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Zondo commission – Ramaphosa: no need to change electoral system

Is South Africa ready for a conversation about an overhaul of its electoral system?

This question came up on day two of President Cyril Ramaphosa's appearance before the state capture commission on Thursday, and based on his response, the ANC would not support a move away from the current proportional representative system.

The proposition was put to Ramaphosa by commission chairperson, Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, who questioned the fairness of the current system. "The current electoral system that we have doesn't give the people, the voters, the right to choose, to elect their president ... it allows each political party that is taking part in elections to put up its own candidate," said Zondo.

"What do you say to the proposition that the system puts at least some voters in a predicament if the party that they'd like to vote for and that they love puts up a candidate that they consider to be unsuitable to be president?"

"It's a proposition that is quite complex and obviously requires a lot of time, and maybe goes back to the origins of our Constitutional construct," Ramaphosa said, adding that South Africa opted for an approach partly based on the Westminster process, while retaining the constituency option at local government level. At national level they thought the constituency system would allow a party with a dominant presence like the ANC to get too much representation in Parliament, and would certainly suppress the prospects of the smaller parties.

On the question of electing a president, Ramaphosa added, South Africa stands out on the continent, because many countries in Africa and around the world have a presidential system.

"In the ANC systems and Constitution, it's written clearly that the president of the ANC becomes the face of the campaign. So ANC members, and I would say supporters, would know that the ANC president automatically becomes the candidate for the party."

It's never really been subjected to debate within the ANC, Ramaphosa said, largely because "we've never really seen the need for it. When we go to the polls it is known who is going to be the face of the campaign as well as, when we do win, who becomes the president."

The matter would need to be discussed, he said. "One would need to demonstrate its attractiveness."

The danger of the presidential system, he continued, is that it has the potential of subjecting a country to a situation where a system "amasses a machinery that propels a person.

"They then start acting like lone rangers, as it were, on a whole number of things. Is that what we want, almost an imperial type of political system where the president acts on a lone basis on many

things? Or a president who acts on a collegiate basis with his other colleagues in the party and who is bound by party strictures?”

Ramaphosa is scheduled to return to the commission in May, when he will answer questions in his capacity as state president.

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