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CONVERSATIONS  
WITH MY SONS AND  
DAUGHTERS  
By Mamphela Ramphele  
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Books

## BOOK REVIEW

# *Conversations with My Sons and Daughters* By Mamphela Ramphele

*Dr Mamphela Ramphele's book begins with an angry young man, and a Sepedi phrase: "Mabu a u tswitswe" – "The soil has been stolen." The young man who spoke these words, Ramphele informs her readers, had no need to explain them or elaborate on his meaning; his idiomatic call to arms in defence of the land spoke for itself.*

And Ramphele, it seems, has taken it on herself to heed that call. *Conversations with My Sons and Daughters* is a declaration of war on the failings of South African governance, and the South African government, since the Mandela presidency. To hear Ramphele tell it, those failings are many.

*Conversations* touches on every issue under the sun, from corruption to the electoral system; from the difficulties of mother tongue education to Malema; from youth unemployment to the problematic 'heroic' nature of South Africa's politics. At times it's hard to remember what you're reading about now or what was covered in the previous chapter, let alone to connect it to what comes next.

In part, this perhaps reflects the dizzying nature of South African politics: our daily and weekly newspapers can sometimes feel like a whirlwind of governance issues, and it's easy, on returning from overseas (or just from Cape Town) after a few weeks away, to feel quite lost. But it is also an editorial issue for Ramphele's book. If there is a central thesis, a line of argument running from one chapter to the next, this reader found it hard to follow. Instead, *Conversations* reads a bit like a compilation of short essays on related but separate topics.

If there is a common theme that binds these essays, it is the failure of the ANC government to live up to its pre-electoral promise. And on this theme, Ramphele is as convincing and compelling as readers might hope. After all, she is uniquely placed to speak truth to South Africa's powers-that-be.

Her struggle credentials are impeccable, attested to by her apartheid detention, banning orders and banishment (to the town of Tzaneen, in what is now Limpopo – a place Ramphele had never visited until she was confined there for seven years in the 70s and 80s). Despite her intimate connection to the struggle though, Ramphele's fortunes and successes in the post-apartheid dispensation are not tied to those of the ANC. A writer like Ramphele is in that respect a rare and precious thing in South Africa – distant enough from the ruling party that she can criticise it with impartiality and without reserve, but close enough to its history and to the history of the struggle that defenders of the party cannot impeach her integrity.

Her ongoing activism and struggle for change also ground Ramphele's criticisms in reality. This is not a book by one of those comrades who 'didn't struggle to be poor' and who, on finding themselves newly rich, seem to have forgotten that for most South Africans the struggle continues. Instead, it's clear that Ramphele feels the pain and frustration of those who cry, "The soil has been stolen."

But despite Ramphele's unique position, despite the clear sincerity of her writing, and despite the breadth and inclusiveness of her book's contents, there is something unfulfilling about *Conversations*.

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Perhaps it's as misguided to judge a book by its title as by its cover, but this reader expected a book entitled *Conversations with My Sons and Daughters* to contain mostly, well, conversations – with young men and women. But the authentic voices of the young are hardly to be found anywhere in *Conversations*. Instead, the book reads as Dr Mamphela Ramphele conveying her views on what has gone wrong, when, why, and how to address it, to her sons and daughters – the youth of South Africa.

There's an inherent implication in this approach, which is that the young themselves should first listen before they speak on the subject of South Africa's governance. Perhaps the even stronger implication, given Ramphele's frank assessment of our struggling education system, is that the young are not equipped to deal with this topic without the guidance of their elders.

But Ramphele's book is equally frank in elucidating how South Africa's elders have failed the young. She decries the culture of heroism in politics that has emerged from the anti-apartheid struggle, and makes it clear that the qualities required to lead that struggle are not the same as the qualities required to lead a democratic nation.

Might we not then look for those qualities in a generation of those who never knew the struggle for democracy, and are unburdened with its baggage, but who live the struggle for a well-governed, fair, equal and prosperous South Africa every day of their lives?

Perhaps that is Ramphele's intention, and her book itself should be read as a call to arms, a cry of, "The soil has been stolen!" But in the end, it is her voice we hear, not the answering shouts of her sons and daughters.

So, though *Conversations* serves as a useful introduction to, and analysis of, the problems confronting South Africa's governance in the early 21st century, I cannot help but feel that it is also a missed opportunity to give voices to this country's voiceless sons and daughters, and find out if, after all, they don't have something useful to say.