

COMMENT Where Cyril went wrong – Financial Mail 15 August 2019

Ramaphosa is a capable leader – there’s no doubt about that. But his allegiance to toeing the political line, and not calling the shots when it’s needed, could be the end of him

There are no bad ideas, only great ideas that go horribly wrong. It’s a line I heard recently while watching *30 Rock*, a brilliant US sitcom created by Tina Fey.

It’s a sentiment that’s perhaps also an apt description of Cyril Ramaphosa’s presidency so far. What happened? It all seemed so bright – not so long ago we were chanting “Thuma Mina” with renewed vigour. The markets rallied, the rand strengthened.

Today it’s another story. There’s no similar chant now – only apprehension about what is to come. What happened?

Some people are even, bizarrely, looking back wistfully at Jacob Zuma’s term. Of course, in those days, we didn’t know what we didn’t know. For example, we had no idea of the extent of cash haemorrhaging happening at Eskom, unemployment was awful but not irretrievable, and filling your car with petrol was a little cheaper.

All we had to do, for this comparative piece of mine, was tolerate the occasional house being built in Nkandla, ignore the Guptas as they flew to national key points for their weddings, and shrug when we heard about trains being shipped to us that don’t fit on the tracks.

A small price to pay, you’d think. Ignorance was bliss.

Now, of course, we have a team in the Union Buildings who, we’re told, will “fix things”. They’ll root out corruption at state-owned companies, they’ll ensure we move up the ease of doing business rankings’, they’ll get investment and give us jobs.

But what do we have? A commission of inquiry into just about everything, armed troops in residential areas, and taxpayer money spent on high-priced lawyers in a thousand court cases.

Faith in this crack team is running out. The country doesn’t want to see capable black CEOs being overwhelmed and ultimately quitting under a mountain of unrealistic expectations. It doesn’t want to see more politics.

It’s a pity, because Ramaphosa is a capable leader – there’s no doubt about that. But his allegiance to toeing the political line, and not calling the shots when it’s needed, could be the end of him. He needs to get his hands dirty; he needs to shoot from the hip and lose the nice guy act. He needs to embrace his moniker of Buffalo.

I fear the National Health Insurance Bill may be the straw that breaks the Buffalo’s back. Now, it’s clear that NHI is noble, and the plan is necessary. Nobody can quibble with the notion of quality health care for all.

But this law is being rushed through in a ham-fisted way that will ultimately destroy it.

Two weeks ago, a report emerged detailing the effectiveness of seven NHI pilot projects. It wasn't pretty. The high-level précis was this: people did not receive the care they needed, and the government's ageing health-care equipment isn't able to meet modern needs. But under NHI, there's no plan to remedy this fundamental problem – just to force the private sector to provide its services and equipment, since the state can't manage to fix it.

Until this simple principle is understood, much of this administration's plans are doomed to fail.

But perhaps Ramaphosa's stillborn administration isn't a bad thing. After all, failure creates urgency, which is the one thing that his tenure has conspicuously lacked. What's clear is that the country is getting restless. Staying in limbo is the exact wrong option.