

Diary of a Bad Year?

South Africa's Upcoming ANC Election

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If South Africans needed a reminder that democracies aren't made or entrenched overnight, 2007 has certainly provided it in spades. Overshadowed by the ruling African National Congress' (ANC) elective National Conference due to be held in December, our politics have taken on all the characteristics of a complex Shakespearian play. Time will tell as to whether it will end in an uplifting and compelling dramatic finale, a farce or a tragedy.

The importance of the ANC's Polokwane National Conference needs underlining: The state president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, is due to step down from office at the end of his constitutionally-prescribed second term which will expire at our fourth democratic elections in the first half of 2009. Notwithstanding a range of important strategic and policy decisions, the National Conference will elect a new ANC leadership collective and decide whether to affirm Mbeki as president of the movement or to elect a new president to guide the party through the next five years. Should a new president of the ANC be elected in December, this individual will, in all likelihood, be our third state president, following in the not so insignificant footsteps of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki.

The ANC, popularly perceived as the primary liberators of South Africa, straddles our political and public spheres with near hegemony. They rule in Parliament with nearly 75% of representation, lead provincial government in all nine provinces, and hold executive power in five of our six major cities. Not one of the plethora of opposition parties have sufficient legitimacy to mount a significant challenge to the ANC's incumbency. The health of our democracy, our emerging democratic culture, and the foreseeable future of South Africa, is thus intimately tied to the health and machinations of the ANC itself.

Battle lines have been drawn between two evenly matched camps, or factions, coalescing around the incumbent ANC president, Mbeki, and his deputy, Jacob Zuma, while a number of dark horses wait in the wings for a crisis that may necessitate the endorsement of a compromise candidate. The temperature and intensity of the struggle for leadership was raised in the aftermath of Mbeki's dismissal of Zuma as deputy president of South Africa in 2005, after a High Court trial linked Zuma to Shabir Shaik who was convicted of corruption stemming from a multi-billion dollar arms deal. Zuma initially stepped down from his position within the ANC, but a mass rebellion of ANC cadres at the National General Council of the organization in 2005 reinstated him in the leadership edifice of the party.

Zuma's star has since waxed and waned through a series of court cases linked to alleged corruption, and an explosive rape trial, in which he was acquitted. His supporters allege a conspiracy spearheaded by the President and his cohorts that has abused state institutions to purge the party of Zuma, and consolidate their position in the state and the economy for years to come. Mbeki's sympathizers, concurrently, cite Zuma's lack of judgment (his relationship with Shaik, his corrupt financial advisor; his admission to having had consensual, but unprotected, sex with an HIV positive woman more than half his age whom he had helped to raise); the allegation that Zuma is being used as a Trojan horse by corrupt associates and a disaffected left to leverage state resources; and the potential for ongoing court action to prejudice the Office of the President of the ANC and embarrass the country at large, as their argument for Mbeki's continued incumbency. Suffice to say, myth-creation, the targeted leaking of information, innuendo, whispering campaigns, and systematic character assassination have marked the strategies of both camps, in a bitter struggle for the future of both the ANC and the country.

Mbeki's rule has brought prosperity to South Africa's entrenched (white) and emerging (black) middle classes; the economy has expanded rapidly through the longest economic upswing since the Second World War; South Africa straddles the world stage as "Africa's Voice"; and the provision of basic services and a nascent welfare net for the poor has accelerated and begun to draw dividends. Yet these gains have been wrought in the context of deepening inequalities between rich and poor, urban and rural; epidemics of AIDS and crime that the President all but denies; and a massive influx of forced and economic migrants from our northern neighbors as a consequence of economic stagnation and collapse (Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique), war (DRC, Somalia, Burundi, Eritrea), and human rights abuses (most of the above as well as Cameroon, Nigeria, and more). Policy prescriptions, many of which are sound, have nevertheless been perceived as having been foisted on the ANC, its formal allies in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), and informal partners in civil society. Critics cite technocrats and consultants who rule the roost at the expense of the consultation, consensus and debate that many feel formed the lifeblood of the mass democratic movement and should underpin our democratic consolidation.

Many feel left behind, neglected and alienated from the fruits of the transition. The organized left and the poor have rallied to the cause of Zuma in a coalition of the disaffected, perceiving the ANC Deputy President as open, empathetic and in tune with people, as opposed to Mbeki who is often portrayed as aloof, arrogant, out-of-touch and patronizing.

The ghosts of scandals past have reappeared this year: The spectre of Mbeki's AIDS denialism resurfaced through the firing of his progressive and orthodox deputy health minister (while his allegedly alcoholic, obsessively eccentric and ineffective health minister remained untouched), and the publication of damning statements and writings attributed to President Mbeki in a new biography. The arms deal is very much with us as international probes in Germany and Britain gather apace, while an ex-ANC member of Parliament published an inside account of the alleged ANC-led, government cover-up. Conspirators alleging the abuse of state institutions for political gain have drawn vindication from Mbeki's suspension of the director of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) amid a cloud of innuendo relating to the imminent arrest of the national commissioner of police, Jackie Selebi, who is alleged to have colluded with, and materially benefited from, relationships with organized crime. Selebi remains in his post, seemingly immune from his poor record in fighting crime and the significant mud thrown at his name, while the fastidious Pikoli awaits his fate from a presidential commission headed by a senior ANC politician. Zuma, in the interim, has lost a series of court appeals aimed at staving off his being recharged by the NPA for corruption, and the air is thick with rumors of an impending arrest.

Drama, farce or tragedy? Perhaps all three. We have embraced the Chinese curse to live in interesting times. But the stakes are very high for both the ANC as an organization, and the quality of our democratic future. Amid the hubbub of the ANC's internal wrangling, positive precedents have been established within the ANC for debate and through the structures of representative government, where patterns of accountability and oversight have strengthened as power blocs are redefined. We may yet emerge from the next fifteen months with a strong and united ANC that has thrown off the yoke of the leadership "crisis" through compromise and concessions; stronger, more independent state institutions; a democratic culture marked by vigorous and intense debate, accountability and transparency; an affirmed judiciary who operate without fear or favor; and a definitive separation of powers to underpin our democratic trajectory for years to come. The permutations are endless – good and bad – and only time will tell. For the millions of South Africans who will not be counted among the ANC delegates who will convene at Polokwane this December, the matter is all but out of our hands.

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