



Publication:

SundayTimesEastLondonBusinessTimes - Main

Title: Cyril`s zankqenkqe isn`t of much use at all

Publish date: 21 May 2023

Page: 2

Reach: 6000

AVE:R 100122.00

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Cyril's zankqenkqe isn't of much use at all



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Almost three months after his appointment, electricity minister Kgosientsho Ramokgopa is still devoid of the powers he needs to do his job. And it doesn't look like they will be conferred on him anytime soon, as the government lurches from one crisis to another.

The Lady R row between South Africa and the US is taking up too much of the government's attention. Even André de Ruyter, the former CEO of Eskom, is proving to be a distraction for our leaders as they publicly criticise him for writing a book about his time at the utility. Of course, the media will latch onto any drama in which the government and De Ruyter trade fire, so our attention strays from the real issue: energy security.

As for Ramokgopa, he isn't allowing the situation to affect him. He runs around holding meetings with anyone who cares to invite him. This week he was with car manufacturers again, declaring it was time to take decisive action. It would be funny were it not so serious.

He is a man with a big title but, in actual fact, he is a "supernumerary", a person excess to requirements. The former Bantustans had a lot of those when they were merged with the old apartheid system to create the new government. In the late 1990s, the Eastern Cape public works department had more than 4,000 people with job titles but no actual work. Ramokgopa now fits into that category.

The way he zooms around South Africa just goes to show how cruel his colleagues and boss are. He evokes the archetypal aimless gofer in a village or township – that guy who is always available to run around without hope or purpose. In the Eastern Cape, we call such figures "zankqenkqe".

The word comes from the sound of just scooting around – nkqeeeee, with no responsibility or care.

Zankqenkqes tend to be useful in the courts of

traditional leaders, where they are sent around to deliver messages. And so the zankqenkqe will be puffed up because of his proximity to royalty.

In Zulu-speaking traditional houses, these gofers are given the name "mahlala esangweni", the man who sits by the entrance. He himself is not royalty, but a useful scanner of the environment, and informs the chiefs when visitors approach.

The real bosses in the electricity crisis are public enterprises minister Pravin Gordhan and his minerals & energy counterpart Gwede Mantashe. At the centre is President Cyril Ramaphosa, who attempted a sleight of hand in the full glare of the nation in February when he said he would appoint an electricity minister.

I understand why he did it. The ANC decided at its December conference that Eskom should be moved from public enterprises to effectively fall under the department of mineral resources & energy.

The business sector and many in the ANC balked at the plan, and Ramaphosa was under pressure to ensure Mantashe wasn't given full responsibility for Eskom.

He had to devise the Ramokgopa decoy. But in doing so he gambled with his credibility.

The president has made countless empty promises about ending the blackouts. In the first trimester of this year alone, we have lost more energy than we did all of last year.

This week, Eskom warned we would have an especially rough winter, with significantly higher stages of power cuts. Still, it assures us a collapse of the entire grid is unlikely.

The problem is the Eskom credibility gap grows wider and wider each time it makes one of its hollow promises.

Economist Kenneth Arrow says trust is a "lubricant" for a social system. "It is extremely efficient; it saves a lot of trouble to have a fair degree of reliance on other people's word. Unfortunately, this is not a commodity which can be bought very easily. If you have to buy it, you already have some doubts about what you have bought."

The waning trust is visible in the way the commentariat has reacted to the US-South Africa arms debacle. While many would ordinarily be suspicious of the US version, owing to Washington's image as a global bully, it is easy to be sceptical of our own government. That is what happens when there is a trust deficit.

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