

“So factionalized and divided is the ANC that it is not clear that either the party or the country is still governable.”

Zuma's First Year

R.W. JOHNSON

South African President Jacob Zuma has waged a long fight for political survival. In recent years his fight was joined by many who resented former President Thabo Mbeki's arrogant, manipulative, and Machiavellian style of rule. Thus it was widely assumed that Zuma's victory in elections a year ago would bring a fresh start in many directions.

Instead, a year into Zuma's presidency, factionalism in the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has worsened. Government paralysis has simply rigidified. And all of South Africa's old problems have re-presented themselves, aggravated in the past year by a deep recession.

Zuma's ANC approached the April 2009 general elections with several agendas. The first was to eliminate Mbeki's imprint from the party. Zuma had deposed Mbeki as party leader in late 2007 at an ANC conference at Polokwane; nearly a year later, Mbeki had been forced to retire from the nation's presidency when it became clear that he was almost constitutionally incapable of ceasing to conspire against Zuma. Now, through the ANC's decision to drop no fewer than 133 sitting parliament members from its candidate list, the transition was complete.

The second item on the agenda was to defeat the Congress of the People (COPE), a party that had splintered from the ANC with Mbeki's tacit support. A “war room” directed by Blade Nzimande, the leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and a key Zuma ally, was set up inside ANC headquarters at Luthuli House for this express purpose.

And finally, the ANC had to unite behind Zuma. Hence a number of odd names, some closely associated with Mbeki, appeared on the party's

candidate list. These included Trevor Manuel, the Mbekiite former finance minister, who was placed at number 4 on the list despite the bitter hatred that his name provoked in the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions; three of Mbeki's provincial premiers (though none retained his premiership); Mbeki's former health minister, the wholly discredited Manto Tshabalala-Msimang (though she was quickly appointed instead, to the horror of health experts, as an African Union goodwill ambassador whose brief was to improve “mother and child health” in Africa as a whole); and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Nelson Mandela's former wife (though her conviction on 43 counts of fraud should have made her ineligible to run, and she had been fined for non-attendance in her previous parliamentary term).

MUDDLED OPPOSITION

For its part, COPE had chosen a Methodist bishop, Mvume Dandala, to lead its party list for the April elections. This was an attempt to take the moral high ground, but also to consolidate support in the Xhosa community in the Eastern Cape province by nominating a Xhosa to run against Zuma, a Zulu. (Mbeki, too, is a Xhosa.) The ANC, to counter this move, retained as many Xhosa heavyweights as it could, including not only Madikizela-Mandela but also Phathekile Holomisa, a leader of the traditional Xhosa chiefs; Enoch Godongwana, an Eastern Cape politician; and some key Mbeki clients, such as Charles Nqakula and Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula. The ANC's electoral prospects were aided by COPE's organizational shambles; the party could not even get its posters up until late in the campaign.

The traditional opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), also made the ANC's task easier by concentrating almost all of its efforts on the Western Cape province, where Helen Zille was the

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party's candidate for premier. The DA did, however, manage to get South Africa's Constitutional Court to grant the vote to registered expatriate voters, despite the opposition of the ANC and of the Independent Electoral Commission, which was full of ANC appointees.

The ANC won the elections handily, with 65.9 percent of the vote. This, however, was almost 4 percentage points below its 2004 showing, and the ruling party was left three seats short in the National Assembly of a two-thirds majority. The DA shot up to 16.7 percent, gaining over 1 million votes over its 2004 performance. In the Western Cape, where its vote more than doubled, the DA won an outright majority.

Early in the campaign, polls had shown COPE biting deep into the votes of both the ANC and the DA. But COPE's ratings fell steadily as it became clear that the party was disorganized and also that it replicated many of the ANC's failings. For all its anti-corruption rhetoric, COPE picked Allan Boesak, who had served a jail sentence for corruption, to head its Western Cape list after Boesak had set his price too high for Zuma. COPE ended up with 7.4 percent of the vote, scoring best in the Northern Cape (15.9 percent), the Eastern Cape (13.3 percent), and the Free State (11.1 percent). Most of COPE's vote was taken away from the ANC, but it also gained at the expense of other smaller parties, which suffered a catastrophic drop.

The ANC, though it won the election, nonetheless suffered its first serious electoral reversal since 1994. It saw its votes decline, both in shares and absolute numbers, in all provinces save Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal. In Gauteng alone the ANC was down by 690,000 votes. What saved the day for the incumbent party was a massive turnout for Zuma among his fellow Zulus. A surge of Zulu nationalist fervor accounted for the ANC's gains in Mpumalanga (plus 173,000 votes) and, above all, in KwaZulu-Natal (plus 944,000 votes).

THE LEFT MOVES IN

Zuma, after he was sworn in as president in May 2009, strived to keep together the coalition that had carried him to victory at Polokwane. It quickly became clear, however, that the coalition's disparate elements, no longer united by the need

to evict Mbeki, would go their own way and often come into conflict.

The central group within the ANC consists of non-Communist African nationalists, many of them involved in a variety of economic activities that are parasitic on the ANC and the government. They have no real political ideology and just wish to be left alone to prosper, by hook and often by crook.

In addition, the government depends heavily on the traditional bureaucracies of the finance ministry, the reserve bank, and the revenue service—institutions that have not been much tampered with because they lay the golden eggs. Economic policy remains securely in the hands of this interlocking bureaucracy. And, much to the left's frustration, Zuma is keen to keep the flow of golden eggs intact. Manuel for long symbolized this bureaucracy; his successor, Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan, has also been captured by it.

The other principal faction in the ANC consists of the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). The latter has now openly declared its loyalties to dialectical materialism and proletarian socialist revolution—that is, it has discarded any remaining pretense that it is something more than an SACP union.

Both the union leadership and the SACP had clearly decided last year that they must adopt a vanguard role, driving the ANC along and, in effect, forcing the party to assent to their conception of the platform adopted at Polokwane. Toward this end the left achieved some success after the elections, provoking at least one observer to draw comparisons with the creeping communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948.

Both Nzimande and Jeremy Cronin, the SACP's top leaders, were given important government jobs, even though the SACP constitution stated that its office-holders work full time, and are not available for other jobs. Rob Davies, another longtime SACP activist, was named minister for trade and industry. And, a week before the election, Cosatu got Zuma to agree that its nominee, Ebrahim Patel, would be given the new ministry for economic planning.

When Manuel, the finance minister from 1996 to 2009, emerged as the minister in charge of a new planning commission based inside the presidency,

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Cosatu tried all it could, both publicly and privately, to marginalize him and to insist that Patel be given primacy. Zuma finally ruled in favor of Cosatu, and Joel Netshitenzhe, an Mbeki confidant who had warned of growing interference by the far left in government, was quickly forced to resign.

At the same time, both Cosatu and the SACP began to make policy statements on their own. The SACP pushed forward a vague but extremely ambitious national health insurance scheme that foresaw the forced amalgamation of the public and private health systems, as well as a similar scheme for universal social security. It also demanded the nationalization of mines. The ANC endorsed the first two proposals and dithered on the last. (There is, of course, no money for either the health or the social security initiative, and no prospect of funding them in the foreseeable future.)

Zwelinzima Vavi, the general secretary of Cosatu, announced in June 2009 that Zuma would serve two presidential terms: “Two terms—and no discussions about it—and we are very happy.” There was some grumbling about Cosatu’s calling the shots this way, but the alternative—another bitter leadership battle in only three years time—did not suit anyone. Vavi also declared that “We are the policy makers—and government implements.”

Gwede Mantashe, the SACP chairman, even insisted that the ANC (that is, himself) would evaluate and monitor the performance of ministers and call them to account. And this would apply even to Zuma himself. Vavi went further, and spoke of Cosatu “recalling” ministers. Cosatu had, he said, developed at least 70 percent of the Polokwane party platform, and henceforth the tripartite alliance (Cosatu, the SACP, and the ANC) would decide everything of importance at the national, provincial, and local levels of government. Vavi would himself be available to serve in a senior government position once he finished his current Cosatu term, he added.

Zuma, who wants to keep his coalition together and prefers to rule by consensus, did little last year to resist this determined leftward push. It has always been Zuma’s style to listen long and hard and then come down in favor of whatever seems most likely to guarantee unity. Given Cosatu and the SACP’s strength at the elite level of the ANC, this made it hard to adopt any line they opposed.

The trouble is, public opinion polls generally show only 2 percent of voters favoring the SACP, and Cosatu now has only 1.6 million members in a population of almost 50 million—an exceedingly narrow base on which to build radical change.

THE ZULUS’ TURN

A less obvious but still fundamental motif in Zuma’s first year in office has been ethnicity. Having waited patiently for the presidency, Zulus are in no hurry to give it up. Zuma’s chief backer, Zweli Mkhize, who could easily have chosen a cabinet post, opted instead for the premiership of KwaZulu-Natal, the traditional home of the Zulu nation. Within the province there is an easy assumption that Mkhize might succeed Zuma as president and that, in any case, the leadership will hardly be allowed to escape again to another Xhosa (let alone to a mere Sotho or Venda).

The same considerations have put wind in the sails of other ambitious Zulu ministers, such as Jeff Radebe, the minister of justice and constitutional development, and Nzimande, the minister for higher education and training—both potential presidential aspirants. Zuma has also quietly appointed a Zulu minister of police, a Zulu police commissioner, and a Zulu chief justice.

When in October 2009 an aspirant black judge boldly opined that black lawyers would not really get anywhere until people like Zuma stopped choosing white lawyers to defend them, the new chief justice brusquely reprimanded her for showing disrespect to the president—for Zuma was now the great Zulu patriarch. Naturally, Zuma’s own legal difficulties evaporated as soon as he became president, with judges and prosecutors all keen to hear no more of the corruption charges that had been levelled against him.

Before long, Zuma was, to the ANC’s embarrassment, celebrating his marriage to a third wife (polygamy is a Zulu tradition). Then, in February 2010, he admitted he had sired a twentieth child, this one out of wedlock. These events prompted a good deal of criticism and ridicule. Zuma was routinely pictured dancing in leopard skins, and even when he mounted podiums he seemed to enjoy singing and dancing more than speech making. Meanwhile, at his home in Nkandla, unknown businessmen were contributing millions to build

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what was effectively a palace for the president, one befitting a Zulu king and his wives. Other businessmen have allegedly financed his wives and children, in return for what favors no one knows.

A RECESSION BUDGET

Much of the government today remains in a state of paralysis. A year after he took office, Zuma has yet to work out exactly what Patel's job is. There is little sense of initiative or leadership, and ministers do much as they please. Sometimes they openly quarrel with one another, just as the different ANC factions have waged bitter disputes in public, entirely ignoring Zuma's anguished pleas for unity.

When Zuma delivered his state of the nation address to the parliament in February 2010, he spoke badly, made frequent mistakes, and ran into a gale of opposition criticism. Most cabinet ministers have largely abandoned the president, leaving only their junior ministers to support him.

The budget that the administration produced this year is—to the fury of Cosatu and the SACP—entirely orthodox. Crafted by Finance Minister Gordhan and praised by international observers, the budget seeks to avoid increasing the federal deficit and calls for deficit reductions in future years. It also retains the central bank's inflation target of 3

to 6 percent. As such, it shows that the labor unions and the Communists have had no impact, in fact, on economic policy making. Zuma has defended the budget, but without seeming to understand it, and it is clear that the finance ministry was acting in effect quite independently from him.

On entering office in 2009, Zuma promised to create 500,000 jobs. Instead, a recession over the past year eliminated 900,000 jobs. The ANC had parochially assumed that South Africa would escape the global economic downturn, and its election campaign was replete with promises of extra welfare spending. But the recession hit hard—gross domestic product shrank by 2.2 percent in 2009.

The left, despite its new ascendancy, clearly had little idea what to do under such circumstances, especially since its plans for health care, social security, and enhanced welfare all depended on extra spending that could no longer be afforded. Moreover, Zuma's creation of new government departments was costly, especially as the new ministers helped themselves to luxury cars and huge expense claims.

The left has promoted the notion of the “developmental state,” according to which the government and parastatal spending programs and state policy itself provide the main motor of economic

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development. But this notion sits awkwardly with the fact that virtually all of South Africa's parastatals are losing money and have required billions in bailouts. Even Eskom, South Africa's electric utility, had to cut back on planned investment in new power stations, and it became painfully clear that state investment could not lead the way out of such difficulties; only renewed private investment could rescue the situation.

Most remarkable of all, the government's plan to deal with the recession was simply not implemented: The various ministries could not agree on who should do what, and the result was complete inaction, a paralysis born of sheer ineptitude and lack of leadership. The economy and the country last year drifted and rolled like a rudderless ship in a storm. In October 2009, a commitment to extend child allowances (payments to mothers for each of their children) up to the age of 18 kicked in, an obligation for which money will have to be borrowed abroad.

From the outset, the Zuma government has faced continuous township agitation about inadequate delivery of basic services. Frequently over the past year these protests have become violent, with much destruction of property. Typically, mayors and councillors have been accused of corruption, usually quite accurately. But all too often, angry street actions have spilled over into xenophobic targeting of foreigners.

CORRUPT TO THE CORE

The government has responded mainly with words—warning that it would not stand for violent protest, that people must be more patient and wait a little longer, that municipalities must get their houses in order, and that corrupt mayors and councillors would not be tolerated. None of this has had any discernible impact. Almost every day has brought fresh revelations of utterly systemic corruption within the public service.

An audit report for 2007–2008, for example, found that many hundreds of millions of rands in tenders and other contracts had been awarded by some 2,319 civil servants who were either directors of companies or had a family member who

played a leading role in them. Worse, absolutely nothing had been done about this by the end of 2009, so the officials in question knew they enjoyed impunity.

The same circumstances pertain at the provincial level. In 2006 the auditor general found that 60 percent of provincial public servants had private business interests, that 49 percent of parliament members were company directors (and 59 percent held shares in companies), and that between a third and a half of all provincial legislators had outside business interests. That is, public sector corruption is not just common—it is the norm, and the government has clearly balked at trying to do anything about it. It has been estimated that as much as 30 percent of all public spending is creamed off in various scams.

Naturally, the beneficiaries can be expected to support the left's notion of the developmental state, since that is the chief engine of their own enrichment. Indeed, this is the true meaning of "African socialism"—public sector theft erected into a way of life.

With headlines blaring every day the message that the political elite at the national and provincial levels is enriching itself by such means, and with the elite often advertising its status with Mercedeses and BMWs and by staying, with large retinues, in five-star hotels, it is ridiculous to think that sermons about how shack-dwellers must be patient in putting up with bucket toilets will have any effect. It is equally ridiculous to think that lectures against corruption will prevent mayors and councillors from viewing their positions as essentially a means toward personal wealth rather than as an opportunity for community service.

Little wonder, then, that by March 2010 there was renewed speculation that Zuma would be a one-term president. ANC elders were quoted as saying that Zuma had done his job by getting rid of Mbeki, but that the country simply needed a leader with greater capacity. No obvious successor, however, has yet emerged. Indeed, so factionalized and divided is the ANC that it is not clear that either the party or the country is still governable. ■