



Publication: Daily Dispatch - Opinion
Title: DA shows little sign of being a government in waiting
Publish date: 04 Apr 2023
Page: 9

Reach: 10889
AVE: R 22419.21
Author: Nkosikhulule Nvembezi



Nkosikhulule Nvembezi Point Of Order DA shows little sign of being a government in waiting

It takes an abysmal president to make the opposition leader's job to overtake the governing party look easy.

It is the toughest gig in South African politics as the DA loses electoral support in an environment of endemic corruption and widening poverty.

For instance, between the 2016 and 2021 local government elections, the party shed 1.4 million votes; between the 2014 and 2019 national elections, it lost 470,000-odd votes.

John Steenhuisen's conference speech marked out the terrain on which the DA must fight the next election, but the ability to deliver votes is not assured. Under the theme "the moon shot pact to stop ANC-EFF doomsday", he portrayed a picture of a credible alternative to govern one of Africa's largest economies.

Indeed, Steenhuisen's DA continues to struggle to get noticed by a significant percentage

of the electorate until they make a mistake which costs them a by-election or a mayoral chain.

So far, the DA has attacked the ANC government without offering a better alternative.

Whenever it comes up with a better plan, such as accelerating the rollout of renewable energy policies, the government snatches it.

It has all along had ambitions but few policies that speak to the basic needs of the masses, leading to critics saying there is no substance in its offerings.

Any strategy to beat an incumbent party involves appealing to a broad spectrum of voters, which risks being denounced as treason by influential individuals in the DA circles.

While Steenhuisen tried his best to generate excitement among delegates about the prospect of change, he fell short of reassurance that the envisioned change would not alarm

the privileged few and would entice the black majority of voters.

Even his constant reference to the "undeniable implosion" of the ANC as an inevitable event ahead of the much-anticipated 2024 general elections did not do enough.

There were no tangible signs that the DA was the government in waiting to take over from the governing party.

The pledge to prevent an "ANC-EFF doomsday coalition" from taking power is a recognition that, on matters of public trust in government at least, the centre is not where it was when DA sprung up in the 1990s.

However, it is a phrase that can trigger allergic reactions in activists, who associate it with late '90s fight-back campaign tactics.

The broader argument that voters want a government that is prudent with their money while also investing in public services,

is not new but still valid.

The 2021 local government poll indicated some slippage in DA support.

Taken together across the nation, its support in those elections was 21.6% — down from the 24.5% in the 2016 local government polls.

Local elections do not provide a direct comparison with national elections, but they are a useful barometer when reading the political temperature.

In any event, the national picture shows a decline too. In 2019, the DA's support slipped to 20.7% from 22.2% in 2014, and support in its Western Cape stronghold fell from 57% in 2014 to 52% in 2019.

But these lessons have not shaken the DA in the right direction as the party continues to squander most of its promising potential appeal to voters.

In its newly adopted policies, it shies away from clearly outlining its position on employ-

ment equity, affirmative action and broad-based BEE.

Its economic vision is designed to destroy what is left of the ANC's bid to be serious stewards of the economy.

The DA's economic vision includes scrapping the government's two-decade-old temporary jobs scheme and focus instead on skills development that would create a pathway to better paying private sector jobs.

It aims to stabilise the public debt-to-GDP ratio through higher economic growth rates and safeguard the SA Reserve Bank's independence.

The government spends about R3bn a year on the expanded public works programme, which creates jobs in areas such as road maintenance, early childhood development and home-based community care.

It is unclear whether the DA also seeks to scrap the newer and much larger presidential employment stimulus programme,

which has an annual budget of more than R11bn.

There will doubtless be times when Steenhuisen fails to press home his advantages.

He will plod prosaically through moments when the DA faithful crave campaigning poetry.

In recent weeks, the ANC made the opposition task look easy for Steenhuisen by shutting down moves by parliament to hold President Cyril Ramaphosa accountable through public scrutiny of the Phala Phala farm saga.

But it is never easy because the ANC majority in parliament determines the outcome of the crucial motions.

Steenhuisen's job at the party's federal congress was to assure supporters that he would continue making Ramaphosa's evasion of accountability and dithering on taking crucial decisions to advance the country harder in turn. And he has.