

Julius Malema interview: 'I am a good person. I don't wish to harm anybody'

Julius Malema, former ANC Youth League president who was expelled from the party, says he doesn't wish to harm anybody.



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Julius Malema, South African firebrand, says he doesn't wish to harm anybody Photo: Jordi Matas

By [Aislinn Laing](#), Johannesburg

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To his enemies, Julius Malema or "Juju" as he is commonly known, is a loud-mouthed demagogue, a Mugabe-esque despot-in-waiting, the very mention of whose name curls lips at the dinner tables of the country's elite, both black and white.

Abroad, he is known for his insistence on singing Kill the Boer, his ugly racial attack on a BBC reporter, his praise of Zimbabwe's "Comrade" Robert Mugabe and his supporters' penchant for hurling rocks and bottles at riot police and reporters.

The negative publicity culminated this year with the former ANC Youth League president's expulsion from the party. Among his crimes in ANC eyes were calling for the overthrow of "imperialist puppet" Ian Khama, president of neighbouring Botswana, and labelling South Africa's President Jacob Zuma a "dictator" for trying to rein him in.

But last week, the controversial showman revealed a softer side during a rare interview with a foreign newspaper. Welcoming *The Sunday Telegraph* to his rented home in the wealthy Johannesburg suburb of Sandton, he insisted that the "monster" label was misplaced.

"Nooo," the 31-year-old purred. "They are talking about the Julius Malema of the newspapers, not me.

"Those who come to interact with me get a different picture altogether. I am a good person. I've got no bad intentions to harm anybody in this country."

Seated on an ivory damask armchair in a marble-floored reception room, he had dispensed with his trademark beret, the T-shirts bearing revolutionary slogans and the bawdy, bullying tone of speeches and press conferences.

They were replaced by Armani jeans, a soft cream sweatshirt and a more introspective mood.

Julius Malema was named by Forbes as one of Africa's 10 most powerful young men in 2011. Today, he is chastened, eager to keep the media on side and his name in the headlines following his ejection from the party in February.

Last week, he had to follow the ANC's five-year National Policy Conference from afar, on television and via phone calls from his ANC Youth League allies who were attending.

It must have been agony for someone who joined the party aged nine and has known little of life outside of it, despite his insistence that he is "fine" and still confident he "did nothing wrong".

He conceded he never foresaw his expulsion, having viewed himself as one of the young Turks who, like former youth league leader Nelson Mandela before him, pushed a radical agenda with the indulgence of his seniors.

"I was very shocked because I know the ANC to be a very patient organisation, especially with the youth," he said.

He laid the blame squarely at the feet of the "insecure" Jacob Zuma who, he claims, wanted rid of him because he highlighted the "institutionalised mediocrity" of his administration.

Now, he said, the 70-year-old president has sunk to "stealing" his ideas. As the country's developing economy has stagnated - growth is forecast to be less than 3 per cent this year, not nearly enough to cut into the 42 per cent unemployment rate among young people - Mr Zuma faces a restive party and a new generation of post-apartheid voters questioning why the ANC has not delivered more.

Mr Zuma told conference delegates that the country's assets remained largely in the hands of "white males", and said an "economic transformation" was needed to match the political one, 18 years after apartheid.

If the ANC did not take "radical" action, the president warned, the estimated 40 per cent of South Africans who still live in poverty would lose patience.

"That's the impatience we've been speaking about but people have not wanted to listen, saying we're just a group of young people who are suffering from excitement," Mr Malema grumbled. "Maybe our expulsion was precisely for this purpose, so that those ideas could shine through."

Among those discussed at conference were calls to nationalise the country's rich gold, diamond, coal and platinum mines, and forcibly reclaim white-owned land - though nothing was settled.

Such campaigns have spooked investors and confirmed for many critics what they see as Mr Malema's lunacy and lack of understanding of basic economics. He maintained that his nationalisation call is just a populist shorthand, and that the system can be made more equitable without bankrupting the country.

"Investors must not forget that they were once told a terrorist, Nelson Mandela, had taken over the country and was going to run it down - yet he became a world icon," he said.

"We will never put our country in a disastrous economic situation. We know the implications of that and they should have confidence in the ANC."

He insisted that the spectre of Zimbabwe's land grabs against white farmers would not be repeated. Land must be taken without compensation but also without violence, he said, in the public interest and not to the benefit of politicians, adding pointedly: "There's not going to be any of Julius getting the land for free."

He was unrepentant of his praise for Robert Mugabe. "He is the only remaining African leader who can still say no to Europe. The rest are very scared of the imperialist forces."

His assessment of the ageing Zimbabwean leader suggests some astonishing blind sides to his judgement. He parroted the party line of Mr Mugabe's ruling Zanu PF, blaming Zimbabwe's economic collapse on Western sanctions, with little of the analytical thought he seems able to apply to his own country.

Pressed about the Mugabe-ordered massacre of an estimated 20,000 mainly Ndebele opposition supporters in the 1980s, and the forced clearance of millions of people from urban shanty towns in the 2005 Operation Clean Out The Trash, he shrugged: "You must understand that every leader will have his or her weaknesses."

However he allowed no such excuses for President Zuma, whom he backed as a more consensual alternative ANC leader to the aloof President Thabo Mbeki in 2007 - a judgment that with hindsight he regrets.

"He was presented to us as a man of the people who would not continue with neo-liberal economic policies," he said.

"But we realised very quickly we had made a mistake. He became worse and worse and abused state power, used his influence for personal benefits."

He is not alone in making such claims about the polygamous president. Some critics have renamed South Africa's Black Economic Empowerment legislation, aimed at redressing apartheid wrongs, "Zuma Economic Empowerment" for the benefits it has showered on many of his family and friends.

He has been accused of using state law enforcement services to fight his political battles, most recently reinstating crime intelligence chief Richard Mdluli without explanation after he was suspended for fraud and corruption. Shortly afterwards a letter emerged, reportedly written by Mr Mdluli, which appeared to promise to help President Zuma win a second term.

Zuma's ANC, Mr Malema sighed, is something the party's legendary forefather Nelson Mandela would be ashamed of.

"President Mandela had so much love and respect for the people. It would be wrong to even compare him with what we have today," he said.

He and his fellow youth leaguers view it as their duty to defend the patriarch's legacy. "We cannot fold our arms while the ANC of President Mandela and Oliver Tambo (another former ANC president) is being destroyed like this," he said. "They cannot do it because of age, we must do it for them."

Mr Malema's detractors will accuse him of hypocrisy since the baby-faced revolutionary himself is under investigation for tax evasion and taking bribes to influence tenders awarded in his home province of Limpopo. That, he claims, is a "political witchhunt", pursued in the hope that he will agree to stop barracking if the investigation is called off.

"Let them come, I am sitting here without any fear because I've done nothing wrong," he said. "They said they were going to arrest people within three months but we are still waiting."

None the less, a rapid chill descends when he is pressed on how he pays for his Breitling watches, opulent Sandton home and the gleaming Mercedes and Range Rover parked outside - not to mention the man who described himself to *The Sunday Telegraph* as Mr Malema's "chef and butler",

The ANC has a long history of using law enforcement to cow political rivals, but Mr Malema has never adequately explained how he affords such luxuries on his former ANC salary - now withdrawn - of no more than R50,000 (£4,000) a month, and earnings from his Limpopo engineering firm, On-Point.

"You know it's very disrespectful to come into somebody's house and start counting what he has," he snapped. "I've accepted to do an interview with you out of respect."

How then, do his impoverished supporters feel about him playing the Big Man? "Joe Slovo (the leading anti-apartheid activist) was white but he fought for blacks who were oppressed. You don't have to be poor to understand the struggles of the poor."

With a judicious change of subject to family life, cordial relations were restored. He glowed with pride when asked about his five-year-old son Ratanang. "Like father like son, it looks like he's going to be extreme, big trouble," he grinned.

His grandmother Sarah, who raised him with his mother away working as a cleaning lady, still treats him "like a little boy" and it is her dying wish to see him married, he said.

But he is suspicious of potential girlfriends' motives. "You don't know whether they are looking for the president of the youth league or whether they are looking for you," he said.

He is more than happy to laugh at himself - and even at comparisons between his interviewer's six-month pregnancy bump and his own, more pronounced belly.

He pronounced himself unimpressed by the ANC's reaction, two months ago, to an exhibition at a Johannesburg gallery of paintings by Brett Murray, a former anti-apartheid campaigner who is a critic of the ruling party's self-enrichment. One of them, *The Spear*, portrayed Mr Zuma in Lenin-like pose with his genitals on display.

The ANC outrage that this sparked, with angry protest marches and a boycott of a national newspaper which published a photograph of it, was "stupid", he believes.

"I would have laughed," he said. "That's what you get when you're a public figure, that's the price you pay. People were just testing their power through a non-issue."

Such pronouncements show for some a wisdom in Mr Malema that most overlook.

Patric Mtshaulana, a respected Johannesburg lawyer and apartheid-era political instructor for ANC fighters in exile, represented him in the ANC disciplinary hearings and came to see him as an intelligent and intuitive politician.

"If he had a Walter Sisulu and an Oliver Tambo around him, to educate him and smooth his sharp edges, he could easily become a Mandela," he told *The Sunday Telegraph*.

"Without them, and isolated as the ANC leadership is trying to make him, he could become very dangerous."

Mr Malema eshewed comparisons with Mandela, or even the suggestion that he lead the country one day.

His principal aim, he insists, is to return to the fold. "I will go back to the ANC whenever the right people are there," he said. "President Zuma is 70 now, I am 31. I have got all the time on my side."

In the meantime, he will settle for the role of kingmaker and through his continuing strong influence in the youth league, back a rival to force out Mr Zuma at the party's five-yearly elective conference in December.

His dearest wish for Christmas is a new president. "We can't continue like this, not for a day. We need those changes now," he said.

Once that happens, he believes, his star can only rise again.

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