

News24

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With former African Union (AU) Commission chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma back in the country, and available, the impending Cabinet reshuffle should start in earnest. The interesting aspect of how we do reshuffles in South Africa is that the president does not have to account for why he is reshuffling in the first place. Or to explain why he (it's been all men so far) is moving ministers around like he is.

Former president Thabo Mbeki was not inclined to dabble in reshuffles and did just one in a 10-year period. President Jacob Zuma has already reshuffled three times. Because he does not give reasons, media and political analysts have commented that Zuma shuffles his decks just to keep everyone on their toes, not knowing what he would do next.

The other reason given is that, because his political allegiances have changed so much, he constantly needs to update his Cabinet to accommodate new friends and discard fresh enemies. Zuma has consistently sent the message that Cabinet appointments are his and his alone, and he does not like to be second-guessed.

He views Cabinet appointments as his prerogative, as his rancour about being forced to reverse the appointment of Des van Rooyen as finance minister after four days illustrated. That unprecedented moment in December 2015, when his fellow ANC top six members forced him to move Van Rooyen, will register strongly as he ponders the current reshuffle.

Reshuffle speculation

Publicly, Zuma has never said he was going to reshuffle.

But last year, the SA Communist Party said it had intelligence that this was what Zuma was planning and that some of its members in Cabinet would be casualties. The likes of Thulas Nxesi, Blade Nzimande and Jeremy Cronin have, after years of elevating and venerating him, turned against him.

When rumours of a reshuffle started last year, a person close to the president told me it was in fact Nzimande who was responsible for spreading the rumour and sowing panic unnecessarily. But the suspicion that Zuma was moving towards a reshuffle gained ground after former Eskom chief executive officer Brian Molefe was sworn in to Parliament.

The desperation with which the North West ANC springboarded him to Parliament suggested that he was going there for a higher purpose than the back bench. It is hard to imagine that Molefe, who used to earn more than R6m per year at Eskom, would leave his lifestyle in Gauteng to go and settle in Cape Town for a salary of just R1 million. Molefe got a salary of R6.97m and a bonus of R2.47m in the 2016 financial year. This the strongest indication that something is in the offing.

Secondly, the hyped-up celebrations at OR Tambo International Airport on Wednesday to welcome Dlamini-Zuma were notable.

Government officials had said a month ago when the reshuffle speculation was at its peak, that those rumours could not be true because Dlamini-Zuma was still tied to the AU.

Now she is free and ready for deployment.

Changing dynamics

There is a strong belief that Zuma would focus on Treasury and remove either Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan or his deputy Mcebisi Jonas to make way for someone whom he can trust and rely on to carry out his instructions.

But dynamics have changed. It is hard to imagine that the finance minister or his deputy could be removed or shuffled around without touching Communications Minister Faith Muthambi. Parliament last week called for Zuma to reconsider her position after she was found to have overstepped her authority and interfered in SABC board matters.

Although the sentiment was that she should be fired, Parliament decided it did not have the powers to instruct Zuma what to do. Zuma would also have to reckon with the position of his close ally, Social Development Minister Bathabile Dlamini, who can no longer justify her Cabinet position after her incredible bungling of the contract relating to the payment of social grants.

Zuma has so far publicly taken the narrow view that as long as grants were paid on April 1, there was no crisis. But he knows that we would not be here, dealing with such “absolute incompetence” (to quote Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng), if Dlamini had done her work.

Suddenly, matters have become complicated. How do you take out Gordhan, for whom the case for his removal must still be made, and keep Muthambi and Dlamini? And he also has to take into account the threat of a mass resignation by other Cabinet ministers if he touches the finance portfolio.

This is because whatever other portfolios he tampers with, the strong suspicion is that the finance ministry is the ultimate target because it has become a stumbling block owing to its strict insistence on adherence to procurement regulations. This has frustrated many Cabinet ministers, such as Dlamini, who want Treasury to “deviate” from normal processes to accommodate their madness.