

Power, Poverty and Populism: Jacob Zuma and the Unmaking of Thabo Mbeki

Anthony Egan SJ

Anthony Egan SJ, of the Jesuit Institute - South Africa, on the ANC's new leader and why his election marks a sea change for the African National Congress.

The election of Jacob Zuma on 18th December 2007, to the presidency of the African National Congress (ANC) at Polokwane, Limpopo Province, heralds the end of the political road for South Africa's incumbent president, Thabo Mbeki. Not only was Mbeki soundly beaten (1505 votes to Zuma's 2329), all of Mbeki's top supporters were trounced in the race for the National Executive Committee (NEC)ⁱ. In South African terms, where for a variety of reasons the ANC is the one-party dominant power in parliament, this is not so much a change in leadership as a change of government. Through a combination of factors – Mbeki's autocratic style of clinging to powerⁱⁱ, mass poverty despite macroeconomic growth, and a well-orchestrated left wing populism on the part of Zuma – a seismic shift has occurred within the ANC which may have repercussions for South Africa. The controversy surrounding Zuma, notably corruption charges pending against him, also raises some important ethical questions about his possible presidency of South Africa

The extent of the shift can be seen by the results of the NEC election. The top positions reveal a clean sweep for the Zuma contingent:

ANC President

Jacob Zuma - 2329 [60.7% of votes cast]
Thabo Mbeki - 1505

Deputy President

Kgalema Motlanthe - 2346 [61.9%]
Nkosoza Dlamini-Zuma - 1444

Secretary-General

Gwede Mantashe - 2378 [62.4%]
Mosiuoa Lekota - 1432



National Chairperson

Baleka Mbete - 2326 [61.2%]
Joel Netshitenzhe - 1475

Treasurer-General

Mathews Phosa - 2320 [62.8%]
Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka - 1374

Deputy Secretary-General

Thandi Modise - 2304 [61.3%]
Thoko Didiza - 1455

The percentages of the victors' votes uncannily call to mind the 1994 South African General Election, in which the ANC came within a few percentage points of a two-thirds majority. Many of the key figures mentioned above have a history of conflict with Thabo Mbeki – Mathews Phosa was briefly accused of plotting against Mbeki; Kgalema Motlanthe, Baleka Mbete and Gwede Mantashe have crossed swords with Mbeki over policy in the past; not to mention the intense rivalry between Zuma and Mbeki. In effect, what we see is an opposition victory from within, with an imminent transfer of power. Recalling political analysts insights that one of the great tests of democratisation comes when a party of liberation is first voted out of office, it will be interesting to see how from within the dominant party the victory of the opposition, in effect the change of government, will be receivedⁱⁱⁱ.

But why did this happen? After all, on the face of it Thabo Mbeki's almost ten years in office have been on the whole a resounding success. Unlike the often all-too-forgiving Mandela approach – where incompetence in governance was treated with too many second chances – Thabo Mbeki ran a tight ship. He demanded that (most of) his cabinet 'delivered or departed', and oversaw with Finance Minister Trevor Manuel economic policies that

have made the country prosper at a level not seen since the early 1970s. The urbane and highly intelligent Mbeki gave South Africa a high profile on the world stage (as Mandela had done) and presented the country as a local economic and political superpower.

Granted, there were problems: Mbeki's, to put it gently, inconsistency regarding HIV-AIDS; his fierce support for a Health Minister viewed by most as an incompetent; and his failure to take a strong moral stance against the gross human rights violations within neighbouring Zimbabwe. Occasionally, too, he seemed personally affronted by criticism of his policies and style of governance – egged on by an increasingly small cadre of ever more shrill apologists for all he did. Though he certainly did not encourage them, he also did not discourage their equation of social criticism with lack of patriotism and sometimes, if the critics were white, with racism.^{iv}

This points to one of the key factors in his defeat on December 18th: **power**. On one level the defeat of Mbeki and his supporters at Polokwane can be ascribed to a leadership style that centralised political power on the President. However articulate and intelligent, Mbeki's leadership has been characterised as aristocratic and even autocratic. With Mbeki brooking little opposition, many ANC members increasingly felt that with few exceptions the Cabinet was no more than a group of assistants carrying out Mbeki's plans. However good they were this flew in the face of the participatory model of decision-making that has become characteristic of the ANC as a party, particularly those who emerged from 1980s internal resistance movements like the United Democratic Front and the trade union movements.

Added to this, there has been a perception among ANC members that Mbeki was a person not to be crossed: at best one could be hauled over the presidential coals for disloyalty, at worst there were incidents where talk of 'conspiracy' was bandied around. The recipients of such attention were, notably, popular ANC figures who may have been seen as a threat to Mbeki (including new Treasurer-General Mathews Phosa) or who were vocal

opponents of the Mbeki government's neoliberal economic policies. Many of the latter came from the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) who were also angry at Mbeki's 'quiet diplomacy' with Robert Mugabe's authoritarian practices in Zimbabwe. It is this left wing of the ANC Alliance, together with the ANC Youth League, who mobilised against Mbeki at Polokwane.

While political power has unambiguously shifted since 1994, economic power is more complex. Most observers concur that the policies of affirmative action and black economic empowerment pursued by the ANC Government to reduce inequality have in fact served to create a black middle and upper class. With the 'old' elite they now share in the prosperity associated with South Africa's re-entry into the global economy. Observer Richard Calland, in his book *Anatomy of South Africa*, has called this an alliance of economic benefit.^v

Such an alliance has not been without tensions. Although it enjoys over 70% of the popular vote, the ANC is itself a political party representing a diversity of political interests and ideologies. Though the dominant section within the ANC government prior to December 18th has heartily endorsed the new economic dispensation^{vi}, at its grassroots the income disparities and reality of poverty drive many of its members in opposite directions.

The South African Communist Party (SACP), which has for decades been an integral part of the grand alliance that is the ANC, is increasingly critical of the neo-liberal policies of President Thabo Mbeki. Together with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), they have become the de facto voice within the ANC of its overwhelmingly poor majority of members and supporters. We should not forget that though the ANC leadership dress well, drive expensive cars and live in the formerly lily-white upper middle class suburbs, the majority of card-carrying ANC members – the majority of those at Polokwane – are poor. ANC supporters and the poor are demanding increased and greater quality service

delivery, job creation and protection, as well as reduced disparity between upper and lower incomes. In the last few years, this has led to increased protest actions around the country and to what appears to be a leadership and policy battle within the ANC itself.^{vii} Just as wealth is linked to power, so poverty is linked to protest. And addressing poverty adequately must inevitably entail certain realignments of power by those who govern – to the benefit of the poor, we submit, and to a more long term vision not trapped in the current neo-liberal globalist mindset.

Thus power is a factor closely aligned to **poverty** which in South Africa takes on many forms. The frequent vision of homeless beggars on our streets is the most obvious. But there is hidden poverty: of subsistence farming deep in the rural areas; of workers on many commercial farms; of unemployment (ranging, depending on how you measure, it from 25 - 40% of adults), and the poverty of those who are employed but earn income that does not meet their basic needs. It is from such poor communities that a young, then illiterate, son of a rural policeman named Jacob Zuma joined the ANC in 1959, gaining a primary school education while imprisoned between 1963 and 1973 on Robben Island.

Writing in the respected HSRC survey *State of the Nation 2004-2005*, Benjamin Roberts^{viii} reported that in 2002 30.8% of children under 17 years went hungry regularly – an 0.9% decrease from 1995, despite a significant attempt by expanded government social services aimed at reducing food insecurity in the country. Many private welfare agencies have declined, their largely overseas-funded budgets slashed after the 1994 democratisation. Public sector welfare services are often uneven in their delivery, suffering from overstretched demand, inadequate staffing and logistical capacity, and at times elements of corruption. Analyst Doreen Atkinson's recent observation^{ix} seems accurate, that though at times the sheer level of poverty and needs overwhelms service delivery such services at local level suffer from endemic corruption, inefficiency and widespread public perception that civil servants enjoy a 'fat cat' lifestyle.

In 2001, economist Sampie Terreblanche indicated^x, the 16.6% "bourgeois elite" earned 72% of the national income. The "petit bourgeoisie" (16.6% of population) earned 17.2%. The remaining population – comprising what he calls the upper, middle and lower lower class – had to make do with the rest. Recent surveys and analyses show that the income disparity within population groups has grown across the board, the most dramatic being that between the new black bourgeois elite (generously estimated at around 2 million people) and the roughly 11.5 million "lower lower class". The percentages, allowing for some economic improvements since Terreblanche's study, are uncanny: the percentage of South Africa's poor and the 60-64% of the vote cast at Polokwane for Zuma nearly coincide. The election of Zuma and his allies can be seen as a reaction to such persistent inequality, a vote of no confidence in the domestic economic policies of the last ten to twelve years. The grassroots of the ANC, the poor who have benefited little from neoliberal macroeconomics, from black economic empowerment and from affirmative action, have voted in what might be seen as the election that matters. In a General Election few felt they had a choice: dissatisfied with opposition parties they could either vote or abstain. Many, including members of the new social protest movements^{xi}, had voted out of loyalty to the ideals of the ANC – and continued to protest against those they'd elected. Polokwane should be seen as a vote for change.

Though Jacob Zuma can no longer be seen as part of the poor – and indeed it may be said that he has solidly entered the middle or upper middle class – his public discourse has consistently been aligned with the poor. He and his comrades within the Alliance – the Communist Party, COSATU and sections of the ANCYL – are the voice of **populism**, the third element in his victory. It could be argued that throughout its history, the ANC has always been a middle class organisation that with increasing frequency over the last fifty years adopted a populist tone^{xii}. It won the 1994, 1999 and 2004 elections on a combination of populism, its liberation struggle credentials and the fact that no viable mass-based opposition party existed.

Zuma's election as president of the ANC can be seen as a popular expression of desire for an alternative to Mbeki. In line with populist presidents in countries like Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, it might be seen as a grassroots expression of resistance to neoliberal globalisation and an expression that 'another world is possible'.

Politically, populism is a two-edged sword. It offers great potential for nation-building and socio-economic reform, but can also take on the form and appearance of mob rule. This mob dimension was seen at Zuma's rape trial and acquittal in 2005-2006, at numerous rallies, and in the uncharacteristically aggressive behaviour of his supporters at Polokwane, where his supporters sang an old ANC struggle song 'Umshini Wami' (which translates as 'Bring me my machine gun'). This is disturbing for many. Similarly a kind of sectarian 'cultural' populism, expressed in some of Zuma's utterances and attitudes to women and homosexuality, is unsettling to those who value highly the principles of equality, non-sexism and comprehensive non-discrimination enshrined in our Constitution and Bill of Rights.

What then of **the future**? Will Zuma become President of South Africa in 2009? How will that affect us?

Zuma's presidency depends on two factors: whether he's convicted of corruption and whether the ANC splinters. The former factor is a possibility. The National Prosecuting Authority is pressing ahead with a case against him and a trial is set for later this year, possibly in August. If he is jailed, it could split the ANC with his supporters demanding his release, guilty or not. Even if he goes to prison, Zuma's influence will remain. With a pro-Zuma dominated ANC NEC, Mbeki will not be able to have control over his successor. At best he might be able to get a compromise candidate – which he should perhaps have done in June. If Zuma stays out of prison, he will be President of South Africa by the end of 2009.

The other – outside – chance is a split in the ANC, with two parties competing, one led by Zuma or his

successor, the other by an Mbeki loyalist. If the 'Mbeki Group' is not wiped out at the polls – further political fallout from Mbeki's grassroots unpopularity – it will only likely be able to govern as part of a coalition, probably with the Democratic Alliance. The strongly Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) would link up with the 'Zuma Group'. Paradoxically, it is conceivable that the socially very conservative African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) might have the handful of seats that could make or break a government. The prospect of such social and political instability is deeply disturbing, as followers of Italian or Israeli politics will recognise.

Assuming Zuma becomes President of South Africa in 2009, how will that affect the country as a whole? Women's and gender rights groups will watch carefully, hoping that the gains made since 1994 are not blown aside on a wave of masculinist populism. More generally, the pressure on Zuma to deliver immediate populist aspirations will be enormous, with associated temptation to radical economic reforms. However a Hugo Chavez-style populist socialism will not work – not least because South Africa has no vast supply of oil, and our mineral revolution (with the exception perhaps of platinum) has started to slow down. Zuma seems aware of this fear. His visits to various countries promising that he will not radically change the South African economy suggest he realises its potential negative consequences, although how this may play out in practical politics is anybody's guess. Some are already saying that he is becoming a political chameleon.

The ethical dimension of Zuma's victory is also complex. How did a party elect someone facing corruption charges? The answer lies in the tendency, noted by former ANC MP Andrew Feinstein, of the ANC to defend its own^{xiii}. Many MPs, supporters of Mbeki and Zuma alike, were implicated in a corrupt arms deal. Feinstein's evidence suggests that many other ANC notables made far more from the deal than Zuma. Zuma is the only parliamentarian under investigation however, a fact suggesting a political undertone. While we may be deeply concerned about the

possibility of a person proven to be corrupt running South Africa, we need perhaps to consider the bigger picture.

It's not that one should absolve corruption (if indeed the accusations against Zuma are proven). Nor should one ignore the fact that, though he was acquitted of rape, his conduct in the events that led to the charges manifest irresponsibility and patent male chauvinism. Zuma is far from a model of morality that many would hold up to the light. Yet, we note that even most of the ANC Women's League, fiercely critical of him for his personal conduct, voted for him. Why? The answer, I think, is clearly that poverty and the belief that Zuma offers the poor a better deal than the Mbeki group trumped personal morality. Zuma expresses what the Catholic Church calls the 'preferential option for the poor'.

Whether he can – or will – deliver on this promise remains to be seen.

Anthony Egan, S.J. is a member of the Jesuit Institute – South Africa in Johannesburg. He also teaches part time at St Augustine College of South Africa (Johannesburg) and St John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria.

ⁱ Moshoeshoe Monare, "Total rejection of Mbeki as ANC veers to the Left", *The Star* 19 December 2007.

ⁱⁱ John Carlin, "Mbeki has abused power on a grand scale", *The Star*, 19 December 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is customary that the president of the ruling party, who is normally first on the parliamentary party list during elections, is made President of the country. Had Mbeki won, this would have been impossible since the Constitution limits the national president to two terms in office. The ANC NEC would have chosen a presidential candidate.

^{iv} Unlike the Mbeki praise-singers, it is useful to read Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007) for an insightful account of Thabo Mbeki's life and thought. Based on research over nine years, Gevisser presents a portrait of a highly complex personality, part diplomat, part intellectual, part urbane, part deeply insecure.

^v Richard Calland, *Anatomy of South Africa: Who Holds the power?* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006).

^{vi} Advisors to the Mbeki government continue to insist that the route taken by the ANC – a growth-oriented, globalisation friendly market economy with provisions for the poor – is not only the right approach, one that has built a stronger economy, but in many respects the only viable option. See: Alan Hirsch, *Seasons of Hope: Economic Reform under Mandela and Mbeki* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2005).

^{vii} For background to this internal tension, see: William Mervyn Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2005).

^{viii} Benjamin Roberts, " 'Empty stomachs, empty pockets': poverty and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa", *State of the Nation. South Africa 2004-2005*, edited by John Daniel, Roger Southall & Jessica Lutchman, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2005), 479-510, detail at p.491.

^{ix} Doreen Atkinson, "Talking to the streets: has developmental local government failed in South Africa?" *State of the Nation. South Africa 2007*, edited by Sakhela Buhlungu, John Daniel, Roger Southall & Jessica Lutchman, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007), pp 53-77.

^x Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002), p. 36.

^{xi} For a survey see: Richard Ballard, Adam Habib & Imran Valodia (eds), *Voices of Protest: Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2006).

^{xii} See: Dale T McKinley, *The ANC and the Liberation Struggle* (London: Pluto Press, 1997).

^{xiii} Andrew Feinstein, *After the Party: A Personal and Political Journey inside the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007).