution allows the president to play such a dual leadership role.¹¹

To communicate and structure his arguments in support of his proposal, the author divides the book into three parts. In the first, ‘President without Portfolio’ (Chapters 1–5), Ndzendze presents his problem statement. He describes and assesses SA presidencies after 1994 to a degree that supports the central argument in his book. He points to the problem underlying the ‘stagnation, crisis or ... decline’¹² in and of South Africa, namely the failure by SA presidents after 1994 to heed the lessons of their predecessors, and to take up ministry leadership positions in their cabinets. Furthermore, according to Ndzendze, it has not helped that these same presidents, unlike their predecessors, had no prior ministerial experience – a truth that cannot be separated from the SA apartheid past, especially as far as it concerns SA administration immediately after 1994.

In the second part of the book, ‘Super Precedent’ (Chapters 6–9), Ndzendze draws on three sources to help make his case: historical executive leadership examples from the Union of South Africa (1910–1961) and the Republic of South Africa (beginning in 1961); contemporary foreign executive leadership examples from India, Nigeria, and Canada; and finally, ‘the oldest ongoing presidency in the world, the United States [of America].’¹³

Altogether, Ndzendze believes these sources help shape a model for ‘how presidential power should be used in South Africa.’¹⁴ He refers to each example above as a “super precedent” because, according to him, the examples all set a standard for what the future

³ Of interest, Ndzendze’s proposal concerning SA presidents after 1994 is as applicable to SA deputy presidents who, he argues, have played largely ceremonial or peripheral roles in the SA political leadership after 1994 (with the possible exception of Thabo Mbeki). According to the SA Constitution, deputy presidents must fulfil the duties of the president when the latter is absent or unable to do so, and they must also assist the president in the execution of his functions.

of executive power in South Africa should look like. If ‘Presidents without Portfolio’¹⁵ (Part 1) is Ndzendze’s problem statement, and essential to understanding the failure of SA presidents after 1994 to fulfil their so-called ‘commitments to the nation’¹⁶ and the resulting political and socio-economic problems of the country – then ‘Super Precedent’¹⁷ (Part 2) is the proposed solution. Part 2 informs and shapes a model that will make for “super presidents” to the degree that the incumbent South African president and future SA presidents apply the model to their executive political leadership.

Having described and assessed SA ‘presidents without portfolio’¹⁸ after 1994 in Part 1 of the book and presented the reader with historical, South African, and more recent, foreign examples of executive political leadership that set a ‘super precedent’,¹⁹ Ndzendze concludes his book in Part 3. Here, he points to the ‘super possibilities’²⁰ for the future of executive power in South Africa.

In the first instance, he argues in Chapter 10 that it is possible for the ‘super precedent’²¹ to be followed because the SA Constitution does not prevent the president from taking up a ministerial position. In the second instance, he recommends, in Chapter 11, ‘which portfolios future presidents ... should and should not consider.’²² Drawing on the American experience, he specifically advises future SA presidents against leading foreign affairs because giving domestic governance the necessary attention is a prerequisite for effective foreign policy formulation and execution.

Among the advantages that Ndzendze lists for a South African president occupying a ministerial position are ‘more realistic target setting’, ‘more thoughtful decision-making’, the accumulation of ‘*direct* experience on a portfolio’ [original emphasis], and increased agility.²³ It is questionable whether these potential advantages would be achievable or whether they would result in the attainment of any significant and sustainable collective or national value if the president in question lacked competence or ethics, or both.

Democracy, something to which Ndzendze fails to give sufficient attention in his book, depends on democratic leadership *and* citizenship. Ndzendze’s exclusive focus on presidential authority and power (first evident when he introduces the notion of presidents as ‘saviours and helpers’ on page 1 of his book)²⁴ leaves no room for considering the cultures, worldviews and actions of eligible voters in South Africa who possess the constitutionally ordained power to decide who the presidents of their country will be.

Whatever the counterarguments to Ndzendze’s proposal in *Super President* might be, the author’s inquiry into and commentary on the use of presidential power in South Africa nevertheless make a valuable and timely contribution to the study and practice of political leadership in South Africa after 1994. The book offers value, if only because it adds to ongoing discussions about what has been and still is wrong with political leadership in post-1994 South Africa, and why, and the debates about how to bring about positive change.

The book is timely because the author discusses, in part, the historical and contemporary relations between South African presidents and their cabinet ministers. There is no denying that these relations require urgent rearrangement and improvement in present-day South

Africa. Furthermore, the author writes about the interaction between SA presidents and their ministers, and the president's power relative to his cabinet and its ministries, more specifically, at a time when South Africa is governed by its second and potentially more contentious Government of National Unity (GNU).

Part of the value of Ndzendze's book lies in the author's willingness to acknowledge and study history, and then to teach that history to readers as a way of shaping our understanding of the present and what the future could look like. In Ndzendze's words, 'History can serve as a prologue, warning us about what to avoid ... The past is also a revelation of possibility and human capability, for both good and bad.'²⁵ In making the case for SA presidents after 1994 to take up ministerial positions, Ndzendze draws firstly on the SA political history before 1994 and, more specifically, on the prime ministers and presidents that formed part of the group he refers to as "super precedents" and "super presidents".

South Africans (individually and collectively) have not dealt sufficiently with the historical responsibility for and trauma resulting from racialised civil governance.²⁶ Consequently, racial tensions and divisions continue to characterise the SA social and political relations.²⁷ Considering these realities, the author's willingness to cite SA executive political leaders before 1994 as examples for the SA presidents after 1994 is bold, courageous, and refreshing, even if the examples have not left this reviewer convinced of the author's thesis.

Even though Ndzendze cites the examples from a purely professional (not a moral) perspective, he, knowingly or not, teaches or reminds readers – especially from South Africa – about the potential to draw positive leadership examples from a racially oppressive leadership. Ndzendze's book points to the failure of SA governments after 1994, beginning with the first, to recognise this potential and to ask what could be learned from SA political leaders before 1994, and which cultural or professional modes could be retained from the previous dispensation to make for a more secure, prosperous and peaceful South Africa.

Craig Bailie 

Bailie Leadership Consultancy

Endnotes

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- 2 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 17.
- 3 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 5.
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- 6 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 5.
- 7 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 5–6.
- 8 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 5–6.
- 9 Ndzendze, *Super President*, i.
- 10 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 15.
- 11 Ndzendze, *Super President*, i.
- 12 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 5.
- 13 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 15.
- 14 Ndzendze, *Super President*, i.
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- 19 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 97.
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- 22 Ndzendze, *Super President*, 16.
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- 27 R Southall, 'The Thorny Issue of 'Race' in South African Politics: Why it Endures Almost 30 Years After Apartheid Ended', *The Conversation*, 24 October 2023. <<https://theconversation.com/the-thorny-issue-of-race-in-south-african-politics-why-it-endures-almost-30-years-after-apartheid-ended-215269>> [Accessed on 5 July 2025]; P Nanthambwe, 'Addressing Systemic Racism in South Africa: A Missio-public Theological Perspective', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 46, 1 (2025), 1–12.

