



June 2017

Thembekile Kimi Makwetu: Holding local government to account

Auditor-General, Kimi Makwetu, plays a crucial role in local government - leading the Chapter 9 institution's assessment of South Africa's municipalities and municipal entities' audit processes. His latest local government audit outcomes Report (released last week, for the 2015-16 financial year, municipaliq.co.za) called for greater levels of leadership accountability as a central (but not new) theme. With parliamentary discussions underway considering augmenting the AG's role in local government, this Profile reviews Makwetu's background and how it might impact on these deliberations.

Independent professional supporting constitutional mandate

Makwetu, a qualified chartered accountant born in Cape Town, completed his first degree (in Social Sciences) at the University of Cape Town in 1989, which he followed up with a BCompt (Honours) degree from the University of Natal (through distance learning) in 1997 (www.agsa.co.za).

His career began in the private sector; starting with Standard Bank and then Nampak before completing articles at Deloitte and moving on to Liberty and Metropolitan Life in the Western Cape (www.agsa.co.za). After moving to Gauteng, Makwetu was appointed as Deloitte's forensic unit director, before being appointed as Deputy AG (www.agsa.co.za). Makwetu is married to Miranda Makwetu, with three children.

Makwetu's resume suggests a strong set of professional qualifications in the auditing field, with the technical rigour and depth that is befitting of the post of AG. The Constitution makes provision for the AG as a role that should be carried out without fear, favour or prejudice - a role that some have described as a commercial version of the Public Protector, with the AG's independence (unlike the Public Protector) reinforced by self-funding through audit fees.

Makwetu's appointment as AG on 1st December 2013, was for a seven-year term (www.agsa.co.za), seeing him taking over from Terence Nombembe in what has been noted as a consistent transition, with Makwetu

emphasising accountability in the same, non-partisan way as his predecessor (www.businesslive.co.za). A Business Day article, for instance, quotes Makwetu as arguing:

"As South Africans, we owe it to ourselves to make sure that our environment is created through a culture of doing the right thing. It goes for the delivery of basic services.... We can do better" (www.businesslive.co.za).

This theme is not only one that is pertinent to municipalities but resonates through a troubled body politic at the moment as communities and stakeholders clamour for better service delivery and accountability for local government failures and transgressions. The AG's voice has been unfaltering in supporting this call. In last week's press release for the 2015-16 MFMA results, Makwetu is quoted as defining accountability as follows: "Accountability means that those performing actions or making decisions are answerable for them, but also that there should be consequences for transgressions, lack of action and poor performance... Municipalities should implement consequence management for officials who fail to comply with the applicable legislation, while appropriate and timely action must be taken against transgressors... without entrenched consequence management systems, the local government audit results we have just released are unlikely to shift or change towards the desired state. We believe the introduction of requisite consequences will go a long way in turning the tide towards wholesale good governance in the public sector" (www.agsa.co.za).

This view suggests a continuation of shift in focus by the AG - beyond reporting on outcomes, looking to systems that contribute to poor findings. With the multi-party Standing Committee on the Auditor-General (Scoag), to which the AG reports, beginning a debate on whether the AG should be granted more powers it will be interesting to see whether Makwetu will be given further authority to impose consequences for financial misgovernance.

While the architects of the Constitution may never have envisaged the AG playing a role in addressing systemic failure, it is one that seems both feasible and desirable in the current context, especially given the AG's independence, capacity and level of engagement with local government. Furthermore, Makwetu's professional background, unwavering critique of transgressions and impartial analysis, position him as an ideal figure to spearhead this evolution.

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