

Introduction

The Politics of Jacob Zuma

Sean Jacobs

Jacob Zuma, the President of Africa's most powerful democracy since April 2009, and the recently chosen 'African President of the Year' (Sapa 2009), arouses strong passions from his supporters and detractors.

A longtime ANC official from a humble peasant background in what is now Kwazulu-Natal province, Zuma was picked by the ANC to be the country's deputy president under Thabo Mbeki in 1999.

The men, close colleagues during exile (and during the early years of negotiating with the Apartheid government), appeared to only enjoy a friendly rivalry at that point.

So when it came to predicting who would lead South Africa when Mbeki departed the national stage, most observers did not think of Zuma as a serious contender. He hardly featured in the daily cut and thrust of national politics, save for spearheading a 'moral regeneration' effort and co-chairing a national body to coordinate the government's AIDS prevention and treatment effort with NGOs. No one took the focus on morals seriously and Mbeki was really in charge of AIDS policy.

Then in 2004 Shabir Shaik, a close associate of Zuma, was tried on charges of corruption and fraud relating to a controversial \$5 billion government arms deal. During the trial it emerged that Shaik managed Zuma's finances and that Zuma was probably embroiled in a corrupt relationship with Shaik (he was accused of procuring bribes for Zuma from arms manufacturers).

In June 2005, President Mbeki — alluding to possible

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corruption charges against Zuma — decided to relieve Zuma of his duties as deputy president. A few months later Zuma was charged with raping the HIV-positive daughter of his former cellmate on Robben Island.

Though Zuma was acquitted of the rape charge, during the trial he claimed to have showered after sex to prevent possible infection and also suggested that his alleged victim invited sex by dressing provocatively. His supporters — who held marches and rallies outside the court — also threatened his accuser with death. She eventually sought asylum in the Netherlands.

By most accounts, Zuma would have been set for certain political isolation. Instead, a combination of factors resurrected his political career.

Zuma's warm personality contrasted sharply with Mbeki's cold, secretive and paranoid character (Mbeki at one point had the Minister of Police investigate three of his rivals for ANC President). Zuma's poor background — he is from a peasant family; his single mother was a domestic to white Durban families — also differed from Mbeki's status as an ANC insider (Mbeki's father was a rival of Mandela and served more than two decades on Robben Island; in fact, Mbeki was sent out of South Africa to prepare him for leadership).

Mbeki's government also became associated with crony corruption and loyalty to non-performing ministers and senior government officials, AIDS deaths (and denialism) as well as other negative social indicators (massive unemployment and growing class fissures among blacks, among others).

Mbeki's critics inside the ANC and its allies (the trade union movement and communists) found in Jacob Zuma — 'the 100% Percent Zulu Boy' — an ambitious politician and willing accomplice.

For Mbeki's opponents ground zero would be the party's national conference in December 2007 — where the ANC usually anoints its leaders and, since 1990, when it was unbanned, its presidential candidates.

Publicly Mbeki — who by now could not conceal his open disdain for Zuma, denied that he wanted to change the country's constitution and serve a third term, leaving it to his surrogates to publicly promote the idea. When his proposal of a third-term was rejected by the ANC, Mbeki instead offered to remain only as party president.

No one could predict what followed next: Zuma trounced Mbeki in elections for party leader (he won nearly twice the number of voters Mbeki got).

With Mbeki now controlling the state and Zuma the party, something had to give. It was clear Zuma's camp held the upper hand and in September 2008 Mbeki resigned his post as the country's president. This plunged the ANC into its first serious crisis since the 1970s (then a group of rabid African nationalists were expelled because of their views of whites and communists).

Some party leaders close to Mbeki eventually broke away to form the Congress of the People (COPE) in October 2008. Though the ANC appointed the party secretary-general, Kgalema Montlante, as President of South Africa, it was clear that the preferred candidate of those who had ousted Mbeki, was Zuma. In early 2009 the corruption charges against Zuma was dismissed. Soon after he was declared the ANC's candidate for President. Zuma, contrary to elite opinion, especially foreign and domestic media, emerged as a capable leader, rallying the ANC's core supporters and running a smooth, tight election campaign to be elected as South Africa's third democratic president.

Zuma had campaigned with the promise that he would only serve one term, but in June 2009 he announced that he wants to serve the maximum allowed two pres-

idential terms. This means Zuma will now certainly dominate South African politics for the next decade.

Unlike his predecessors as South Africa's democratic presidents — Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki — Zuma is a relatively close book. He is also not known to write things down.

But Zuma, like Mbeki before him, is considered a polarizing figure in mainstream accounts. Journalist Mark Gevisser (2007), who authored a 900-odd page biography of Thabo Mbeki, later declared that he is not a fan of Zuma. Gevisser later wrote an article for the *British Prospect Magazine* to declare that he would not vote for the ANC with Zuma as leader (Gevisser 2009). Former ANC member of parliament, Andrew Feinstein, in his book about the arms deal, described Jacob Zuma as morally compromised. Some, like journalist Alec Russell, hedge their bets on Zuma. In his recent book on South Africa, Russell (who was a fan of Mbeki's rightwing economic policies) speculates on what kind of leader Jacob Zuma will be: 'If South Africa is lucky, Zuma will be its Ronald Reagan'. That is if Zuma

leaves the governing to technocrats, while working to 'make the country feel good about itself'. At the same time Zuma could develop into a 'Big Man personality cult' and a 'charismatic populist,' according to Russell (2009). But with the exception of Russell, none of the other books claim to be about Zuma specifically.

To shed light on the politics and ideology of Jacob Zuma, we approached a number of experts (among them historians, political scientists, and sociologists) based inside and outside South Africa, to shed led on Zuma's politics and biography. In these essays, the contributors attempt to get beyond the headlines to explore aspects of Zuma's political identity, his class politics, biography (Robben Island, his Zuluness), his political alliances, style of government, gender politics, among others.

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Essays are by Suren Pillay, Peter Dwyer, Raymond Suttner, Ari Sitas, Hlonipha Mokoena, Thembisa Waetjen and Gerhard Mare and Fran Buntman. There is also an essay by an Anonymous contributor. Rather than summarize them here, we have decided to let them speak for themselves.

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