

■ POLITICS

Getting to know colourful Nkonyeni

The new KZN MEC has a history of activism and has not escaped the whiff of scandal

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PEGGY Nkonyeni, 58, the new MEC for Public Works and Human Settlements in KZN, is a colourful figure with a history of youth activism that was later tainted by corruption scandals that have followed her for years.

Despite that, she has survived the scandals and political onslaught to stage a stunning comeback like she did on Monday, when KZN's new premier, Sihle Zikalala, surprisingly announced her as part of his 10-member cabinet for the 2019-2024 term.

Days before her announcement, while Independent Media was sniffing for incoming cabinet members from the structures of the ANC in the province, a long-standing member in Durban said: "I'm not sure about others who'll be appointed as cabinet members but I can tell you for a fact that Peggy will be one. That woman is too powerful to ignore when she's a member of the provincial legislature."

Trying to unravel the mystery behind the political clout of the woman, who once faced charges in the so called Amigos case, we went back to the informer to ask what was Nkonyeni's strength that made her indispensable in politics.

The man said Nkonyeni was an activist from her time as a teacher on the Lower South Coast. But someone else from the structures of the party

said she rose on the back of her late husband, activist Ray Nkonyeni.

"While she's failed in other departments like health, she excelled in the department of education as the results in the province started improving under her watch. Mthandeni Dlungwane took over a well-oiled department, from her," said the ANC insider from Durban.

The insider said Nkonyeni rose through the party ranks and her success should not be linked to that of Ray, who was famous for establishing the ANC in the Lower South Africa when the IFP was still ruling the roost in KZN.

Nkonyeni, from Mzumbe, on the South Coast, still has a home in Gamalakhe in Port Shepstone.

"I think while her marriage may have helped her somehow, she was also an activist, good at mobilising. That's why she was later elected to be the treasurer of the ANC during Zweli Mkhize's tenure," the insider said.

Ray Nkonyeni's legacy is being carried by the local municipality, which is named after him.

In a government profile on Nkonyeni, released in 2013, when she was being announced by then KZN premier Senzo Mchunu as education MEC, she was described as a well-travelled person who matriculated at Mbusi High School in Harding.

The profile says between 1989 and 1999 she served as a teacher; she holds



THE new MEC for Public Works and Human Settlements in KZN, Peggy Nkonyeni.

a Secondary Teachers' Diploma.

In 1997 she was appointed chairperson of the Lower South Coast Region of the ANC Women's League.

From 1999 she served as a member of the KZN legislature, where she was later appointed as whip and ANC chairperson of the Parliamentary Women's Caucus. She was also at the forefront of the establishment of the office in the Status of Women in the Premier's Office.

In 2004, she served as a chairperson of committees in the KZN Legislature and was appointed as MEC for Health on November 4, 2004. In 2008, she served as a provincial executive committee (PEC) member for the SACP; also as a PEC member of the ANC KZN Women's League. She was elected and is currently serving as the provincial

treasurer of the ANC and serves as a provincial working committee (PWC) member of the ANC, and in 2009 was appointed as speaker of the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature.

At a fund-raiser of the task team of the ANC in the Lower South Coast region, Mondli Chiliza confirmed that Nkonyeni was their branch member, even though he was not sure of her exact branch.

Others in the party in KZN attribute Nkonyeni's stunning comeback to an effort by Zikalala to mend things with her after she was kicked out of office during the chaotic provincial power struggle in 2016 when Mchunu, who was backed by Nkonyeni, was ousted as provincial chair and later as premier.

Reacting to her appointment, the IFP on Monday said

Nkonyeni was "compromised".

Responding to their comment, Nkonyeni said their response "is always predictable."

"It would have made me very suspicious had they been full of compliments. In being elected as an African National Congress-led government, we have shown that we enjoy the confidence of our people. While I am a member of the SACP, my deployment is by the ANC. My job is to join with my comrades in government to work relentlessly at fighting poverty, inequality and unemployment."

Defending her tenure as the treasurer of the ANC in the province, she said it was no secret that the job of the treasurer is to attract funding for political work.

"Whether at national, provincial or local level we go to people especially in business to ask for their support. Party political fundraising is governed by strict legislation. At every stage of discharging my responsibilities, I was fully accountable to my leadership and acted within the law. From the President down, anybody can have charges brought against them and it is up to our justice system to test the veracity of those claims."

Looking back on her track record in politics, the returning MEC added that she was the first chairperson of the ANC Women's League in her region on the South Coast and that was not linked to her husband.

"I have served in political office in my own right and inspired the confidence of those comrades who chose me to lead them. My family is steeped in politics and that is something to be proud of."