

SHOULD A WOMAN LEAD RATHER THAN A MAN

# What price a female SA president

Louise du Toit

THE South African political landscape is in its greatest turmoil since the country's transition to democracy.

The Gupta leaks, maybe more than any other factor, have shown citizens to what extent the current leadership has failed the country and its constitutional values.

Health care, education and housing have never received the urgent government attention needed to lift the lives of millions of South Africans to the standard of a minimally decent existence.

In the process, the first generation of born-frees have in a sense lost their past and their present and have little hope of a better future.

Also, the gap between rich and poor has further increased, public and personal trust has eroded, and political instability is ruining the economy, adversely affecting, finally, everyone except for a small inner circle which is rapidly growing spectacularly wealthy.

Most South Africans would agree, looking back over the years of democracy, that increasingly immoral leadership is one of the main reasons for our current predicament.

With a clear sense that President Zuma needs replacing by the end of this year, the public debate on female leadership has reared its head again. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma's candidacy is supported by Zuma himself as well as by the ANC Women's League, ostensibly on principled (feminist) grounds: it "is time for" a female president – whatever that might mean.

Yet the professed grounds are widely disbelieved, given the understanding that Zuma believes his ex-wife will give him and his cronies much-needed protection against prosecution once he leaves power.

Neither Zuma nor the Women's League has anything like a convincing history of feminist practice. "Feminism" here should be understood broadly as an outlook that takes into account the systematic exclusion of women and women's interests from the political sphere.

Arguably, it's something like this stance which underlies, or which should make sense of, support for female leadership, whether in the form of quotas in political parties or a female president. What else could justify the notion that a woman rather than a man should lead?

Generally, gender is rightly seen as largely irrelevant to whether any person in particular has the kind of personal virtues that make of them a good leader. Yet, the assumption which links female leadership almost automatically with feminist politics is dubious.

On one level it makes some sense to think that individual women generally have a better (lived) understanding of the marginalisation of women as a category or class from male dominated politics and concentrations of power.

Women are generally placed in social positions and locations from where their marginalisation and trivialisation of the most burning issues facing women are most visible and sometimes glaringly unjust. To name only the most obvious:

for more than 20 years of democratic freedoms and with one of the strongest constitutional protections in the world, South African women have had no reprieve from a consistent onslaught by South African men on their sexual and bodily integrity.

The high levels of sexual violence against especially women and girls robs us of many of our most basic human rights: to safety, bodily integrity, freedom from violence, freedom of movement, speech and association. Sexual violence moreover usually harmfully affects women's and girls' lives over an extended period, if they survive.

Somehow this desperate situation affecting the most vulnerable the most, has not received sustained and committed government attention. The leadership has not managed to condemn in the strongest possible terms the behaviours of millions of men of all races and creeds which cause this destruction, nor has it been able to galvanise institutions to fight the problem with political will and commitment, to give women the sense that



WOMAN POWER: Members of the Women's League protest outside the Western Cape High Court during Shriren Dewani's femicide trial.

Picture: CINDY WAXA

our government takes our side in the struggle for our basic human dignity.

These tragic facts, this situation of great injustice, is what makes sense of, and ultimately justifies, the call for specifically female leadership. When female leadership instead of gender-free moral, meritorious and virtuous leadership is prioritised on principled grounds, I propose the only reason could be the expectation that the specific woman

has a feminist consciousness.

She will understand that her leadership position has been given to her by the women and girls of this country, with the rightful expectation that she will do everything in her power to address the gender-specific injustices in our society. She will have to find out from them what those injustices entail and how best to address them. And she will ensure that male-dominated power struggles do not derail her feminist

commitments to her constituency.

I foresee some objections to this argument. First, some may want to argue that not all female leaders are feminist, or need to be. I agree, but then they should obtain leadership positions in a fair and open competition with the male leadership.

Second, some may say I put an unfair burden on female leadership and that male leadership should also represent women's interests. Again, I restrict the specifically

feminist burden to those women who get positions meant to ensure women's representation in politics.

Regarding the second issue, feminist male leadership, the following: since I defined feminism as a stance regarding women's marginalisation, it is a perspective that men may obtain through listening to women and their experiences and concerns. We know for sure that not all women are feminists and there are men who are.

We should thus problematise assumptions in local politics that equate female leadership with feminism, and finally insist all our leaders represent all of us and, in particular, those who live the most precarious of lives. Good leaders are ultimately shaped and maintained by good followers.

● Professor Louise Du Toit is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University.

