

South Africa: Factional war intensifies between Mbeki and Zuma supporters in ANC

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30 May 2006

On May 8, Jacob Zuma, former deputy president of South Africa, was acquitted of the charge of rape in the Johannesburg High Court. The accusation against him was made last December, causing him to step down from the office of vice president of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) until a verdict was reached.

Zuma still faces a second trial regarding an alleged “generally corrupt relationship” with Schabir Shaik, his former financial advisor, who was convicted of corruption in May 2005 and sentenced to five years in jail. President Thabo Mbeki sacked Zuma as deputy president of the country when news of the corruption trial was made public.

After the two-month rape trial, the judge said he accepted as “plausible” the explanation that the sexual encounter in Zuma’s home between the accused and his accuser was consensual. In dismissing the complainant’s testimony, he said the evidence showed she had a “history of making false allegations of rape”.

Rather than putting an end to the factional warfare within the ANC, the failure to convict Zuma means it will increase in ferocity. Karima Brown, political editor of *Business Day*, wrote, “Zuma is now marching back into Luthuli House [headquarters of the ANC]...This is a major victory for Zuma’s political career.”

Zuma claimed that the rape accusation was politically motivated, part of a conspiracy organised by “faceless persons” aimed at preventing him from standing as the ANC candidate in the South African presidential elections in 2009. He mobilised his Zulu power-base in a show of strength against the ANC leadership, which his supporters denounce as a “Xhosa-nostra”—dominated by politicians from the Xhosa tribe. Hundreds were bussed from KwaZulu Natal into Johannesburg every day to demonstrate outside the courthouse during the trial.

The *Guardian* accused Zuma of deliberately using “tribalism in his fight, undermining the ANC’s century-old anti-tribal philosophy”. It reported his supporters claiming that he was “their ‘100 percent Zulu boy’ [who] was a victim of Xhosas who had a stranglehold on the party”.

The ANC Youth League and the Young Communist League also supported Zuma. The South African Communist Party

(SACP) is a partner, along with the ANC and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), in the coalition government. COSATU is divided over supporting Zuma.

As soon as the trial was over, Zuma announced his intention to take up his official positions within the ANC party leadership as soon as possible. He claimed that he suspended himself from office only for the duration of the case and was now ready to resume his duties.

His supporters are calling for the rescheduling of the ANC national conference due to be held in December 2007. They believe Zuma is in a strong position to defeat any pro-Mbeki candidate for the position of party president and would then be unassailable in the 2009 South African presidential elections.

The ANC and the Tripartite Alliance are being torn apart by the factional fighting. Sam Sole, a *Mail & Guardian* columnist, recently described “the fevered atmosphere of power-lust, greed, fear, revenge and conspiracy gripping the party as a consequence of the battle between Jacob Zuma’s supporters and detractors”.

According to the same paper, a member of the SACP’s national executive committee recently described the deepening fractures as “the worst in the party’s history”.

The conflict between the pro-Zuma and pro-Mbeki factions is not based on issues of principle. Both groups are deeply concerned about the rising popular opposition to the ANC’s pro-business policies, which over a year ago Bishop Desmond Tutu likened to “a powder keg”. But they disagree over how to preserve stability in the country and who can best protect the interests of its tiny privileged minority.

Mbeki most directly articulates the interests of finance capital and the transnational corporations. He has made clear his determination to press ahead with the free-market policies demanded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, of increased privatisation and further attacks on workers’ wages and conditions.

He has announced that he will not stand for the presidency again; to do so would necessitate an amendment to the constitution. Instead, he insists that the next president of the country should be a woman. This is an attempt to secure the presidency for his acolyte, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. As minerals minister, she was responsible for the introduction of

free-market measures that cost of tens of thousands of jobs in the mining industry. She was appointed as South Africa's deputy president in Zuma's place after he was sacked by Mbeki.

Zuma is, by contrast, portrayed as a left-winger—mainly because of his association with the ANC's radical past and his populist rhetoric about fulfilling the aims of the ANC's Freedom Charter. But he has never opposed any of the government's pro-market, privatisation policies that have devastated the lives of millions. Mbeki chose Zuma as the country's deputy president in 1999—when Mbeki replaced Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa—precisely because he could use Zuma's popular credentials as a supposed “left” to head off opposition to the government's neo-liberal agenda.

To the extent that differences exist between Mbeki's and Zuma's supporters in the SACP and COSATU, they are of a tactical character—how to defend the interests of big capital, while proceeding with the caution necessary to prevent an explosive confrontation with the working class.

Additionally Zuma has attracted support from the party and trade union bureaucracy because they fear that Mbeki will cut them out of the riches to be made from exercising power and influence peddling. The president's claim to be “rooting out corruption,” even in the highest echelons of the government, is an attempt to prove to the Western powers and the major transnationals that he is willing to act in their interests. Foreign investors view corruption in the government and state apparatus as an unpardonable effort by the local elite to siphon off too great a share of corporate profits.

An attack on Zuma for corruption was politically expedient for a number of reasons. It offered a means of proving to the West that Mbeki was acceding to the demands being made on him; made clear that the ANC would not make any concessions to workers who supported Zuma because of his populist rhetoric; and eliminated a powerful rival to Mbeki's faction—a rival whose power base extended outside the ANC to embrace the SACP and much of the trade union bureaucracy.

There is massive disaffection with the government, especially in the townships where people suffer desperate poverty. South African society is becoming increasingly polarised, with a small clique of black businessmen and women, mostly made up of leading members of the ANC, who are enriching themselves through the government's policy of Black Economic Empowerment. In contrast, figures recently published by the South African Institute of Race Relations demonstrated that the living conditions for millions of South Africans have actually worsened since the ending of Apartheid 12 years ago.

The proportion of black households with running water in their homes fell by 10 percent between 1995 and 2004-05. And even where water is available, its use is restricted or cut off because of crippling water bills from the privatised companies.

The number of Africans living in absolute poverty rose from 16 million in 1996 to 22 million in 2004, an increase of 39

percent. Over the same period, unemployment rose by 200 percent, from 1.3 million to 3.9 million.

This situation is compounded by the terrible reality that over six million people are living with HIV, and less than 1 percent of those who need it, have access to treatment under the government's anti-retroviral plan.

Angry protests in the poverty-stricken districts of the major cities have demanded decent housing with sanitation, and an end to power cuts and water shutoffs. The government's response has been to denounce the protests as the work of a “secret force” fomenting trouble in an attempt to overthrow democracy.

The scale of the opposition to the ANC government was highlighted during this year's local government elections when ANC national chairman, Mosiuoa Lekota, addressed a rally at the local stadium in Khutsong, a small mining town of about 170,000 people. According to press reports, less than 100 ANC supporters turned up, while thousands protested outside. They were eventually dispersed by the police firing rubber bullets and tear gas. Twenty-eight residents were arrested.

The ANC was unable to campaign in the town, and posters were torn down as soon as they were put up. Only one percent of residents cast a ballot, in an area that had been an ANC stronghold. Councillors have been forced to flee the area after the torching of several houses.

It is this growing hatred for Mbeki and the government that is bringing the ANC alliance near to breaking point. A leaked SACP document has revealed that it is discussing standing as a separate party in the next elections. Whether or not such a step is taken, there is little doubt that both the SACP and COSATU will support Zuma as the supposed “people's president” in order to head off any independent political development in the working class that would threaten the interests of capitalism in South Africa.



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