

The Second Transition: Hope and Fear

By Daniel Silke

With less than a year before South Africa's fourth democratic elections, the country finds itself gripped in a vice of political uncertainty, internal dissension and leadership transition. The end of the second (and final) term of President Thabo Mbeki's rule has resulted in a timely but somewhat heavy-handed review of the past ten years of the post-Mandela era – and the overall verdict has been to blame Mbeki for most of the ills of the past – and to look to a new slate of leaders to take the country forward.

The review of the last decade has been honest and brutal. The African National Congress (ANC) has been looking inward at itself and has sought few excuses in assessing the many impediments to achieving a thriving and globally-competitive nation. With President Mbeki constitutionally bound to vacate his office next year, he has become an easy target for vilification. He is at once a sitting duck for criticism and has also become a lame duck in terms of any remaining power that he wields.

The long-held tradition of the ANC to honour its liberation heroes at all costs is fast disappearing in the South Africa of 2008. Mbeki's failures – most notably his stance on Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS, crime, corruption, the economy and the extension of political control via Mbeki comrades has alienated many in his own party.

Gone are the days of blind loyalty to the party bosses. Mbeki is now regularly condemned by all and sundry. In fact, key members of his alliance (in particular the SA Communist Party) now call for his resignation as a matter of course – despite the fact that he has barely a year to serve as the constitutional head-of-state. The print media in the country add to Mbeki's woes by calling on him to quit office. He is now censured at every turn.

This represents an unprecedented turning point within the ruling party. With loyalty to the President no longer assured, the ANC is more divided than

ever. Respect for authority has been replaced with a new-found internal dynamism that while crude in execution could just lay the foundations for a much more vibrant and mature political system in the future.

For a party of Liberation, the ANC has represented nationalistic tendencies in the past – and a more Africanist orientation over the Mbeki years. Both these eras were characterised by exploiting the fight against Apartheid and colonialism. Both eras necessitated strong party leadership quite naturally committed to the core cause – the defeat of the oppressor.

Mbeki's South Africa represented more of a transition from white rule to black majority rule than the symbolic and bridging years of the Nelson Mandela presidency. Mandela was the conciliator and father figure. He was inclusive – bringing his former enemies and suspicious minority groups into the new South Africa and offering them a sense of place – a sense of feeling wanted and needed as the country moved into a new era.

Mbeki was a different character. Always paranoid about his political future, he saw Africa as a key agenda point. Mbeki's denialist views on HIV/AIDS and his acquiescence to Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe for an extended period smacked of an anti-colonialist world-view. Mbeki was never that inclusive.

While Mandela might have been somewhat idealistic in his post-1994 utopian view of a united, inclusive society, Mbeki set the scene as early as 2001 with his analysis of South Africa as a two-nation society still racially divided.

This view was to set the scene for much of his Presidency. Minority groups increasingly felt isolated. A lack of political will to tackle the scourge of crime left many demoralized and contemplating emigration. The much needed but onerous Black Economic Empowerment policies left many minorities contemplating their future career options.

Cronyism and patronage – always a feature of the former White Minority government – was back in vogue. And, the effects on state institutions are now being felt as inefficiencies and political bickering weakens state and quasi-state deliveries.

Cynically though, the promotion of cronies and careerists within the Mbeki fold promoted a 'them and

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us” culture within the organization. Patronage was linked with being close to Mbeki while the outsiders saw little of the largesse.

In a country where the ANC’s ideological leit-motiv was always the fight against colonialism and oppression, the Mbeki years began to resemble a scramble for the resources of the state as careerists fought to ingratiate and enrich themselves at the expense of commitment to the country.

Zimbabwe and the ever-increasing authoritarian drift in that country was also increasingly another blot on the copybook of Mbeki - even amongst ordinary ANC members. In retrospect, perhaps Thabo Mbeki was ideologically much closer to Robert Mugabe than many South Africans were prepared to admit.

The softly-softly diplomatic dance initiated and perpetuated by Mbeki over the last 5 years has allowed Mugabe to remain in power and has ironically cemented the Zimbabwean leader’s reign in office to that of Mbeki. The Africanist perspective of Mbeki and the shared suspicion for the West held by both Mugabe and Mbeki drew them together. It wasn’t just the comradeship of the liberation struggle – it was an ideological bond as well.

Mbeki’s alliance with capital – and especially with the beneficiaries of the empowerment policies of the government left many rank-and-file ANC members alienated from power. The pro-capital approach had always riled the Left in the Alliance. Both the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) saw an opportunity in the midst of a global (and domestic) economic slowdown to play their final hand and organize against Mbeki. Furthermore, Mbeki’s more authoritarian grip on political power had left COSATU and the SACP weakened politically and this was, perhaps their only moment, to restore the ascendancy within the ruling party.

It is within this context that the ANC sought a replacement for Mbeki. Mbeki’s firing of the charismatic but compromised Jacob Zuma as Deputy President was the catalyst for an anti-Mbeki crusade that ended with the party rejecting Mbeki’s overtures at a third term as ANC leader and the election of arch-rival Zuma as the new heir apparent. Mbeki had been, proverbially, hoist on his own petard. Zuma, fired by

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Mbeki, had in turn orchestrated the emasculation of his former boss. The lame duck was now mortally wounded.

So, South Africa has now entered yet another transition. First there was the transition from white minority rule to democracy. Now, there is a new transition – a transition from the post-liberation nationalistic and Africanist tendencies of the Mbeki era to a new leadership that looks set to represent socialist and unionist interests. The question remains: Does this represent a sea change in South Africa’s body politic or will the continuities outweigh the changes.

Jacob Zuma’s anointment as heir apparent marks a critical shift in South Africa. Although tainted as a result of the failed (but damaging) rape trial and still awaiting charges on corruption, Zuma is the antithesis of Mbeki. Seemingly an anti-intellectual, his affable warm nature has endeared him to many. Even minorities and those sceptical are warming to a man who has run a masterful campaign.

Akin to any US-style Presidential election, Jacob Zuma reached out to disparate constituencies. He has charmed business leaders and reassured jittery white farmers. His message is carefully distilled to the many key elements of the South African body politic.

At the very least, Zuma is likely to be a more per-



Former ANC deputy president Jacob Zuma, right, is congratulated by South Africa President Thabo Mbeki after winning the ballot to become ANC president and lead the party, on the third day of the African National Congress conference in Polokwane, South Africa, Tuesday, Dec. 18, 2007. © AP Photo/Jerome Delay

sonable president that Mbeki. His warm human smile contrasts sharply with the cold, clinical style of his predecessor. In a sense, he could be South Africa's answer to Ronald Reagan. Sniggered at by the chattering classes, yet very effective as a bridge-builder in a country where minorities feel threatened and increasingly marginalized.

This perhaps is one of the key differences between a more Africanist South Africa under Mbeki and a more collectivist country under Zuma. There is greater likelihood of a Left of centre President playing to an inclusive tune rather than singling out specific groups for benefits.

Secondly, the post-mortems on the Mbeki era have been damning. And, for once, the ANC is set to question its own inefficiencies over the last decade, rather than simply lay the blame on the previous regime. With the Mbeki administration's inefficiencies amplified by the national shortage of electricity and resultant power-blackouts (not to mention the dysfunctional educational system and perpetually high murder and rape rates), it would seem easy to blame the sitting administration.

Within the South African context, blaming oneself for policy failures is something of a novelty. The end of the Mbeki era has seen ordinary ANC Members of Par-

liament rediscover that they actually can (and should) be able to hold the Executive to account. Parliamentary Standing Committees now regularly cross-question Cabinet Ministers and Senior Bureaucrats with penetrating queries.

It is as if there has been a rediscovery of accountability which was sorely lacking in the Mbeki era. Perhaps the move from Nationalist/Africanist to Unionist also will assist the fledgling democracy. Perhaps accountability and internal dissent will become institutionalised as the more authoritarian tendencies of the past fade and the Left take charge.

Indeed, by not playing the blame game, the ANC are now legitimizing self criticism – an important step in the political maturity of the new democracy. Criticizing one's own is perhaps now a function of a party in transition – but it is a new found skill that will be tough to curtail even under a new administration. Party members are now relishing their new found political freedoms.

And, in an ironic twist, the Left now have a new rallying cry. Starved of an issue (other than bad-mouthing Mbeki for years) their focus has now turned to removing Robert Mugabe from office. Just as Mbeki was intricately linked with Mugabe, so Zuma and his allies in the trade union movement are linked

to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe.

Thabo Mbeki might have had some ideological similarities with Robert Mugabe but he also feared Mugabe's Zanu-PF party being defeated at the polls by a credible opposition party. This scenario would have provided a precedent for South Africa whereby the ANC might be threatened by a more Left-wing political party and therefore lose its grip on power.

Although Mbeki may have feared this scenario, it has indeed come to pass within the South African context. Now, just as the MDC does threaten Mugabe, so does a unionist alliance threaten Mbeki – albeit from within his own political party. In other words, South Africa is likely to enjoy a change of leadership (and ideological orientation) much akin to what might happen in Zimbabwe.

Unlike Zimbabwe, the second transition in South Africa will come from a different faction within the ruling party – almost as if there has been a simulation of multi-partyism or a veneer of competitive democracy.

The factionalism within the ANC now threatens to derail the post-liberation cohesion of the party. Suddenly the authoritarian base of a nationalistic movement has had its soul ripped asunder. The trade unionists are now in control and the persona of Jacob Zuma looms large over the presidency.

Unfortunately, South Africa still has to develop the institution of competitive elections. With internal opposition in the ANC now replacing opposition parties and the competition for votes, the country still has to legitimize voting for alternative political parties. However, the disunity displayed can be a catalyst for the eventual splintering of the ruling party and the creation of a much-needed competitive political system.

Whether Zuma survives the corruption charges or not, his supporters are already setting about ridding the country of any residue of Thabo Mbeki's influence. Government departments and state institutions (like the national broadcaster) are currently battlegrounds. Mbeki supporters are slowly being isolated. Provincial party structures like that of the Western Cape are now racked by internal ANC tensions involving competing factions – often ending in political violence.

The second transition therefore offers many oppor-

tunities. But it holds critical dangers as well. For all the renewed debate within the strained democratic system, there remains a distinct danger that cronyism and careerism may well be simply perpetuated under a different guise.

In a country beset by unemployment of at least 30% and ongoing pervasive poverty, access to scarce resources is seen as a function of holding political office. Unless a new cadre of leadership emerges - who can lay claim to a moral high ground - it is unlikely that this scenario will change.

For all the positives that Zuma can bring, his own record casts doubt on the country to reinvent itself. Zuma will need to be quickly acquitted by the courts and proceed with a verifiable moral agenda and strong leadership should this dilemma be adequately addressed. Alternatively, a new leader of note – and respect – needs to be found. This can still be newly installed deputy ANC president Kgalema Motlanthe or even the somewhat removed (but none less influential) Cyril Ramphosa.

The demise of the moral high ground within the ruling party has left a void. Coupled with a tainted heir apparent to the Presidency, there is natural cause for concern. However, amidst the increasing factionalism, there is an emergence of debate unheard of within the ruling party. No-one is safe. Blind allegiance to the party or to personality is on the wane – despite recent militant statements from some Zuma supporters.

The liberation party is maturing and encountering the effects of political freedoms now as they enter their second decade. But what we are seeing is a messy coming of age – somewhat akin to a teenager taking some steps towards adulthood and often straying from the accepted norms.

Ultimately, the country now needs strong, principled and ethical leadership to steer it on an adult course. The next year will be critical in establishing whether the second transition will take up where the first left off – enhancing democracy and providing a better life for all. Or, will hard-won freedoms and the pursuit of a South African dream become the continued (and increasingly exclusive) domain of the cronies – emboldened with a new leader? ❄️