

Jacob Zuma's Robben Island legacy

Fran Buntman

Three of the first four South African presidents — Nelson Mandela, Kgalema Motlanthe, and now Jacob Zuma — were incarcerated on Robben Island for substantial periods of time. (Govan Mbeki, the father of the fourth and longest-serving president to date, Thabo Mbeki, served 23 years in the island prison.) Moreover, Zuma told Motlanthe about Robben Island long before the Motlanthe's own imprisonment, in a sense preparing the younger man for what might — and did — await him.

The important experience of prison is usually noted in the biographies of the four men, above all Mandela. Indeed, the iconic Mandela is key to much of the legend of Robben Island; witness, for example, the focus on Mandela's cell in the guided tours to the once prison, now museum. Although Mandela is essential to understanding the Island, the frequent narrowing of the Robben Island experience to Mandela obscures rather than highlights the broader impact of the Island on South African politics and history. This influence is perhaps most significant in the shaping of leadership and the African National Congress (ANC), including in the case of Jacob Zuma.

What makes Robben Island substantively and not only symbolically important is that the political prisoners used their incarceration to sustain and strengthen themselves, their organizations, and their cause(s). Particularly in the period Zuma and Mandela arrived

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on the Island, the early 1960s, conditions in the prison were harsh, soul destroying, and dangerous. Insufficient food, woefully inadequate medical care, the legacy of torture and dislocation in the months that preceded most inmates' arrivals on Robben Island, hard labor, callous and often brutal guards, and criminal thugs (later removed) were key features of the prison. The men — variously members of the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), or other smaller groupings — successfully resisted and reconfigured much of this hostile environment by challenging the perilous conditions, resurrecting their organizations underground in prison, and enhancing their individual as well as group skills, education, and understanding.

Jacob Zuma is very much a 'poster child' for the use of the Island to broaden and deepen his education, knowledge, and understanding. Zuma came to Robben Island with basic literacy skills, largely self-taught, and a modest profile as an ANC leader, especially at the regional level. Although some biographies of Zuma paint him arriving in prison as illiterate and a political neophyte, this profile is not correct. Journalist Fred Khumalo reminds us that at the time of his trial, The Star newspaper called him a 'prominent' member of the ANC, and one of its 'rising stars'. In a 1994 interview with me, Zuma corrected the common misimpression of his illiteracy, one that he had indeed fostered at least with his police interrogators who almost caught his lie when he began correcting their spelling of his name! Thanks to night schools he organized with others as well as from other sources, Zuma recalled that 'by the time I was grown up I could read and write Zulu. It was absolutely no problem. I could speak the language English precisely because I had spent some time in Durban. I stayed with Indian kids at Greyville,' and even played with white children there, with whom he and his playmates 'tried to communicate'.

On Robben Island he furthered his academic educa-

tion. Acquiring a formal education was difficult for Zuma, as for other prisoners. One reason was they were poor and had little access to funding. Another reason was that the apartheid prison authorities considered education a privilege which the regime allowed and denied at will, sometimes arbitrarily and sometimes to try to increase inmate compliance. Zuma was, however, able to acquire some formal correspondence education. He studied some 'standard 6 as well as JC [Junior Certificate] ... subjects which I wrote and passed'.

Zuma regarded the informal means of self-education as more important than this certification. With others, he organized and engaged in classes based on mutual education. 'We also had sort of adult education among ourselves. Those who were educated were educating those who were not educated'. His reputation grew; although from the single cells and another political organization, Neville Alexander had heard that Zuma 'played a big role in the educational side of things'. Above all though, Zuma read 'widely'. He loved reading anthropology and 'studied a lot of Shakespeare ... I used to love Macbeth in particular'. Indeed, he recalled always keeping the complete works of Shakespeare with him in prison and exile; only upon his return to South Africa did he not have such a volume. In contrast to the image of the illiterate herd boy and traditional tribalist so common today, Zuma offered a very different self-image. In prison, he recalled, 'I spent time reading and reading, in other words, further educated myself to a level where I had no problem. I don't regard myself as an uneducated person. I think I began to have a wider understanding educationally speaking, and values as it were, to a degree that I didn't think I had anything short in education'. While he did lack formal qualifications and certifications, his reading and exposure meant that he considers himself 'a modern person, or a person of today'.

Political and academic education, in addition to the revival and honing of (usually clandestine) organizational skills, was critical to the role of Robben Island in producing as well as refining leaders. Zuma offered himself as emblematic of how and why people sent to Robben Island often returned as more skilled, as well as credentialed, in the arts of political struggle.

The crux of Zuma's emphasis on education on Robben Island was political education. That education was partly in the ANC's and South African Communist Party's history and ideological understanding — an education of syllabi, lectures, and readings, partly experiential and focused on training, doing, and living as a political activist. Zuma reviewed his political education noting that soon after he arrived in prison, about five people from his pre-prison 'labor theory discussion' group resurrected the classes on Robben Island. There were additional 'political lectures for everybody during lunch time, which was one hour; we used that to ... analyze news items'. It was in this context that Stephen Dlamini and Harry Gwala, 'our political instructors [from] outside,' were especially important. The 'nucleus of the culture in Robben Island [was] the culture of political education'. Attendance at the classes grew to inmates from other parts of the country, and the initiatives became increasingly structured and organized; 'we were actually looking at grading people in terms of their understanding'.

More broadly, political education was a key part of reconstituting the ANC on Robben Island, albeit illegally and clandestinely. 'We had a political committee that was in charge of preparing political discussions with representatives of all the cells coming to take the political discussions to the cells over the weekend. More than above that, we actually had these groups which were study groups, specifically to develop cadres, politically speaking'. For Zuma, developments such as these 'turned Robben Island into a political school in the true sense of the word'. There was a 'culture of learning, the culture that we are here as politicians, we needed to understand more. We discussed the world, the country, the organizations more than anybody else. We had the time to do so'.

Zuma offered incisive analyses of how the political education system in prison fed into and was part of the ANC's 'serious underground structure' in what might

be called the movement's Robben Island branch. Under a secret executive in the general sections, necessary to protect against exposure or infiltration, was a complex organizational structure 'with different levels of authority and function' from small cell structures to sections, section committees, and section leaders. This secret structure 'communicated with' the ANC outside prison, 'took ... disciplinary decisions,' required reports and debriefing from incoming inmates, and facilitated the communication of messages: 'We ran one of the most effective, and efficient underground structures'.

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Importantly, in many senses, Jacob Zuma's Robben Island prison experience was more typical, and more emblematic of the overall Robben Island experience, than Nelson Mandela's—all, of course, a result of the apartheid state, not the prisoners. Given their shared ANC membership and their different ages and sentences, probably the most important difference in their

Island terms was where in the prison they spent most of their time. Mandela was in the single cells, imprisoned apart from the majority of inmates in what were called the general sections. The other men in the single cells were disproportionately educated and much more likely to be leaders in the eyes of both the regime and their organizations. Mandela's fellow single-cell neighbors, for example, included fellow ANC members Govan Mbeki and, until their sentences ended in the 1960s and 1970s, Mac Maharaj as well as the PAC's Zeph (Zephania) Mothopeng and Neville Alexander from the National Liberation Front.

In contrast to the small, individual cells of the leadership section, the majority of Islanders were in the general sections with barracks or dormitory style housing. While in prison, most of the men in the general sections never met Mandela, Mbeki, Sisulu, and other known leaders in prison, because they were incarcerated separately. There were people in the general sections who regarded as leaders by their peers, probably without the state realizing their status. In addition to the limited contact between and among the sections of the prison, people's sentences did not always coincide or overlap; recall that Zuma met Motlanthe in Umkhonto we Sizwe training camps, after Zuma's incarceration and before Motlanthe's. But as Zuma's preparation of the younger man attested to, movements in and out of the prison as sentences began and ended also facilitated shared knowledge and communication. Furthermore, within the prison there was a complex smuggling network that enabled intra-ANC communication and ANC political education, including between the single cells and the rest of the prison. (Other organizations had more or less similar structures.)

The political training and networks with which Zuma left prison helped and shaped his secret political work after release, before being forced into exile. He further credits the self-critique he and others engaged in on Robben Island, better understanding the apartheid state, as allowing him to avoid capture and instead escape out of the country. Those same insights and networks advanced his underground work. The late Harry Gwala attributed re-establishing the ANC in Natal to Zuma; Gwala recalled that 'When I came out we kept touch with those who came out with me It was not until Jacob Zuma came out' that the ANC's underground structure was reestablished, especially in Pietermaritzburg.

Zuma identified both Robben Island and exile as important to his political development. His self-identified gains from his time in prison include deep political understanding, education, and broad political understanding. But he also emphasized that 'When you came out of Robben Island in the majority of cases you are not an emotional and sloganeering politician. You are a politician that looked at things with a strategic mind'. This emphasis on acting on strategy and substance rather than passions is why he argued Robben Island 'produced people of a special quality in terms of leadership'. He identified the Island 'progeny' as including thinkers, lawyers, 'real intellectuals,' the 'best negotiators,' and the most 'tolerant people in the political arena'.

While many of these characteristics might be dismissed as self-serving or familiar platitudes, they offer us insight into what Zuma values, at least in part. Furthermore, these perspectives were offered less than two months into South Africa's newborn democracy, when Zuma was in a very different place, a regional leader in a province still reeling from years of political violence and controlled by the opposition Inkatha Freedom Party. Indeed, the very context of that June 1994 interview was revealing. Zuma had recently been elected to the KwaZulu-Natal provincial legislature

when I arrived for our 2pm meeting to his nondescript and slightly shabby downtown Durban office. If there was a record of the appointment, it was irrelevant to the many people who also waited to see Zuma. While I was not privy to his conversations with people, my impression was that the visitors had come to ask for his help. My sense was not that he was a cacique delivering patronage but a chief delivering intercession and advice.

When I eventually got to see him it was about 8pm; we were the last two people in the office. Someone had brought him an ordinary dinner on a paper plate. I certainly did not imagine that fifteen years later this man would be president and, I suspect, neither did he. But I did learn of his more admirable qualities and astounding history that long day; there was no hint that alleged corruption, rape trials, and an electoral campaign invoking machine guns would be part of his future either. Perhaps South Africans need to hope to be governed by this Zuma, the Robben Islander who earned many of his achievements and status in a prison he rightly called 'a hell of a place'. 'A lot of political prisoners who went to Robben Island,' he noted, 'today are equal to the tasks of the nation'. That is the hope — and the question.