

## “The heroes in South Africa are the people themselves”

### A conversation with Mmusi Maimane

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*Mmusi Maimane is a theologian and economist from South Africa. He is running for president on 29 May 2024. He strikes an unusual note: Politicians are first and foremost committed to the citizens and the common good. A conversation about empowering people in communities and the African culture of solidarity.*

*Interviewer: Sabine Breit*

**Question:** Whenever I go to South Africa, I stumble upon all types of community initiatives started by ordinary citizens. What do you think, what is the biggest strength, the biggest driver of this country? What could they unite around, apart from the Springboks?

**Maimane:** The heroes in South Africa are the people themselves. We often say that South Africans are resilient, but I think they are fighters. And they are consistent with what Steve Biko so eloquently put: We give a much more human face to the world.

And to be frank, actually, I think South Africans are ahead of their government. Their government wants to pull them into racial polarization, and class polarization, etc.. I think citizens are figuring out ways where they can do things, grassroots up, to empower themselves and thus bring about a high level of development.

I mean, if you come into the township economy, there are innovators and entrepreneurs, there are people who are hustling to make a difference. So to me, I think the job is to get behind that, and to add wind to those sails rather than be an impediment.

And this is what I try to say to our candidates: get your hands dirty in your community. Your community is doing an incredible job. Your job is to work with and ensure that you offer that social capital.

**Question:** Does this conviction also come from your own journey?

**Maimane:** I grew up in a township. In Soweto. Had it not been for - at the risk of sounding subservient - two white South Africans who had the social capital to say, "this black kid can study something. How do we help partner with that kid so that we can clear pathways that they cannot clear themselves", my path might have looked very different. My parents had never been to university. In my entire family, I was the first one to get a degree. So when you go to university coming from that background, you need someone who had been through that process and say "you know, actually, this could help you in this or that way." That's what I mean by offering social capital.

So, one thing that I have been working hard at doing is being a resource, for example for small businesses in townships, by offering them social capital. This is why I am passionate about building One South Africa - I think the problems and the solutions sit amongst the people of this country. If you partner with them, they can achieve great things

### ***Politicians must be accountable to the people***

**Question:** BOSA started out as a movement that wanted to bring independent candidates not having to toe a party line into parliament. A concept I found quite intriguing. Now, BOSA has become a party itself. Has that changed anything about BOSA, or is it still the same inside?

**Maimane:** Our principles are still in place: Our candidates still have to come from a constituency, they still have to have the support of a constituency, and if the constituency chooses to recall them, it still can.

At BOSA, I might be the party leader, but I have no power to manipulate the selection of candidates: All our candidates had to get signatures. We then have a body that vets those signatures and that carries out interviews in order to authenticate if the candidates are doing the work they claim they are doing. That body trains them, that body ranks them to a point. Many of the candidates I had never met until I saw them appear on our list, which is unique.

We kept the authenticity of saying: if the community has spoken, this is what the community we have promised to serve wants. Human beings and the community are the centre of any program that a government wants to achieve. And so public representation in that instance becomes authentically that. First and foremost, politicians must be accountable to the people.

***To find out how human beings can prosper and thrive in a beautiful way***

**Question:** If your candidates and thus your party is thus bound by the will, and I reckon, also by the needs of the constituency, would you say that it is then, per se, excluded that any central authority defines what “dignity” or “freedom” (two of your values) means, what the “good of the community” is or what “a good life” looks like?

**Maimane:** I think, to a large extent, this is where you will always have the tension that must exist within an organisation. I like to think of it as the tension between your thumb and your pointing finger. It’s that tension between what the communities interests are and what the shared visions and values become. I, for example, have a very strong passion for education, the economy, and the safety of communities. So we have a conversation on that. The candidate reverts back to say: “For us, in our communities, this is what it means, to be safe, to be educated, to be employed.” So it is an iterative relationship. I like to think about it as a triangle: you have BOSA, you have the community and the candidate.

**Question:** You studied psychology, public administration, theology, and now economy. How does all of this play out inside of you? How do those instances communicate with each other?

**Maimane:** It's a good question. To some extent it lets you allow the love of questioning things. From a methodological point of view, it helps you to achieve a sense of purpose and meaning and align it with the economics of a situation. You stop looking at human beings just as "homo economicus", as others would put it, just as consumers buying things. You pursue meaning, you educate yourself and you fight hard, but you also stop subscribing to an economic doctrine that enslaves people. A doctrine that is a departure from seeing human beings as an "image of the divine", as Archbishop Tutu put it.

So ultimately, I find these two disciplines - theology and economy - refreshing. Pure theologically spoken, I might say "there is hope for this nation" but the economist also wants to find out how human beings can prosper and thrive in a beautiful way. To find an economic model that would empower people that ensures their dignity and almost ensure their humanity. You got to get those two things right.

### ***Africa can help to give the world its soul back***

**Question:** Speaking of "getting things right": What can the so-called Global North learn from South Africa? What would you want South Africa to be the role-model for in the future?

**Maimane:** I really believe we can give this notion of Ubuntu. I believe the global north has, through its own pathway, exulted individualism and almost in parallel lost some of its own interconnectedness and shared humanity. When results like Brexit come on board, some of them stem from the fact that there is "othering" of people who don't look like you. Or having a very toxic conversation around immigration.

And lastly, perhaps the global north could also recognize that there is wisdom that can be gleaned elsewhere. We saw this during Covid, where there was a paternalistic view of: "What do you guys know?", "What do your scientist know?"  
Doubting an entire continent, or continents.

So I do think, that interconnectedness, that shared humanity, might be something to learn. And when I look at the conflicts in the world, such as the conflicts that they are seeing in the USA, I think here we also have a lesson to share.

We are not perfect in our reconciliation journey, but boy we made some strides. So, I think we got something to share. A story to communicate, when it comes to the question of: "How do we resolve conflict in ways that ultimately achieve a sense of mutual benefit?"

I believe Africa as a whole has something to bring to the table. I love this continent. I really do think that Africa can help to give the world its soul back.

**Question:** Let me close with a very personal question: What is your biggest wish for your children?

**Maimane:** We kind of have this mantra we say every night: They need to figure out how they can serve this nation and make someone else's life better. It's a mission that all of us are on in the family. So I would hope for them that they could find that. That they can figure out a purposeful life for themselves and make someone else's life better.

*Mmusi Maimane (born 6 June 1980) is a South African politician, businessman, and leader of Build One South Africa (BOSA). He grew up in Soweto and entered politics in 2011. He has been the former Leader of South Africa's opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) political party and the former Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly of South Africa. Maimane is currently running for presidency at the upcoming elections on 29 May 2024.*