

THE ANC HAS RULED S. AFRICA SINCE 1994, WHEN NELSON MANDELA WON THE FIRST MULTI-RACIAL VOTE

SOUTH AFRICA Johannesburg

South African deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa faces wide-ranging challenges after being elected to lead South Africa's ruling party, just as it grapples with corruption allegations and disunity.

Ramaphosa, 65, was narrowly elected head of the African National Congress (ANC) on Monday, winning a bruising race that exposed rifts within the organisation that led the fight against apartheid.

Thousands of raucous Ramaphosa supporters sang and chanted in the conference hall as rival backers of defeated candidate Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma appeared dejected.

Ramaphosa won 2,440 votes against Dlamini-Zuma's 2,261.

Investor confidence

The victory puts Ramaphosa in line to succeed President Jacob Zuma, whose reign has been plagued by corruption scandals, a slowing economy and anger at the once-omnipotent party.

He will likely enjoy a honeymoon period; the rand currency was up 3% against the dollar by Monday evening, suggesting investor confidence in the politician-turned-businessman.

But Ramaphosa still faces unenviable challenges.

Political analyst Richard Calland warned that he would be politically constrained as long as Zuma remains president.

Although Zuma stepped down as party chief at the conference, his term as head of state runs until 2019, when elections are due.

"The winner has inherited a mixed blessing, possibly a poisoned chalice," Calland told AFP.

Ramaphosa will be confronted with decisions about what public sector cuts to make to balance the budget and how to tackle Zuma-era corruption.

Ramaphosa faces new battles as ANC leader



Ramaphosa takes images of unseen media representatives at the 54th ANC conference in Johannesburg on Monday

'Good for the country'

"It is going to be very difficult for him to manoeuvre. He will have to reach compromise at every step," Calland added.

A vast image of the ANC's new leader was unfurled, as sustained applause and loud singing greeted news at the party conference venue outside Johannesburg.

Outside the hall, ANC supporters blocked a road leading to the conference centre, dancing and singing party songs.

Ramaphosa is due to make his first speech as leader today, as the conference draws to a close.

Zuma was seen as backing Dlamini-Zuma, allegedly to secure protection from prosecution on graft charges

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after he leaves office.

But his loyalists won senior positions in the vote, including David Mabuza as party deputy chief, meaning Ramaphosa is likely to face strong internal opposition to his pro-business reform agenda.

"I hope you will co-operate with the new leadership... as we move to the 2019 elections," Baleka Mbete, outgoing party chairwoman, told delegates.

The ANC, which has ruled

since 1994 when Nelson Mandela won the first multi-racial vote, could struggle to retain its grip on power in the next election due to falling public support.

Multi-millionaire

Ramaphosa is a former trade unionist leader, who led talks to end white-minority rule in the early 1990s and then became a multi-millionaire businessman, before returning to politics.

Ramaphosa is often accused of failing to confront Zuma while serving as his deputy since 2014.

"Ramaphosa will work to bring back the principles of liberal politics in the party," Amanda Gouws, politics professor at Stellenbosch University, told AFP.

"The outcome of the vote was not easy to call. What is at stake here is unity. The new leaders need to forge unity and rebuild the image of the party," she added.

'Same old ANC?'

Soaring unemployment and state corruption have fuelled frustration at the ANC among millions of poor black South Africans, who face a wide range of difficulties, such as dire housing, inadequate education and continuing racial inequality.

The main opposition Democratic Alliance party said that the ANC was "held together only by the glue of patronage and corruption, and Cyril Ramaphosa is just a new face to the same old ANC".

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