

Presidentialism and its Pitfalls: Towards a theory of how not to understand the Zuma Presidency

Suren Pillay

It was an unthinkable for many. That Jacob Zuma would become President of post-Apartheid South Africa. Or rather it was unthinkable for many in the West, and for many of the elites in the postcolonial world. At some point South Africa possessed one of the neatest narratives in the history of national liberation movements. A globally condemned problem- racism, and a globally revered leader- Nelson Mandela. A history of violence that was transcended through forgiveness and reconciliation. That was a much consumed version of the story in most of the world. The untidiness of historical actualities is of course a different matter. And yet it seems that the untidiness of actuality always struggles to find voice when it doesn't seem to tell the story that is required. Perhaps that is because we grasp the world through genres of understanding. Our historical-political events, like our economic fates, are told through classificatory systems, concept repertoires, metaphors, and idioms that allow us to make the specificity of a moment both commensurate with other specific moments in other places at other times. Specificity is therefore inserted and dissolved into historical Time and space so that we can tell a story who's dimensions, characters, and plot we are roughly already familiar with. We have good stories, and bad stories. There are the inspirational stories, the tragedies, dramas, and the farces, perhaps too much farce. Political life in liberal democracies, totalitarian states and other forms of centralized authority embodied in a person has a genre of its own, through which we seek to make sense of it all. Yet in making sense of the individual leader, the genre that governs plot, character and narrative in political journalism and much politi-

cal science literature, has already predetermined what it looks for, even if it can't always govern the timing of events, as the epics of Greek political tragedy demonstrate.

In Africa we perhaps suffer the worse forms of this genre of understanding political life and leadership, since we have to live with cardboard cut-out caricatures, such as a 'Big Man' theory of African politics, still very much alive in African Studies it seems, given the glut of B-movie 'analyses' of Robert Mugabe we have seen over the last decade. It would however be unfair to castigate scholars in and of African political life alone for mobilizing this heuristic device. It is a mode of understanding political life that exceeds us and is often taken from elsewhere and travels like a global cookie cutter in the sky, landing on a sovereign territory, and forcing its template onto the ground so that what emerges in relief are things like 'The President' and 'the Masses'. All eyes are put on the leader if we want to understand what's going on, and what's going to happen. My point is not that this is necessarily wrong in some places at some times. It's just that this mode of analyses might not apply so well everywhere all of the time. And one place it doesn't apply to very well too is in the analysis of the rise to power, and the practices of political power, the policies and futures we are going to have under the Presidency of Jacob Zuma. That is because while we might refer to him as President Zuma, and whilst we have a very complex institutional machinery designed around him, called the "Presidency", it would be an analytical mistake to understand Jacob Zuma's occupation of the presidency in the way that we might understand the rise to power of a political leader in a Presidential system, where an electorate votes directly for the president who is required to spell out an individualized vision

Suren Pillay is a Senior Researcher in Democracy and Governance at the Human Science Research Council in South Africa

and policy agenda.

Jacob Zuma might rather be understood as an ‘empty signifier’, as the name that marks something to be contested over, to be filled in, and to be discursively managed. The rise of Jacob Zuma to the presidency is quite distinct to the individual who went into exile, who spent a month locked in the same jail cell with his comrade Thabo Mbeki in Swaziland in the 1980’s, who became head of ANC intelligence in exile, and who became Deputy President of the ANC, and of the country. Whilst Mr. Zuma is not reducible to any one of these, his public persona is a compound of all these facets. To understand the “Zuma Presidency” I would argue requires studying two dimensions. Firstly, it requires a historical analysis of the ANC in exile, the transformation of the liberation movement into a political party, and an understanding of the local effects of a post-political techno-administrative rationality of governance in a specific global economic context after the Cold War¹. Jacob Zuma is the name of a confluence of different forces, interests and pasts that intersect to name him, as it were, and that come together in a movement that translates into a displacement of a sitting President who represents another countervailing movement. I prefer then to think of events as marking confluences, of ruptures, of congealing and of dissolving, of a multiplicity of things that are constantly coming together and coming apart. Secondly, I would view the figure of Jacob Zuma-as-President as a person within the webs that have been spun around him that congealed into the ‘politi-

1. For one of the more thoughtful analyses of the confluence of local socio-economic shifts, the rise of Jacob Zuma and ‘Zuluness’ as an idiom of populism in Kwazulu Natal, see Ari Sitas’s discussion document, ‘Populism and the NDR in South Africa’ 2007, <http://iolsresearch.ukzn.ac.za/FullVersionPopulismandNDRinSouthAfrica12070.aspx>, accessed on 28 October 2009.

cal tsunami’², but who’s fragile unity is scattered all over the shores. That movement which produced that spectacular but now spent wave is drawing its parts together to find and maintain a post-tsunami coherency. Witness the struggles over where the center of gravity for dealing with economic policy lies today: is it with the newly created Planning Commission, headed by a senior figure of the past executive responsible for overseeing what was seen as conservative neo-liberal fiscal policy that hurt the poor, or does it lie with the new ministry for Economic Development, headed

by a deployee of the labour movement who is not tainted by being part of the previous political administration? The ‘constitutive outside’, to invoke a concept from Ernesto Laclau, of the forces that congealed around Jacob Zuma—the figure of Thabo Mbeki and what he stood for — has largely been vanquished at the top and its remnants are slowly being rooted out throughout the bureaucracy. The struggle now is within the diverse unity that cohered around a particular set of grievances, and that found a groundswell in the form of Jacob Zuma as the agent of change.

Political events in South Africa understood as a Zuma-Mbeki personality struggle, as much as the Tsvangarai-Mugabe affair in Zimbabwe is told this way, do not encourage us to understand our politics as structurally shaped and his-

torically grounded. We are encouraged rather to construct personality archetypes which become turn-keys to unravel the mystery in the drama. Yes, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma lend themselves to stark contrasts — the urban sophisticated intellectual who is thoughtful and reticent versus the formally uneducated goat herder who is warm and approachable. We may even find

2. The general secretary of the country’s largest trade union federation, Zwelinzima Vavi, described Zuma’s bid for the Presidency as an ‘unstoppable tsunami’.

Post-apartheid South Africa has contended with two main legacies. The first is the legacy of the exclusion of the majority of those who resided in it from the political community of citizens. The second legacy it confronts is the effects of economic exclusion and marginalization, which impoverished the majority of its residents at the gain of its few citizens. The relationship between representing “the will of the people” (the democratic imperative) and making “a better life for all” (the developmental imperative) is however not a seamless one.

in the person of Thabo Mbeki that story we are looking for, of a seemingly deliberate individualized rise to power that appears less constituency based- he is quoted as saying when he came back from exile that he had 'no constituencies', where rivals like Chris Hani at Mafikeng in 1991, Cyril Ramaphosa at the negotiations in Kempton Park, Tokyo Sexwale later on — potential rivals that might have eclipsed him, are outmaneuvered in one way or another. We might find in Mbeki who participated in the secret talks with the apartheid regime whilst simultaneously drafting resolutions for the South African Communist Party demanding mass insurrection, a certain double-speaking tendency driven by a larger vision, in that case the realization that an armed struggle was unlikely to conquer power and that negotiations were the only viable route. To that extent, we could argue that Mbeki possessed a discernable 'vision' which was stamped onto the Presidency, spelt out in his 'I am an African' speech, in the commitment to peacekeeping in the continent, in the style of dealing with the political events in Zimbabwe, in the stance on HIV/Aids, in the style of appointments and of dealing with critics of the vision that emerged from the Presidency, either through what it said or refused to say.

On the other hand, it would be difficult to find a policy quarrel between Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma; the latter was a cooperative part of the executive that made policy under the former's presidency. What then is at stake in the divisive question of 'succession' in the ANC and of the country that brought Jacob Zuma to power? How then did Jacob Zuma emerge as the symbolic figure that represents 'the Left' of the tripartite alliance partners, as well as a popular figure who's increasing legal woes only endeared him more and more to grassroots sympathy? Even if they possess very distinct personalities, why is it that the traits of the one resonated with the mass base of the ANC at this point in time rather than the traits of the other?

Post-apartheid South Africa has contended with two main legacies. The first is the legacy of the exclusion of the majority of those who resided in it from the political community of citizens. Transforming all who lived in it into full legal citizens defines its 'democratic im-

perative'. The second legacy it confronts is the effects of economic exclusion and marginalization, which impoverished the majority of its residents at the gain of its few citizens. Improving the basic conditions of life for the majority therefore defines the state's 'developmental imperative'. The relationship between representing 'the will of the people' — the democratic imperative — and making 'a better life for all' — the developmental imperative — is however not a seamless one.

The presidency under Mandela and Mbeki read its mandate- the 'delivery' of basic services and the improvement of the welfare of the majority of citizens lives — as an administrative matter to be resolved by expertise. Its criteria for success or failure is to be able quantify its achievements with regard to delivery. There is a remarkable moment at the ANC conference at Polokwane in 2007 where Mbeki and Zuma squared off against in each in the vote for leadership of the ANC.

Mbeki is met with open hostility by a pro-Zuma audience of delegates, whom the chairperson struggles to reign in. Mbeki's advisers suggested to him that he use the opportunity to make a speech that was emotive, and that spoke to the hearts of delegates, that 'looked people in the eye', as Ronnie Kasrils said. Mbeki however, consistently technocratic, looked down and

read the text of a speech crowded with facts and figures about the achievements of the Presidency. The audience was visibly bored and yawned through it. The technocratic and the popular seemed worlds apart in that moment.

Another dimension to the story is that citizenship in South Africa, which was racially and ethnically exclusive, seeks to create a legal subject of the political in a context where the Law still lacks legitimacy in the eyes of many South Africans, particularly its punitive side. Its important to note that the more Zuma became a subject of punitive law, as an accused of either corruption or rape, the greater the public displays of popular support were. Jacob Zuma, as a victim of Law, resonated with the political disposition of many black South Africans towards law, as a codification of injustice towards them, and therefore lacking legitimacy and authority. In a recent piece, Slavoj Zizek notes

The challenge is going to be how [Zuma] manages and is managed by the contending forces at work on the Presidency once they start criticizing what he actually begins to stand for.

that “the key fact here is that pure post-politics (a regime whose self legitimization would have been thoroughly ‘technocratic’, presenting itself as competent administration) is inherently impossible: any political regime needs a supplementary ‘populist’ level of self-legitimization”.³ The contrast of Zuma to Mbeki as a ‘populist’ leader to a centralizing one, in this context is both misleading and simultaneously useful. What is misleading is the view that Zuma in his person represents a ‘populist’ leader, in the mould of figures like Argentina’s Juan Peron. I would argue rather that the campaign around Zuma takes on populist forms which are projected onto Zuma, whilst we are likely to see that in practice his governance imperatives will force him to manage the relationship between technocratic problem solving, and popular approval, necessary elements of all democratic regimes and their leaders. Zuma has already shown himself willing to criticize the constituency that brought him to power.⁴ The challenge is going to be how he manages and is managed by the contending forces at work on the Presidency once they start criticizing what he actually begins to stand for.

3. Slavoj Zizek, ‘Against the Populist Temptation’, <http://www.lacan.com/zizpopulism.htm>, accessed on 20 October 2009.

4. According to a newspaper account, addressing workers debating to go on strike, he remarked ‘There is no pandering to the unions. Asked if he felt indebted to unions, Zuma said: ‘Not at all’. James Macharia ‘There is no Pandering to Unions’, Mail and Guardian, 12 August 2009. Also August this year Zuma paid a surprise visit to the town of Balfour, which had experienced protests, to check in on local government officials. The Mayor was apparently off sick, but rushed to the office when he heard of his visitor. Karabo Keepile ‘The day the President came knocking’, Mail and Guardian, 26 August 2009. There have been similar visits elsewhere in the country, not only by himself, but by other ministers, who have been vocal in the criticisms of perceived incompetence.