

WINKIE DIREKO-A POLITICAL LEADER IN HER OWN RIGHT?

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1. INTRODUCTION

To record merely that Winkie Direko, present premier of the Free State Province, was born on 27 November 1929 in Bochabela (Mangaung) and to an average family, will be an inadequate prelude to assessing her community and political life, which had an impact on her political career. Her entry into full-time party politics after the April 1994 first non-racial democratic election in South Africa caused a great stir in the Free State Province, and no one ever expected that she would rise to the premiership position after June 1999. This article attempts to provide an accurate, scientific and historical assessment of Direko as a political leader in her own right amid serious criticisms levelled against her before and after her appointment as the province's premier. The article, however, does not tend to adopt a defensive stance for Direko, but rather to answer a repeatedly asked question in the political circles of the Free State Province on whether Direko is a political leader or not.

The article extends beyond narrowly held views that Direko emerged to prominence after she had been inaugurated as the province's second woman premier in 1999. In the political arena, some critics within the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in the Free State Province claim that there is no testimonial that can more aptly describe her political leadership role. The fact that she occupied the premiership position for almost five years unlike her predecessors is testimony enough that she is a political leader in her own right. For the purpose of this article, emphasis is placed on her political role despite the fact that she is more widely known for her community service. The article is an attempt to place Direko in a political setting and explore her political leadership.

The article departs from the most frequently asked questions after her appointment as the province's premier by political commentators, politicians and a section of the media representatives on whether a shift from high school principalship to

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premiership status makes one a better political leader. When appointed as the premier, was she ready to lead or was she thrown in at the deep end by President Thabo Mbeki? Was she the right candidate for the premiership position in the trouble-torn Free State Province? Would she be able to re-establish stability to the province by resolving the existing ANC leadership squabbles in the province by means of the vision of a 'better life for all'?¹ Would she be able to put the province on a sound financial position and uproot the looming and prevailing corruption practices within the province? In an assessment of Direko's political leadership and in an attempt to answer the above questions, divergent views have emerged. This article seeks to analyze her career as a politician by looking at her political philosophy, the influence of her personality, her involvement in the disintegration of the provincial ANC and her various attempts to improve the position of the Africans. The article also looks at the subtle rebellion that existed in the Free State Province when Direko was nominated as the province's premier.

2. BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

When Direko was sworn in as the premier of the Free State Province on 15 June 1999, the majority of South Africans as well as Free Staters knew little about her political life prior to her premiership status. Mistress Winkie or Ausi Winkie,² as she is affectionately known, was born 74 years before. She spent her childhood and youth in Bochabela township³ (Bloemfontein) with her parents at her paternal grandparents' home. Her parents had initially resided in Waaihoek township⁴ before moving to Bochabela. In the early 1920s, the Waaihoek settlement was demolished.

¹ 'A better life for all' was the leading election slogan of the African National Congress (ANC) during the June 1999 general election.

² To many Free Staters, especially the African population, Ms IW Direko is known as Mistress Winkie or Ausi Winkie. This name originated from the people of Mangaung (Bloemfontein) and stuck to her as her title for decades. She was called Mistress Winkie because she was a teacher for the better part of her life, and the Mangaung residents attributed her unmarried status of mistress to her long-time commitment to the community and social development of the Africans. Even at school as a teacher, parents, students and fellow teachers referred to her as Mistress Winkie or Ausi Winkie. Her name Winkie was originally her nickname which she later adopted as her official name. The majority of the students in the Mangaung community ended up not knowing exactly what her real surname was because of repeated reference to her as mistress or Ausi Winkie.

³ Bochabela township is one of the African townships in Mangaung (Bloemfontein).

⁴ Waaihoek was the African township of Bloemfontein. This township was demolished in the early 1920s and the residents of Waaihoek were resettled in Batho township and the coloured population resettled in another small location known as Cape Stands. See K Schoeman, **Bloemfontein - Die ontstaan van 'n stad 1846-1946**, p. 35. See also J Haasbroek, "Die sosiale en vermaaklikheidslewe van die swart inwoners van Waaihoek, Bloemfontein, tydens die Oranjerivierkolonietydperk (1900-1910)" in **Navorsing van die Nasionale Museum, Bloemfontein**, Vol. 13, No. 4, September 1997, pp. 153-9.

Direko spent the latter part of her childhood years in Heidedal township⁵ with her maternal grandparents.

Direko lived in Bloemfontein in the Free State Province for the better part of her life. Her primary schooling was at the Anglican St. Alban's church school in Bochabela. After completing sub-standard B, she proceeded to another Anglican Church school known as the St. Patrick's Higher Primary School. Her commitment to social and community activities started while she was at this school. This commitment later grew into being her life-long mission to serve the African communities at a local, provincial and national level in the Girl Guide Association of which she became national president at a later stage.

After completing her teacher training at Modderpoort Teacher Training Institution (near Ladybrand in the Free State Province), she returned to Bloemfontein to take up a teaching post. Direko spent more than four decades in the teaching fraternity. Her stay in teaching for such a long period made her understand the impact of apartheid in as far as imbalances in education were concerned. That understanding nurtured her political inclination. In the field of education, while she served as a teacher, deputy principal and later principal of Sehunelo High School, Direko made herself audible by, among other things, being part of the delegation urging the then ministry of education to allow African students to register as students at the Orange Free State University, a mission which they failed to achieve. Through further negotiations with the representatives from the education ministry, the delegation succeeded in acquiring the establishment of Vista University⁶ in Bloemfontein. For Direko this was a victory on their side because African students could enroll and better their qualifications.

Direko's greatest achievements in and around Bloemfontein occurred in the field of community service. Her community involvement, which was to some extent politically motivated, saw her taking a bold stance in tackling the problem of eviction of widows from their houses by the municipal authorities after the death of their husbands. These widows not only had to cope with the trauma of death but also of eviction. As a community cum political leader, she also became helpful in

⁵ Heidedal is a coloured township outside the city of Bloemfontein. This township was later given the informal name of Cairo.

⁶ In 1977, IW Direko was part of a delegation that negotiated with the Department of Education under the National Party government for allowing the African students to register at the Orange Free State University. In 1978 the government appointed a commission of inquiry to investigate the needs and requirements of urban Africans in South Africa. This commission was initially chaired by Dr G van N Viljoen (the then rector of the Rand Afrikaans University) who was later succeeded by Dr FP Retief (the then rector of the Medical University of Southern Africa). After the meeting with the then Minister of Education, Dr F Hartzenberg, Vista University was established in terms of Act 106, of 1981 and came into existence on 1 January 1982.

assisting with applications for pensions and disability and state maintenance grants and for providing food parcels to the aged, sick and needy.⁷ She sometimes spent time in courts mitigating on behalf of students arrested for political reasons who because of their trials could not continue with their schooling. It is believed that due to her busy schedule with extra-curricular activities, her school work suffered and lagged behind.

Direko was involved in many positions of authority. In her career as a teacher, she became a member of the National Council of Educators of South Africa, an organization which some claim was an extension of apartheid in education because it had little impact in fighting the apartheid government. She served in many organizations and committees. She was President of the National Council of African Women and member of the Mangaung University Community Partnership Programme (MUCPP). She served as an executive of the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) and in the Council for Childcare. She also was a member of the Vista University Council.⁸

3. DIREKO AND POLITICS

The above-mentioned commitments of Direko to social development are indicative of the fact that she excelled as a community worker. For her to be nominated as the province's premier could have been precipitated by her involvement in community activities. The most asked question after her nomination was whether a hard working community leader makes a good political leader. In scrutinizing her involvement as a political leader in her own right, it should be noted that her political involvement was not an 'open book' until her appointment as a senator in Cape Town after the 1994 election. Many people started recognizing her political involvement after 1994, when she became involved in a subtle way.

Direko's short period in full-time politics has to a certain extent revealed that although she had little knowledge of party politics, she had the dogged determination and tenacity necessary for success in the political arena. In spite of her subdued political background she was charged with the responsibility to lead the Free State ANC-dominated government, and it was soon evident that she had a huge load on her shoulders. The South African citizens, and particularly the Free Staters, were scarcely aware of her meagre political experience. What the citizens expected from her service was delivery as promised by the ANC government. When she became fully involved in party politics, particularly as the premier, Direko's attitude in dealing with government and party matters developed into a

⁷ **Die Volksblad**, 23 September 1993.

⁸ **Vista Voice: Journal of Vista University**, Vol.10, No. 2, September 1994.

paranoic suspicion that some people were trying to undermine her leadership. This was a result of the fact that she had never been involved in full-time party politics before 1994. To a certain extent this was true; hence she later adopted a radical approach in dealing with some party members and civil servants in her government. This stance was maintained by her to assert her authority as the leader of the government.

Within the first decade after the 1994 election, the Free State Province has had three premiers. It became evident that the first two premiers who were Direko's predecessors, namely Mosioua Lekota⁹ and Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri¹⁰, were entrusted with a task beyond their control. They did not really enjoy their stay because of the infighting that existed within the provincial leadership of the ANC.¹¹ When Direko was appointed premier, the infighting as to who deserved to be the premier cropped up again. Lekota was not welcomed by some of the old guards in the Free State ANC leadership as he was viewed as an outsider who came to the province for the premiership position. The fact that he was mostly outside the province during the 'struggle days' made this group to be suspicious of his leadership. The June 1999 election rescued Matsepe-Casaburri from the hot premiership position. During her stay as premier squabbles intensified within the provincial ANC leadership. After her deployment to the national parliament, it became clear that the Free State needed a politically strong candidate to steer the province forward. The Free State was by this time in decline, disintegrating, racked by financial and organizational problems and leadership disputes.

Prior to the 1999 general election, the president elect, Thabo Mbeki, nominated Direko to be the province's premier. It was at this stage that Direko became fully and directly involved in the political arena because a political and administrative leadership was expected of her as premier. When Direko ascended the premiership position, she was, as stated before, faced with problems of leadership within the ANC.¹² As the newly appointed premier, it was expected of her by the National Executive Council (NEC) to remedy the situation. It is therefore important that

⁹ Mosioua Lekota was the first premier of the Free State Province and was appointed after the April 1994 general election. He served as the premier from 1994 to 1996. After this two year term as the premier, he was deployed as chairperson of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP). Lekota is currently (2003) serving as Minister of Defence.

¹⁰ Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri became the first female premier of the Free State. She was Lekota's successor and was the premier from 1996 to 1999. After the June 1999 election she was deployed to the national parliament to serve as the Minister of Post and Telecommunications.

¹¹ **Financial Mail**, Vol. 150, No. 6, 21 August 1998, pp. 38-9. See also **Finansies en Tegniek**, Vol. 48, No. 20, 17 May 1996, p. 67. It should also be noted that the Free State was not the only province which experienced this factionalism within the ANC provincial leaderships. The same phenomenon occurred in the North West, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Eastern Cape provinces.

¹² **The Star**, 26 April 1999.

when one assesses Direko as a political leader in her own right, cognizance should be taken of the fact that she inherited a province which had been riddled by problems.

Direko was optimistic that she would be able to heal the wounds of a divided ANC in the Free State. In her acceptance speech as the province's premier it was clear that she categorized herself as a politician who needed people to support her in order to map the way forward for the province. In that speech she said the following: "We are called upon to lead our Province into the new millennium and to speed up the necessary changes to improve the quality of life of the poor and the destitute....Our Legislature will indeed learn from the past five years and we will work hard on the foundations already laid by those who went before us. To members of the Legislature, the people of the Free State want speedy delivery for a better life."¹³

Without any doubt, when Direko was appointed premier of the province, a test of character and strength awaited her. Lack of cohesion within the provincial leadership had, from 1994 to 1999, seen two premiers vacating their office. First to vacate the position was Lekota, a popular politician whom the NEC of the ANC removed following clashes between factions in the province. Lekota was believed to be leading a group basically constituted of members of the ANC from the Southern Free State. This group was believed to be at loggerheads with another group dubbed the Ace Magashule's group with the majority of members originating from the Northern Free State.

The ANC branches which had voted Magashule to the top of the provincial list in the 1998 Welkom congress became dissatisfied with Direko's appointment and the perceived purge of Magashule's supporters from the party's provincial list.¹⁴ To many people, particularly his supporters, Magashule was seen as the 'premier in waiting'. His supporters believed that Magashule, who had helped to mobilize the masses as a community activist in Parys in the 1980s, deserved the premiership position. To the dismay of his supporters they realized that the president elect, Thabo Mbeki, had different expectations as to the provincial premiership positions. The conclusions of the provincial congress therefore were not in agreement with the president's ruling. It was after such a politically volatile period that Direko found herself appointed to lead the province. The fact that the premiers were appointed by the president, made it clear that Direko had the full support of Mbeki and the people referred to her as Mbeki's appointee.

¹³ Debates of the Legislature of the Free State Province, **Hansard**, Vol. 64, 15 and 21 June 1999, pp. 6371-74.

¹⁴ **Business Day**, 20 April 1999.

Prof. DP Wessels, Head of the Political Science Department at the Free State University, observed that the political leadership crisis that existed in the Free State was to a certain extent a confrontation of personalities, hence the involvement of the NEC of the ANC in trying to resolve the crisis. Wessels argued that the fact that Direko had no glorious political background did not deter Thabo Mbeki from appointing her as premier. From Wessels' view, it became clear to the NEC that the Free State needed a leader irrespective of political credentials. In view of that, while most of the political leaders were trapped in the south and north divide, Direko appeared to be neutral and well-known for community-based activities and therefore suited to become the premier.¹⁵ Wessels also indicated that Direko's leadership skills which she had acquired in community service manifested themselves in the way she ran the province. Since she took over as the premier there was to a certain extent stability in the province.¹⁶

With such a daunting situation that prevailed in the province, it made matters difficult for Direko to successfully execute her duties as premier. Initially, after her appointment, her office was more of a conflict resolution centre because of the nature of problems brought to it. Within the province some people doubted her leadership as they maintained that the political problems in the province warranted political solutions. The fact that Direko had no long history in full-time political involvement, caused doubt as to whether she would be able to normalize the situation in the province. In her first few months as premier, Direko firmly believed that rash actions and violent antagonistic speeches against those who never believed in her leadership would be counter-productive and undermine her capacity to deal with government matters. The above belief by Direko did not apply when she had to deal with acts of corruption within her government, therefore, quiet diplomacy would not work for her in the premiership position. She had to be vocal on some issues which were detrimental to her governance.

From the beginning, the choice of Direko as premier was not a happy one. Her nomination and later appointment triggered divergent viewpoints. On the one hand, there were those who were taken in by Direko's profile as a community worker and highly rated her ability to make a good premier. To this group, she was the embodiment of what a Free State voter should expect of a community cum political leader. In political circles, this was an unpopular view. It was a view popularly held by the Mangaung residents and the surrounding areas. This group based its trust on the fact that she was 'the people's person', but forgetting that she was not 'the people's choice' as the choice of the premiers is the prerogative of the country's

¹⁵ Interview with Prof. DP Wessels, 14 April 2003.

¹⁶ **Ibid.**

president.¹⁷ Notwithstanding the fact that she was 70 years when appointed premier and had only 5 years experience of full-time party politics, she still remained the overwhelming favourite of this group.¹⁸

This group which vigorously supported her nomination and appointment, described her as a fine woman who is well-known in the province and has solid Christian values.¹⁹ They also believed that her background as a teacher and her interest in education were factors that would play a significant role in the development of the Free State Province. She was seen as the ideal candidate to deal with the cliques within the ANC in the province.²⁰ Dick Phala, Direko's colleague when she started teaching, supported her nomination and appointment as premier and indicated the following: "Direko is undoubtedly one of the best leaders the Free State has ever had. She has a critical eye in looking at the issues. Who else in the province could have risked taking the leadership of such a problematic province?"²¹ Here she was judged not so much by her actions in the political arena, but by what she had been in the past as a community leader.

While there was a group who supported Direko, there were others who condemned her appointment as the province's premier. The group who argued against her appointment was by far in the majority. This group included political commentators, politicians and the larger section of the media. They concluded that because of her lack of political experience, she was bound to fail as premier. According to them, leading a politically divided Free State Province was certainly no easy task for a comparatively inexperienced Direko.

A former newspaper journalist attached to **The Star** newspaper, Simon Zwane, was skeptical about Direko's nomination as premier. He did not hide his dissatisfaction about her appointment. He argued that Direko was politically and administratively too weak to be trusted with the leadership of the province.²² He doubted her being the right candidate to bring stability in the province. A Free Stater himself, Zwane acknowledged the fact that Direko had played a significant role in community development, but doubted her expertise in political leadership. This judgement by Zwane was rather unfair to Direko because he was equating success in the premiership position with individuals' past political profile.

¹⁷ Interview with Mr CS Moshotle, 14 February 2003.

¹⁸ **Ibid.**

¹⁹ **Volksblad**, 19 June 1999.

²⁰ **Volksblad**, 9 August 1999.

²¹ Interview with Mr D Phala, 10 March 2003.

²² **The Star**, 14 May 1999. See also **Pretoria News**, 27 May 1999.

Zwane further contended that Direko's nomination had been influenced by her involvement in community development. He also acknowledged that Direko enjoyed a measure of respect by the NEC of the ANC, but the fact that she lacked political charisma was regarded as a barrier on her side to lead the province. Zwane was also of the opinion that this lack of political charisma and obviously weak political leadership could accelerate the hostilities between the conflicting groups in the Free State.²³ The group that subscribed to Zwane's viewpoint, because of a lack of knowledge of the political background pertaining to the Free State squabbles, declared that Direko emerged from the Lekota group. They claimed that Lekota influenced her appointment as he had worked with Direko in Cape Town while she was a member of the National Council of Provinces. The argument raised by Zwane was denounced by some as a ploy to belittle Direko's past contributions in the community which were politically motivated. They believed that she would bring a sound and smooth administration to the province.²⁴

Taryn Lamberti of **Business Day** echoed Zwane's sentiments and expressed the view that Direko was faced with a mammoth task of uniting the Free State citizens. Lamberti doubted Direko's expertise in that regard. Direko's capability of putting the province, plagued by financial problems in a desirable financial position, was questioned. Lamberti also provided answers as to the appointment of Direko as premier despite her past political involvement. It was argued that her age was to a certain extent advantageous and contributed to her nomination. According to Lamberti, Direko's age "demand[ed] respect".²⁵ Although Lamberti believed that the age factor would play a significant role, she experienced a growing marginalization from the ANC's provincial leadership.

DP Wessels contends that it was difficult for some ANC members in the Free State to comprehend and understand why Thabo Mbeki opted for Direko in the premiership position. According to them they had never considered her for such a position.²⁶ Both Wessels and Van Zyl Slabbert, a political observer in the 1999 election, had predicted before Direko's appointment that Mbeki's style of governance would be different from that of his predecessor. He would exercise more dictatorial control within the organization. The appointment of the premiers by the president was one of the main features of Mbeki's control.²⁷

It was believed that Direko's nomination as the premier candidate in the Free State would deter potential ANC voters from voting for the organization. Those who

²³ **Ibid.**
²⁴ **Ibid.**
²⁵ **Business Day**, 6 May 1999.
²⁶ **Business Day**, 20 May 1999.
²⁷ **Ibid.**

never supported Direko's nomination were likely to stay away from the polls in protest against her nomination. Even if it was clear that Direko's nomination as the premier candidate was not well accepted by other members of the ANC, Wessels indicated that the ANC supporters would vote in great numbers despite the problems of the premier's nomination. It was clear that open rebellion was unlikely because this group of supporters was also quick to indicate that the ANC's policy, culture and tradition should be obeyed.²⁸ What remained a question was whether the division in the organization would remain intact after the election or not, and whether she would be able to govern the province properly or not.

Another example of how skeptical many people were about Direko's nomination as the head of the Free State government is also summarized by Mawande Jubasi in his article entitled "More ANC rumbles in the Free State jungle". This article added more woes to Direko's nomination when he stated the following: "The appointment of the low-profile Winkie Direko as the Free State premier candidate has re-opened old divisions between the party's factions, forcing the national leadership to deploy more key leaders out of the province...How can we be led by a sick old woman when we have energetic young leaders to travel all through the Free State Province canvassing votes for the movement."²⁹

Without doubt, in any political sense, the above statement by Jubasi was substantive proof that, as a political leader, Direko was less recognized. Direko, with her meagre political background, was, nonetheless, taken on tow by the NEC of the ANC to lead the province, an offer she could not have refused. Contrary to the above perceptions on Direko's political background and her appointment as the premier, if her political leadership was weak, uninspiring and aimless as stated by many, Mbeki would not have recommended her. It shows that despite all efforts to run her down, Mbeki still had trust and confidence in her leadership.³⁰

It was not only members within the ANC who had problems with her appointment and disparaged her leadership, thus implying that her nomination as the province's premier was a miracle. Inus Aucamp, Free State leader of the New National Party (NNP) had a mixed reaction after Direko's nomination. He stated that Direko was well known as a friendly person, but had reservations about her abilities as a politician. To Aucamp, Direko portrayed good leadership qualities as a community leader, but he doubted her political leadership skills.³¹ However, Aucamp acknowledged that Direko might be the right candidate to neutralize the prevailing

²⁸**Ibid.**²⁹ **Sowetan Sunday World**, 2 May 1999; **Pretoria News**, 27 May 1999.³⁰**Ibid.**³¹ Interview with Mr Inus Aucamp, 14 May 2003.

squabbles within the ruling organization's leadership; he therefore supported her as the premier candidate. With her good command of the Afrikaans language, Direko was regarded as a capable leader who could even reach members of the opposition parties with ease.

While acknowledged by Mbeki as a capable person to lead the province, Direko's attempts to revive the ANC in the province were sometimes bedevilled by her tactless and insensitive approach in dealing with the ANC's affairs. This aggravated strains within the organization and resulted in clashes with some members. At times Direko tended to overlook the fact that, despite its problems, the ANC's provincial leadership under the chair of Magashule represented a considerable achievement in as far as the electorate and ANC branch membership were concerned.

In most cases Direko was accused of being politically tactless. People attributed it to her lack of political maturity as she was a novice in full-time party politics. After her nomination as the provincial premier, the ANC provincial leadership accused her of operating behind the scenes. She had written a letter to Mbeki asking for the removal of some members' names from the provincial list. The people whose names were to be removed, it were believed to be aligned to the Magashule group.³² According to this group, Direko wanted to eliminate her opposition. This attempt of removing some members from the list by Direko was seen as cowardly by those affected by the changes on the list, and was interpreted negatively by her opponents. It was seen as an acknowledgement on her part that she would not be able to run the province without the elimination of the so-called problematic people from the list. What worsened the situation was the fact that the replacements on the list were identified as members of the Lekota bloc.³³ In this letter, Direko allegedly expressed fears of alienating the coloured community. This alienation would have detrimental effects on her governance.

Direko was not only seen as tactless in trying to achieve her goals, but also autocratic in dealing with the organization's matters. The issue of compiling the provincial list should have been a joint venture of the provincial ANC leadership under the chair of Magashule before its final submission to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). There were strong views that it would be useless for the ANC in future to hold the list conferences for members if the final list would not reflect the wishes of the organization's members. The sidelining of the leadership in this matter was interpreted negatively by the Magashule group. Without doubt, her treatment of requests for changes on the provincial lists became

³² Sowetan, 11 May 1999; **Business Day**, 12 May 1999; **The Star**, 12 May 1999.

³³ **Ibid.**

the greatest source of friction within the organization and she was largely accused of displaying dictatorial tendencies.

Not all people blamed her because of her request for changes in the provincial list. Those who supported her stated that her action was a starting point to steer the province in the right direction. To the dismay of her political opponents, Mbeki acceded to her request for effecting changes in the provincial list. On Monday 10 May 1999, the provincial list was reshuffled as requested by Direko. This fuelled speculations that Mbeki indirectly wanted to gain the administrative control of the province. Direko was therefore entangled in controversy and her political leadership qualities were further doubted. This put her on a collision course with the organization's provincial leadership. It was alleged that Direko had proposed in the letter that J Mafereka, the then provincial speaker of parliament, be recalled to the province and that S Besani who took up a post with the Free State Tourism Board, be replaced. The then local government MEC, B Kotsokane, was to be moved higher on the list from his 18th position at the time. SH Ntombela was to be replaced by B Marshoff in an attempt to address the issue of coloured representation. L Tsenoli was to replace N Masithela and B Mononyane to replace B Phitsane.³⁴

It was believed that Direko's letter was an attempt to strengthen her position and remove the so-called 'troublemakers' who could disrupt her plans of governance. It was also believed that the re-ordering of certain names and the replacement of others would undermine any resurgence of the past problems.³⁵ Farout Chothia stated that Mbeki effected the changes because he wanted to strengthen the hand of the premier designate in the provincial government.³⁶ The issue of effecting changes in the provincial list created disillusionment and discontent within the ANC ranks in the province. The affected group argued that the revision had not brought balance to the provincial list. Instead it skewed the balance in favour of the southern region, particularly Bloemfontein, which had lost its grip on the levers of power at the provincial congress, held in 1998 when Magashule became the ANC provincial chairperson.³⁷ The changes on the provincial list caused jubilation in some circles within the provincial ANC, but also consternation in others and this was seen as yet another attempt by Direko to undermine the provincial leadership and to create two centres of power, namely, one under her leadership in government and the other being the provincial leadership.³⁸

³⁴**Ibid.**³⁵ **Volksblad**, 7 May 1999.³⁶ **Business Day**, 12 May 1999.³⁷ **The Star**, 14 May 1999.³⁸ **Ibid.**

To show the seriousness of this matter and add salt to the wounds, Wally Mbele intimated that the Free State Province had not enjoyed stability since 1996. He indicated that further seeds of disintegration were also sown when Direko took up office as the province's premier in 1999. Mbele made the following succinct statement: "Here comes a new leader who has not even been inaugurated yet hurries to make recommendations without consulting any provincial party structure and virtually dictates to the centre of the party. The other problem is that when you bring in people who were not on the list, you begin to create a culture of political masters. You make people owe allegiance to you as an individual who put them there, and not to the constituency which you are supposed to be accountable to."³⁹

In defence of her actions, Direko indicated that while provincial conferences were intended to be democratic processes for determining candidates for the legislature, the whole process had to be understood within the context of deployment.⁴⁰ Nullifying the whole process initiated by Direko, the provincial leadership declared itself central in provincial governance. This was a declaration of no confidence in what Direko wanted to do. Moreover, they accused her of having a 'hidden agenda' against some members. She was accused of dividing the ANC further in the province and the NEC was accused of not being even-handed in its handling of provincial problems and appeared to be strengthening Direko's group.⁴¹

In the midst of the above highlighted simmering tensions, Direko had to select Members of the Executive Council (MECs) to serve in her administration. The provincial leadership felt that it was entitled to contribute to the choice of the MECs. They believed that the provincial list should also be used in determining the MECs.⁴² Her appointment of the new MECs led to resentment and her sometimes moderate political approach aroused the suspicion that she was Mbeki's political tool, hence her controversial appointment as the province's premier.

Notwithstanding her growing marginalization from the organization's provincial leadership, Direko used appearances before the ANC supporters to articulate with success the vision and mission of the Free State Province. She was accused by her opponents of being a politically ambitious and an opportunistic person. Turning her attention to the province's people to ensure that service delivery was taking place, was interpreted negatively by her antagonists, who cited that Direko was trying to promote her image as the one who provides for the needy Free State citizens. By so doing, they contended Direko was trying to popularize herself as she had no

³⁹ **Mail and Guardian**, 21-27 May 1999.

⁴⁰ **Business Day**, 12 May 1999.

⁴¹ **Ibid.**

⁴² **Ibid.**

outstanding political profile. Such an accusation was unfair to Direko because part and parcel of her job had always been to ensure that service delivery took place as per ANC mandate. Her detractors labelled her a 'peace time hero'.

One of the most important factors to be scrutinized when assessing the role Direko played as a political leader is the fact that she was charged with a heavy responsibility of uniting the ANC members in the province, something that could have been a nightmare for any leader. Some critics believed that instead of uniting these members, she played a divisive role and that she perpetrated divisions. This was evident in February 2001, when she axed three MECs from her provincial cabinet. This reshuffling of the cabinet caused the following MECs to lose their portfolios, namely T Makgoe (Agriculture), C Mokitlane (Safety and Security) and Anna Buthelezi-Phori (Social Development).⁴³ In justifying her stance, Direko indicated that the reshuffling was not aimed at destroying these former MECs political careers but to improve efficiency in the province in as far as service delivery was concerned. However, this reshuffling triggered the long-standing divisions in the province to resurface. It does not imply that these three MECs were failures in executing their duties.⁴⁴ Direko was accused of removing them because of their alignment with the Magashule group.

Direko differed with other leaders over the issue of religion and ideology. She was criticized for her emphasis on Christianity as a force in changing the lives of the Free State people. In an article published by Gert Coetzee in the **Volksblad** newspaper, entitled "Winkie Direko sê swart mense kan nooit waarlik kommuniste wees nie", she was quoted having indicated that within the African communities there are no genuine communists. The above alleged statement by Direko opened up the healing wounds between herself and some members of the ANC and was analyzed as undermining the tripartite alliance.⁴⁵

As the provincial political head, the issue of putting the province in a financially viable position was her primary responsibility. The Democratic Alliance (DA) leader in the Free State, Darryl Worth, also highlighted that it was imperative for the new premier to put the province on a sound financial footing, but he was doubtful of Direko's expertise in this regard. He indicated that Bloemfontein alone as a city was R270 million in debt when she took over the premiership position. This figure amounted to a monthly expense of R3 million because of the services which were not properly paid for.⁴⁶ Kobie Gouws of the Freedom Front (FF)

⁴³ **Sowetan Sunday World**, 4 February 2001; **Sunday Times**, 4 February 2001.

⁴⁴ Interview with IW Direko, 5 February 2001.

⁴⁵ **Volksblad**, 12 January 2000; **Volksblad**, 13 January 2000.

⁴⁶ **Sowetan Sunday World**, 2 May 1999.

indicated that the province had an estimated R900 million debt and blamed its financial woes on ineffective management. Gouws also had little trust that Direko would be in a position to correct that situation.⁴⁷

Despite all the problems she experienced Direko registered some political successes as the province's premier, although in other fields she failed to either promote the province or unite the members. The successes included her seriousness about clean governance. In November 2000, she started proceedings to suspend the provincial speaker, J Mafereka, in an effort to protect the integrity of the public office. Mafereka was allegedly implicated in the murder of or conspiracy to murder a Welkom taxi driver in 1989.⁴⁸ Ironically, Mafereka was one of the people Direko had recommended to serve in the provincial legislature after her appointment as premier. This earned her respect within the ANC as well as from the opposition parties. Taking such a bold stance against one of her confidantes showed that she was making her mark as the political head of the province. The fact that she tackled this problem the way she did, was an indication that she was a political leader in her own right. After this incident, it became clear that she had the political courage to lead the province despite all criticisms levelled against her.

Direko never allowed herself to be deterred from her vision of making the Free State Province one of the most successful provinces in the country. She started programmes to reach out to the communities, this time not as a community worker but as a politician. She met with the Public Service Anti-Corruption Unit in Bloemfontein in an attempt to engage the unit in uprooting corruption in the public sector.⁴⁹ Her political leadership was also manifested when she engaged her MECs in promoting what was termed "Imbizo".⁵⁰ The ANC used this term to refer to a meeting of the constituency with the government's leadership. In the Free State, such a meeting was known as "Exco meets the people". It is in this meeting where the different communities have direct talks with the MECs and the premier. Each MEC responds to the questions posed by the community members. In such meetings Direko addressed issues of social concern like dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, poverty, high levels of crime and job creation.⁵¹

Direko showed another side of her political leadership when she resisted the merger of the Bloemfontein-based Supreme Court of Appeal with the Constitutional Court,

⁴⁷ **Ibid.**

⁴⁸ **Sowetan**, 24 November 2000.

⁴⁹ **The Star**, 8 June 2000.

⁵⁰ 'Imbizo' means coming together and this is an interaction of the government's leadership with ordinary citizens. In the olden days this was a meeting usually called by a king in tribal authorities.

⁵¹ Interview with IW Direko, 5 February 2003.

and to relocate the former to the Gauteng Province. She stated that such relocation would have disastrous social and economic effects on the province as people like cleaners, gardeners, messengers and tea makers would not be able to move to Gauteng province and subsequently lose their jobs. Direko realized that relocation would strip the Free State, particularly the city of Bloemfontein, from its treasured title as judicial capital. The existence of the Supreme Court in the Free State forms part of the province's rich history and is a treasured heritage site.⁵²

As a devoted Christian, she realized that the church could play a vital role in helping the government to achieve its political and socio-economic goals. She involved churches in the issue of moral regeneration. In a meeting held on 10 November 2000 at St. George Cathedral with church leaders, she appealed to these leaders to join hands with government in addressing issues of crime, corruption and unemployment and to inculcate in their congregations a sense of helping each other in times of need.⁵³ The involvement of churches became a moral booster to Direko's political leadership and this was acknowledged by many church leaders who realized that they should help the government on issues of social concern.⁵⁴

In this meeting with the church leaders, she further requested that they should engage in political transformation of the people by preaching to them to transform their souls. In a prayer assembly held on 4 November 2001, she encouraged people to use prayer as a uniting factor against the political divisions in the province.⁵⁵ Dr N Shunmugam, chairperson of the Christian Church Forum, declared his forum's unequivocal support to assist the Free State government in combating crime, unemployment, poverty and diseases.⁵⁶ The strategy of meeting the church leaders had fulfilling results for Direko and earned her the respect of these leaders as well as their followers as some of them had no political interests.

Direko exercised her power as a political leader when she continued to manage and promote good relations with the province's neighbour, Lesotho. The relationship between South Africa and Lesotho was tarnished by the September 1998 military invasion that saw South Africa accused of interfering in Lesotho's domestic affairs.⁵⁷ To restore this relationship required Direko to act diplomatically and exhibit her political leadership. Besides the 1998 invasion in Lesotho, the Caledon River border, which separates the province and Lesotho, became vulnerable and exploited as a stock theft corridor. Direko intervened when the farmers in the

⁵² **Business Day**, 29 August 2000.

⁵³ **Volksblad**, 11 November 2000.

⁵⁴ **Volksblad**, 21 February 2001; **Volksblad**, 16 May 2001.

⁵⁵ **Volksblad**, 5 November 2001.

⁵⁶ **Ibid.**

⁵⁷ **The Star**, 23 September 1998.

Eastern Free State organized themselves into patrol units on these borders. Direko sent police to prevent what could have been a bloody war between the units and stock thieves.⁵⁸

Direko used her political profile as the premier to secure the farmers' support. Addressing them on 15 March 2000, she indicated the government's intentions to assist struggling farmers financially. She had a vision of boosting the agricultural sector; this would result in a better economy for the province and assist in alleviating poverty and unemployment. In the light of farmers' debts increasing at an alarming rate, any strategy that would alleviate this problem was appreciated by the farmers. With the help of T Makgoe, former MEC for agriculture, Direko explained that an agricultural investment strategy was to be put in place aimed at giving the farmers incentives to ensure that they continue with their work and make their profession economically sustainable. Aspects considered in the new strategy included upgrading infrastructure such as land, roads and training opportunities, as well as intensifying rural safety.⁵⁹ This initiative by Direko was welcomed by many farmers in the province. In February 2002, during the World Conference on young upcoming farmers held in Bloemfontein, she maintained her long-time slogan of: "Geen boere, geen kos. Geen kos, geen energie om te werk nie."⁶⁰ At this conference Direko declared that the Free State government was prepared to continue with the rebuilding of the province's agricultural sector.

Hardly a year after the above agreements had been made, in February 2003, the introduction of land tax in the Nketoana Municipal Area⁶¹ triggered misunderstandings between Direko's government and the Free State Agricultural Union. The farmers in this area were dissatisfied with a land tax of 2 percent which they were expected to pay following the Land Tax Act of 1962. These farmers resisted paying such tax as they were the only group targeted. This was another test of Direko's leadership as she had to intervene in resolving this problem because the farmers' union threatened to take the Free State government to court.⁶²

Although Direko is not such an inspiring political leader, her political career is on the other hand not a complete failure. She is a conscientious leader, devoted to the interests of her constituency. She used her position in trying to convince her fellow

⁵⁸ **The Sunday Independent**, 18 July 1999; **The Citizen**, 11 May 2000.

⁵⁹ **Sowetan**, 16 March 2001.

⁶⁰ **Volksblad**, 13 February 2002.

⁶¹ The Nketoana Municipal Area includes farms in the Reitz, Petrus Steyn, Arlington, Lindley and Tweeling districts.

⁶² **Volksblad**, 28 February 2003.

ANC members and the opposition parties in the provincial parliament of the importance of working together and to strengthen service delivery to the people. In almost every debate in the provincial legislature, whether on education, health or social welfare, Direko used the opportunity to plead for better treatment of people under the adopted principle of the government known as "Batho Pele".⁶³ Her commitment to the interests of her constituency is best illustrated in the provincial opening address on 16 February 2001, when she allocated R3 million to the Maluti-a-Phofung local municipality⁶⁴ to alleviate unemployment problems, improve the infrastructure, pursue resource development and establish an Aids Council to educate people about this disease.⁶⁵ The allocation of funds to this municipal area caused her to become the champion of service delivery and she was labelled as the leader who addresses "bread and butter" issues. Her character traits of dogged persistence, single-mindedness, tenacity, courage and to a certain extent a fixed sense of purpose made her a formidable opponent of corruption.

4. CONCLUSION

Although clearly accepted by the majority of the Free State citizens for the past four years as the province's premier, Direko cannot be characterized merely as a politician. She learnt the dynamics of political life in a short space of time as she managed to guide the one-time troubled province to a certain level of success. She should also be credited for the maintenance of stability within the ANC in the province, although she entered the premiership office with little political background. A number of aspects discussed in the text above are testimony to her hard work despite the fact that she is not a born politician.

Direko as a leader does not possess the political leadership qualities of the other premiers in the ANC led provinces. In evaluating her political leadership, it must be noted that she acted as a political leader within the organization's context. One cannot fully ascribe the success of the province to an individual. Therefore, the team spirit she instilled in her MECs is commendable. As to what extent she has been successful as a political leader is a million dollar question to answer, as the divisive slogans of the northern and southern factions are still prevalent though more subtle. As she was prepared to lead the province from the chaotic stage in which it had been in 1999, she should be respected as a political leader in her own right.

⁶³ This is the government service delivery principle, holding that at all public service points, clients must be prioritized in rendering service.

⁶⁴ Maluti-a-Phofung is a municipal area composed of the following towns in the former Eastern Free State area: Harrismith, Kestell, Golden Gate and Phuthaditjhaba.

⁶⁵ Speech by IW Direko at the opening of the provincial parliament, 16 February 2001.