Tokyo Sexwale is the man of the moment. Ramotena Mabote wonders what his next step will be.
More than 10 years ago, when he was premier of Gauteng, Tokyo Sexwale was known to do unconventional things like taking a drive alone in his vintage VW Beetle to the FNB Stadium to watch a big soccer match.

Many politicians, even small town local councillors, religiously trail along a horde of security personnel even to their own children’s christening ceremonies. And here was the head of the richest and most important province in South Africa driving alone in a car, with no greater safety features than brakes and a seatbelt.

Sexwale broke with convention again earlier this year when he announced that he was being lobbied to stand for African National Congress party presidency.

The history of the ANC is littered with contradictions, but one thing has been consistent over the years, candidates do not announce their desire for office. The ANC nominates and members accept, period.

No lesser a person than former president Nelson Mandela named Sexwale as the first premier of Gauteng in 1994. Arguably, Mandela could have gone for other senior ANC members, but the new president preferred Sexwale. They remain neighbours in Johannesburg’s Houghton and insiders say Sexwale has the tacit support of Madiba for the presidency of the ANC. Sexwale himself, in the interview on BBC’s Hard Talk, spoke about ‘the ANC of Nelson Mandela’, clearly endorsing the belief that he is a Madiba man.

Born in Soweto in 1953, Mosima Gabriel Sexwale, like most activists born in that era, became a member of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s. He joined the ANC underground while at school and went into exile in the Soviet Union, undergoing military officers’ training specialising in army engineering in 1975.

The following year he was back in the country on a guerrilla mission, but was arrested, charged with terrorism and conspiracy to overthrow the South African government, convicted and sentenced to 18 years imprisonment. The 25-year-old Sexwale joined leaders of the liberation movement on Robben Island where he served 13 years before his release in 1990 as part of the general amnesty agreement between the ANC and the National Party.

During his stay at the notorious prison where Nelson Mandela served 18 years of his 27-year jail term, Sexwale met a young white human rights lawyer, who was visiting prisoners. She made quite an impression on him. Soon after his release in 1990, he married Judy Moon and today they have two children, Gabrielle (15) and Chris (14).

Three years after his release, when his friend Chris Hani was gunned down, Sexwale wept in front of television cameras. His public display of emotion touched the hearts of Radio 702 listeners who voted him ‘sexiest politician in South Africa’. Sexwale lives up to that image. He dresses impeccably, speaks Afrikaans when it matters, embraces children, loves publicity and, yes, he is not afraid to cry, although he did this only once in recent memory. Mandela’s choice of Sexwale was perceptive. In the township violence of the early 1990s leading up to and beyond the 1994 elections, Sexwale arguably played a pivotal role in facilitating peace among the warring factions and bringing sanity back to the streets of Johannesburg, especially on the East Rand.

It was Sexwale who went to address angry hostel dwellers, some of them baying for blood, and said to the crowd: ‘I know you are indunas (chiefs), but I am induna-kulu (premier)’. Such action could only be mustered by a man fully aware of the gravity of the situation and his power to lead and control angry crowds.

His bravery and willingness to lead from the front, even if it meant he was putting his own life on the line, proved his leadership qualities. Gauteng sped faster to a peaceful situation thanks to the leadership of the man who was to run the province successfully for just over three years before quitting to venture into business.

His move into business was yet another unexpected step. Whereas most of his
Although he says he is being lobbied – implying it is not his ambition – to go back into active politics, the latest turn of events is in character. He is unconventional and fearless, marching in where angels fear to tread. He also likes publicity and the spotlight, even if it comes with vilification.

So will Tokyo Sexwale become the next president of the ANC? Those who play in the black economic empowerment circles with him don’t think so. They say the ANC is still a closed society and is not ready for American-type politics where personality, coupled with wealth, counts for more than party loyalty.

They may be right. But one thing is sure, Sexwale has upset yet another convention and one day South Africa may have a different presidential system because one man dared to make waves.

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