

# The Minority Front

## Amichand Rajbansi – crouching tiger, hidden political genius?

**N**ames, big names in politics, drop faster than I can blink, and with more natural comfort as I sit next to Amichand Rajbansi in his office in Truro House on Durban's Victoria Embankment.

Albert Luthuli, Moses Mabinda... it's an impressive list for the then 12-year-old Clairwood resident just starting out in politics – and despite the fact that I am one of those who tends to dismiss politics as game of dirty tricks, I am aware that I am in the presence of a politician of consummate skill.

More names, a visit by Madiba in 2002, awards of recognition for outstanding service from India, photograph upon photograph recording meetings with visiting dignitaries, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, a visit to Nelson Mandela's home in 2007...

The Raj, as he is affectionately known, currently KwaZulu-Natal's MEC for Sport and Recreation and leader of the Minority Front, has managed to maintain a political stronghold through controversy and court cases to changes in government and is acknowledged as one of South Africa's outstanding political survivors.

Often ridiculed by the press and political opposition alike during his long career, for being one man and a fax machine, Rajbansi's opposition have repeatedly made the mistake of underestimating his appreciation of political positioning and strategy and undervalued his seemingly undying stamina.

Stamina that has seem him serve on the local Indian councils and lead the Indian house of the tricameral parliament under the apartheid regime as well as after the 1994 democratic elections.

Rajbansi's political career began with his election onto the Indian Council in 1974. He

co-founded the Reform Party from which he was suspended in the early 1980s. In 1981 he formed the National People's Party (NPP) and was elected as party leader while it was the only parliamentary chamber ruling party of the Indians, the House of Delegates, under PW Botha's tricameral parliament.

After the 1994 elections, he bounced back yet again to form the Minority Front and is the only Indian head of a political party in South Africa.

A *Sunday Times* article by political reporter Norman West in 1988 likened Rajbansi, to the "kanniedood", a Karoo plant that refuses to wither and die despite the extremes of temperature to which it is exposed. At the time, Rajbansi was leading the NPP and a member of the South Africa Cabinet – and, amazingly, he has gone on to survive the heat of another 20 years of South African politics.

As one would expect from a 34-year period of active political campaigning, Rajbansi has faced many accusations and character assassinations – some valid, some not – but like the tenacious Bengal Tiger after which he was named, he always lands on his feet.

I think the way the media has played on the ferocious tiger image of Rajbansi, including the allusion to the mythical nine lives of a cat, have all served to mask the true stripes of a political genius.

I can't help wondering if Rajbansi didn't actively and purposefully work on encouraging this impression, not only because it made him out to be a tough and fearless leader, but because it put his success into the realm of the mysterious and belied the hard work that lies behind his successful political career.

There are two things this successful Chatsworth politician has done consistently throughout his career, and they are the two

very things that his varying opposition have continued to discount over his many years in politics. One is to work at a community and grass-roots level – to be seen to be accessible and work with and amongst the people. The other is to tirelessly seek and maximise every opportunity for publicity.

His opposition have called him "the master of politics of patronage", "shrewd", "a supreme wheeler and dealer" and while these were meant to be disparaging remarks, in the world of politics they are the very tools one needs to survive – and survive is what Rajbansi has done, like no other South African politician.

His skill and comfort with debating earned him dubious accolades like "the unstoppable talk champion" the "tireless tongue" and "the veritable fount of verbiage" and the winner of the "floating trophy for loquacity", but like his infamous toupee, Rajbansi has skillfully turned these sorts of negative jabs into positive publicity.

There's not doubt in the public's mind that he will fight like a tiger for a cause, talk anyone down in an argument, remain thick skinned and ride the verbal punches and give as good as he gets – whether we like to admit it or not: aren't these the skills we look for in a good politician?

Tactics and long-term strategy are also part of Rajbansi's political arsenal. Rather than follow other Indian political leaders and become absorbed into the ruling African National Congress (ANC), Rajbansi positioned himself with care as a champion of minorities while still (largely) co-operating with the ruling party.

It's not the first time this career politician has gone against the grain. He will probably be best remembered for taking advantage of a political loophole and suing his constitutional rights as

a cabinet minister to become the first person of colour to address the then whites only South African House of Assembly in the Free State.

That was in April 1998 – and he's still making headlines, whether it be for allying and splitting with the ANC 17 times between 2001 and 2004, or questioning whether he really has a mandate to represent Indian interests... and you can be sure it will not be the last.

The former soccer referee and businessman predicted in an article printed in 1976: "Everything in my life is planned. My entry into politics was no accident. This is what I wanted to do and, by God, I am here to stay and heard for a long time."

Rajbansi, who has learnt much from studying Napoleon Bonaparte and Alexander the Great, attributes his survival of four decades of South African politics to two things: being very wide awake and responding with lightening speed to situations; and to working with the people.

South Africa's greatest political tightrope walker of all time said: "I'm a grass-roots person. I believe you must work amongst the masses and serve them with honesty, sincerity and dedication."

As leader of the Minority Front, Rajbansi has championed the rights of Indians and minority groups in general and could very well be carving out a niche role in a possible ministry of minority rights.

As provincial minister for Sport and Recreation since 2004, Rajbansi has in his inimitable style worked hard to bring sports to the masses in KZN, and although there is likely to be the usual criticism, KZN was recognised as the best performing province for 2007 by the Ministry of Sport and Recreation: an accolade based on performance that speaks for itself. KZN also won the South African Games in 2007, another achievement as MEC of which Rajbansi is rightfully proud.



Born on 14 January 1942, KZN's long-lived politician said he is 60 days older than ANC president Jacob Zuma, and has been nominated for a lifetime achievement award by the Indian International Friendship Society, which will be presented in January 2009.

We can expect to see more from Rajbansi in the years to come. He will be contesting the 2009 elections and predicts that he will be "in devastating form" and at the peak of his career.

"It is very important that we have a multi-party democracy and respect for individuals and individual rights," said Rajbansi.

And whether one admires how he plays the political game or not, you surely have to admire

the courage and cunning that he has used to reposition himself, yet again, within the South African political arena.

While others have not wanted to make a stand on racial or minority grounds and chosen to blend with the masses, Rajbansi is out on his grand stand, being seen and heard, loquaciously, championing for causes that make a difference to a significant portion of South Africans.

Politics may not be pretty – but watching Rajbansi play the masterstrokes of his game is political poetry in motion, the subtlety and beauty of which are sometimes only revealed, like a Bengal tiger camouflaged in the shadow, by more careful examination of the terrain. ▲