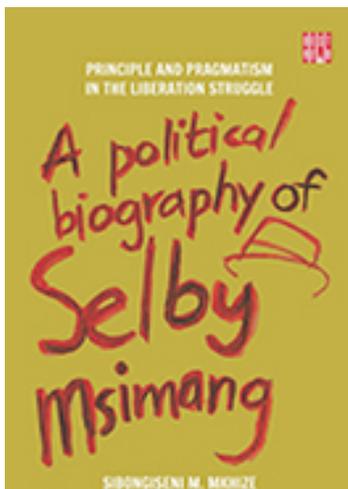


No Linear Path to Liberation

A Comment on the Political Biography of H. Selby Msimang

BONGANI NGQULUNGA 

Johannesburg Institute of Advanced Studies
University of Johannesburg



Introduction

In May 2019, South Africa held the sixth general elections for national and provincial government since the dawn of democracy in 1994. Following a trend that began in 2004, electoral support for the ruling African National Congress (ANC) declined and for the first time fell under the 60% mark. Lying behind the decline in its electoral fortunes were myriad factors including general public perception that associated ANC rule with corruption and incompetence in governance. The results also demonstrated that the political sheen that it (the ANC) had acquired for the role it played in the struggle for democracy and liberation in South Africa had started to wear off. With that, the political narrative that the ANC had propagated so effectively, which characterised South African politics, especially in the black camp, as having been divided between heroes who fought the good fight and

villains who collaborated with the oppressive apartheid system was also being contested.

In the midst of this contestation and relook of South African political history, Sibongiseni Mkhize published in 2019 a political biography of Henry Selby Msimang. As Mkhize points out in the introduction, Msimang was a founding member of the ANC in 1912, which was followed by decades of involvement at the forefront of South African politics and public life for seven decades. Despite this impressive history of participation in the country's political and civic life, Msimang, as his biographer notes, has become 'a figure of neglect, who hardly features at all in the grand historical narrative of South Africa's liberation' (Mkhize, 2019: 1). Mkhize seeks to make amends for this neglect by giving an insightful and impressive account of a public life of one of the most enigmatic political figures of South Africa's 20th century politics. I use the word enigmatic to underscore the complexity of Msimang's long career in public life. Having begun his career when African nationalism was forged and solidified in Bloemfontein in 1912, Msimang's long history of political involvement saw him abandoning the ANC to become a founding member of the Liberal Party in the early 1950s, which was followed two decades later by yet another political turn to Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha in which he was both founder and high ranking member from the 1970s until his death in 1982. Mkhize provides various explanations for these political zigzags, some convincing and some not so convincing. I discuss these explanations and other issues in the remainder of the review.

Structure and Themes of Discussion

The primary focus of Mkhize's book is Msimang's long career in public life. It follows a chronological order of his political career, starting with his involvement in the ANC from its founding in 1912, an

event he attended as probably the youngest participant. Mkhize provides an insightful account of his subject's participation in various structures of and activities organized by the ANC, including serving as a member of a committee that raised funding to send a deputation to England to protest the 1913 Natives Land Act. When Msimang and his young family lived in the town of Bloemfontein between 1917 and 1921, he got himself involved by leading various community struggles. His civic activism exposed him to the plight that workers in Bloemfontein faced, which resulted in his active engagement in their struggles. For his leadership in community and labour struggles, Msimang was imprisoned in Bloemfontein—apparently his first taste of the state repressive measures directed at those who were considered to be challenging the existing social and political order at the time. Realising that worker struggles could succeed only if they were organized into strong trade unions, Msimang became one of the founder members of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU).

Judging by Mkhize's account, Msimang's active public life in Bloemfontein did not stop him from getting involved in the politics of the ANC. On the contrary, he utilized the experience he gained in trade unionism to become the ANC's spokesperson on labour and economic matters during the 1920s and 1930s. Mkhize discusses this period in Msimang's political life in chapter 4 of the book. Chapter 5, titled 'Native Representation', addresses African opposition to abolition of the Cape black franchise, which ended in defeat with enactment of the Representation of Natives Act of 1936. Like a number of prominent leaders of the ANC in the 1930s, Msimang waged his opposition to the so-called Hertzog Bills as a leading member of the All Africa Convention (AAC). When the opposition to the so-called Hertzog Bills (in which the Representation of Natives Act was a major part) failed and new forms of African representation in the national legislature were established, Msimang, like other African leaders, participated fully in those structures, including standing to be elected as members of the Native Representative Council (NRC). It was during this period (late 1930s to the 1950s) that Msimang's political involvement shifted to the Natal province, where he struck a political partnership with Allison Wessels George Champion. As Mkhize demonstrates in chapters 5 and 6 of the book, Msimang used his political relationship with Champion to gain a foothold in the politics of Natal, which led to his election as secretary of the ANC in the province as well as a member of the NRC.

It was while serving as leader of the ANC in the province that he came to terms with the fraught relations between Africans and Indians in Durban, which ultimately exploded to violent conflict in January 1949. In chapter 8 of the book, Mkhize discusses the ANC's Programme of Action. Although (or perhaps because of) inspired by the Congress Youth League, the Programme of Action deeply divided its leaders, including those from Natal. Some, like Champion, were opposed strongly to the Programme of Action, while others such as Msimang, Mkhize explains, worried about timing of its implementation. Msimang's ambiguous position in respect to the Programme of Action—supporting it but cautioning against timing of its implementation, caught up with him later on. When the Congress Youth League leaders such as Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu started to implement it in earnest by staging popular protests, Msimang abandoned the ANC and joined those who had decided to found the Liberal Party in 1953. Mkhize's explanation for his subject's political 'flip-flopping', which led to his departure is that he (Msimang) was repelled by the influence the Communist Party had on the ANC.

The last three chapters of the book address two main subjects: first, Msimang's defection to the Liberal Party in the 1950s, and secondly, his move to Inkatha in the early 1970s. Chapter 11 pulls together various strands in the book into a conclusion. In this concluding chapter, Mkhize concedes to the fact that Msimang's long political career was marked by contradictions and ambiguities. Msimang, Mkhize argues, should not be judged by the contradictions and ambiguities. If anything,

the contradictions should be expected of someone who ‘traversed the length and breadth of South Africa’s political spectrum and embraced at various times different, often competing, forms of African nationalism’ (Mkhize, 2019: 205). The zigzags in his political career also challenge the “idea of an ‘unbreakable thread’ in the struggle for justice or a suggestion that there is a system or structure in the manner in which political figures pursue their paths, particularly in the struggle for liberation” (ibid.). Though contradictory and ambiguous, Msimang’s long life in politics was defined, as the title of the book suggests, by a politics of principle and pragmatism.

The argument and evidence

One of the main contributions that Mkhize’s book makes to the historiography of the liberation struggle in South Africa is that it tells the story of someone whose political career is difficult to fit into the Manichean narrative of political heroes and villains; those who fought against the apartheid system on one hand and those who collaborated with it on the other hand. In this detailed political biography, Mkhize demonstrates that there was no ‘unbreakable thread’ (p. 205) in the struggle for justice. Msimang’s complex political career, he contends, ‘defies the idea of a linear path taken with a conscious sense of direction and purpose’ (ibid.). Although he followed a convoluted route, Msimang’s political choices, Mkhize contends, were motivated and driven by unwavering fidelity to principle and shaped by pragmatism. This is the theme that runs through the book. It is what gives it coherence.

While this consistent theme is admirable, at times Mkhize uses it to explain away his subject’s inconsistencies and political choices that appear unprincipled. One subject in which Mkhize appears to make excuses for Msimang’s controversial political choices concerns his participation in the ‘Native Representative’ structures that were created through the Representation of Natives Act of 1936. The Act abolished the Cape black franchise and replaced with a system of indirect representation of Africans in the legislature. The indirect representation came into two main forms. The first was election of certain white people to represent Africans in the Senate. The second was establishment of the Natives Representative Council (NRC), which was an advisory body to which a number of Africans was elected. Members of the NRC, referred rather fancily as MRCs, met with representatives of the government, drawn mostly from the Native Affairs department, to give advice on matters that affected Africans. Though initially opposed to abolition of the Cape black franchise and the NRC, Msimang argued for participation in the indirect system of representation when the law was passed. Although he was not alone in calling for participation in the NRC after opposing it, Mkhize presents this significant change in political position as another instance of his subject’s pragmatism. Even when political opinion inside the ANC turned strongly against continued participation in the NRC, Msimang went ahead to stand for election as a member of the NRC in 1948. Mkhize explains away this political ‘flip-flopping’ by his subject as his views evolving in a ‘curiously hybrid direction’ (Mkhize, 2019: 85).

Another subject on which Mkhize tries to justify his subject’s controversial political choices concerns his shift from the African nationalism of the ANC to the liberalism of the Liberal Party and all the way to the Zulu nationalism of Inkatha, which was his final political home. Even for a politician well known for his legendary pragmatism, this political versatility is breathtaking. Mkhize resorts once again to his subject’s long history of pragmatism to explain his decision to become a founding member of Inkatha. He contends that the decision ‘was yet another example of his [Msimang’s] lifelong pragmatism, influenced by the political conditions of the time’ (Mkhize, 2019: 183). Mkhize presents Msimang’s decision to join Inkatha as if it was the only political choice available to him. However, the truth of the matter is that there were other choices, including not participating in politics at all since the ANC had been banned and the Liberal Party dissolved. It is not as if the only

option available to him, for instance, was political exile even though some leaders of the liberation movement chose this difficult route.

There are other points in the book that are debatable. These include Mkhize's analysis of Msimang's relationship with Champion. In recounting the story of their turbulent political relationship, Mkhize clearly takes his subject's side despite available evidence that points to a more complex relationship. As Mkhize correctly points out, Msimang's entrance into Natal politics happened only in the early 1940s when he relocated to the province. When he arrived in the province in the early 1940s, he found that the ANC that had long been dominated by John Langalibalele Dube and his allies was starting to be contested by Champion in anticipation of Dube's retirement. It is worth repeating the point Mkhize makes in the book, which is that Msimang did not have a political base in Natal when he arrived there. This was despite his many decades of public life, which was concentrated mainly in national politics as well as in provinces such as the Free State where he once lived. Champion proved critical in facilitating Msimang's transition into the quarrelsome politics of Natal. It is inconceivable to imagine Champion appointing Msimang as the provincial secretary of the ANC in 1945 and reappointing him to the same position in the late 1940s if he [Champion] thought their positions on important political matters were opposed radically. And yet, Mkhize claims 'Msimang was uncompromising about his belief in following ANC resolutions' (Mkhize, 2019: 145). This statement implies that Champion was not. The cause of their political fallout in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Mkhize suggests, should be attributed primarily to a conservative Champion refusing to abide by the decision of the ANC to implement the 1949 Programme of Action on one hand and Msimang's principled stance to implement ANC's resolutions on the other hand. This interpretation is suspect to say the least. Moreover, Msimang's own record in abiding by resolutions of the ANC is not impressive. For instance, when the ANC asked its leaders to withdraw from participating in the NRC, Msimang defied it by maintaining his membership. Mkhize does not explain the circumstances under which his subject abided by ANC resolutions and those in which he decided the principle of abiding by his party's decisions was not relevant.

A point that is related to Msimang's fallout with Champion concerns his decision to abandon the ANC for the Liberal Party. Mkhize makes an effort to point out that the decision did not strain his relationship with the ANC and its leaders, particularly Albert Luthuli. If anything, Mkhize helpfully points out, Msimang continued to be invited to ANC's events even though he had left. Two points are worth commenting on regarding this matter. The first concerns Mkhize's explanation for his subject's decision to abandon the ANC. He states that Msimang cited the radicalisation of the ANC in Natal as the main reason for his departure. Mkhize also suggests that Msimang might have been driven away by the ANC's perceived proximity to the Communist Party at the time. While his anti-communism was and is well known, what is unclear and Mkhize does not explain is what changed between his support for implementation of the Programme of Action after its adoption in 1949 and 1953 when he joined the Liberal Party. Could it be that his political stance was no so different from Champion's, who had opposed the Programme of Action from the get-go?

I should point out that Msimang was not the only senior leader of the ANC who either left the party or became inactive in the 1950s. Alfred Xuma and James Moroka, respectively the sixth and seventh presidents-general, took a backseat after vacating their leadership positions. In Natal, Champion essentially abandoned the ANC after his defeat by Luthuli in 1951. None of them joined the Liberal Party, not even Xuma and Moroka whose political views may be considered closer to Msimang's. This raises a second matter, which is Msimang's reported liberalism. Mkhize suggests that Msimang's association with liberalism can be traced to the 1920s when he was involved in the Joint Council Movement. The only point that one should mention, perhaps, in this respect, is that a number of senior ANC leaders participated actively in the Joint Council Movement and yet decided not to join

the Liberal Party when it was established. One prominent leader in this connection was Msimang's longtime friend, Selope Thema, whose opposition to the perceived influence of the Communist Party on the ANC led him to establish a faction inside the ANC, which opposed leadership of the ANC by communists and advocated for a return to African nationalism. Once again, it was not as if liberalism was the only political option available to Msimang. It would not have been unexpected, judging by his long association with African nationalism and his closeness to Thema, for him to join the National-Minded group. Instead, he opted for white liberalism.

Finally, because Mkhize's book focuses mainly on his subject's political career, there are certain aspects of his public life that it does not cover sufficiently. Most obvious in this respect is Msimang's status as one of the leading intellectuals of his generation. Msimang was a prolific writer whose published work covered a wide field of different subjects. His columns and opinion pieces can be found in numerous newspapers such as *Umteteli wa Bantu*, *The Bantu World*, *Ilanga lase Natal*, *Inkundla Ya Bantu* and several others for which he was a prominent correspondent. A quick search of his columns for *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper in the 1920s and early 1930s brings up approximately 200 articles written by him. For his role as a leading thinker of his generation, Ntongela Masilela, the preeminent African cultural and intellectual historian, credits Msimang and Selope Thema for inventing social and political constructs such as 'New African', 'New African modernity' and other streams of African political thought (Masilela, 2013: 5-6). This important aspect of Msimang's public life does not come through sufficiently in the book despite it being a significant part of his life as a political figure. Part of the explanation for this insufficient treatment may lie in the sources that Mkhize relied on for the political biography. A closer look shows that he, perhaps for understandable reasons, relied significantly on the Alan Paton Centre J.J.W. Aitchison Collection based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Historical and Literary Papers located at Wits University and other collections such as the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, and the state archives. Although Mkhize uses newspaper archives, the extent of use appears limited considering the available information on his subject contained there, particularly a rich archive of his columns carried in the *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper.

Conclusion

The quibbles I have mentioned in the section above do not and should not take anything away from the outstanding contribution Mkhize's book makes to scholarship. It is not just a fascinating account of the public life of one of the remarkable and complex political figures of the 20th century in South Africa. Through examining the life of one man, Mkhize also provides a rich history of a people and their country. When all is said and done, this book's major contribution may be its challenge to what has become a dominant narrative regarding the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Msimang's long and complex life in politics demonstrates vividly that there was no single path to liberation; there was no, as Mkhize contends persuasively, 'unbreakable thread'. Different people contributed in different ways, some occupying large political stages, while other contributions were made in the obscure and quiet corners of this land. The ambiguities and complexities in Msimang's long career in public life should cause us to question the Manichean view of our past, a world that is inhabited only by political heroes and villains. Mkhize's nuanced discussion of his subject's political life pays attention to these ambiguities and complexities. It is no wonder that it won a prestigious literary award in 2020 for its outstanding contribution to scholarship.

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