

# BOOK REVIEW

**Anthony Butler. *Cyril Ramaphosa: The Road to Presidential Power, Third Edition.*** Woodbridge (UK): Jacana Press, 2019. xvi + 496 pp. Photographs. Endnotes. Index. \$39.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9781847012296.

This third edition of Anthony Butler's biography of Cyril Ramaphosa was published after Ramaphosa became president of South Africa in February 2018. Subsequently, in the National Elections of May 2019, he received a popular mandate in support of his efforts to return South Africa to economic stability and growth following the erratic and kleptocratic years of Jacob Zuma, and he remains the most popular and trusted politician in South Africa today. Even before his ascent to the presidency, Ramaphosa was a fascinating subject for a biography; his latest incarnation as president gives this well-researched and highly readable biography added relevance.

In 2007, Ramaphosa was more famous in South Africa as one of the wealthiest black businessmen in the country than as a politician. Against this background, the first edition of this biography ended with two unanswered questions about his pursuit of the presidency: "Is Ramaphosa up to the job? And does he want it?" (380) If the first remains an open question, Butler seeks to answer the second in the current edition. Based on the new information available to him, he argues that Ramaphosa's desire to capture the top job was clear by 2010.

According to the publishers' blurb, this new edition of *Cyril Ramaphosa: The Road to Presidential Power* is "fully revised and extended." This is not quite accurate. Five of the original six parts—that is, the first twenty chapters dealing with Ramaphosa's origins, upbringing, and career up to 2007—remain essentially as published in the first edition. The major revisions and additions come in the final section, Part Six, where five chapters are added, bringing the total number of chapters from 22 to 27. These chapters pick up the story from the Polokwane Conference where Mbeki was replaced by Zuma as ANC president in December 2007, through the Zuma years, to the end of Ramaphosa's first year as state president in 2019.

Many of the insights into Ramaphosa's character and career in this book are drawn from an extensive list of interviewees, almost all of whom knew him and interacted with him at critical moments. About fifteen names are added

to this list for the new edition, though a few other new informants asked to remain anonymous. In the portrait that emerges, Ramaphosa is described variously as “self-possessed,” “charismatic,” “a relentless worker,” “a perfectionist,” “a natural leader,” “inclusive,” “an ameliorator,” and “unstoppable.” His skill as a negotiator is attributed to the fact that, beneath an affable and urbane exterior, “His own deeper beliefs and opinions mostly remain hidden” (434). Ultimately, Butler suggests, Ramaphosa is “a visionary pragmatist.”

Ramaphosa’s political career is presented in four “waves,” interspersed with periods of introspection and redirection. The fourth “wave”—addressed in the new edition—began in 2008 and culminated in his accession to the presidency. Curiously, the book is subtitled “The Road to Presidential Power” on the flyleaf (and in the publisher’s catalogue), but “The Path to Presidential Power” on the title page. Perhaps this betrays some indecision about the true nature of Ramaphosa’s rise to the Presidency, since a “path” can be more circuitous than a “road.” Certainly, his route to power was far from straightforward. His status as a “latecomer” to membership of the ANC rankled with many of the exile generation, while others were suspicious of his remarkable success as a businessman, his close friendships with members of the white elite—dating back to his time in the late 1970s on the Board of the Urban Foundation (funded by Anglo American)—and his taste for fast cars and other trappings of wealth. Potentially most damaging to his political ambitions was the police massacre of 34 miners at the Marikana platinum mine in August 2011, because his personal investment company, Shanduka, was a significant shareholder in the company that operated the mine. Butler devotes two of the five new chapters to discussing the circumstances surrounding the massacre and how Ramaphosa extricated himself from that particular jam.

In his life and career, Ramaphosa has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to reinvent himself, from young student Christian, bible in hand, to Black Consciousness activist, from trade unionist to ANC spokesperson, and from multi-millionaire businessman to state president. Butler’s insightful biography allows us to follow his journey, and to catch glimpses behind the façade of this consummate politician.

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### **For additional readings on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

Jolaosho, Omotayo. 2019. “Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa.” *African Studies Review* 62 (2): 6–29. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.16.

- Lanegran, Kimberly. 1995. "South Africa's Civic Association Movement: ANC's Ally or Society's 'Watchdog'? Shifting Social Movement-Political Party Relations." *African Studies Review* 38 (2): 101–26. doi:[10.2307/525319](https://doi.org/10.2307/525319).
- Steinberg, Jonny. 2018. "Xenophobia and Collective Violence in South Africa: A Note of Skepticism About the Scapegoat." *African Studies Review* 61 (3): 119–34. doi:[10.1017/asr.2018.56](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.56).