

South Africa's top court sentences former ANC President Jacob Zuma to 15 months

Jean Shaoul
30 June 2021

South Africa's Constitutional Court has sentenced former African National Congress (ANC) President Jacob Zuma to 15 months imprisonment for contempt of court. He was convicted for defying its order to appear at an inquiry into corruption during his presidency.

Should Zuma fail to hand himself in to police within five days, the police minister must order his arrest.

The pending imprisonment of the former president some 30 years after the end of the hated apartheid system and the rise to power of the ANC expresses the protracted crisis gripping the entire South African bourgeoisie. It takes place as public anger mounts over the ANC's handling of the public health crisis and vaccine rollout, systemic corruption within the ruling party and the escalating economic crisis.

The 79-year-old Zuma has denied any wrongdoing. Apart from one brief appearance when he left before being questioned, he not only refused to attend the inquiry led by Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo examining corruption allegations relating to his period in office, but also failed to mount a defence. Instead, he wrote a 21-page letter to the chief justice, accusing the court of bias and Zondo of conducting a personal vendetta against him. This prompted the inquiry's lawyers to seek an order from the constitutional court for his imprisonment.

In an hour-long speech setting out the court's decision, Justice Sisi Khampepe criticised Zuma, saying that his attacks on the court were unprecedented and that "Never before has the judicial process been so threatened." She added, "If his conduct is met with impunity, he will do significant damage to the lost rule of law."

It was Zuma who had set up the inquiry into "allegations of state capture, corruption, fraud" that

focused on the Gupta family and its associates who won lucrative government contracts and were allegedly even able to choose cabinet ministers.

A longstanding member of both the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP) until 1990 and the ANC that has ruled South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994, Zuma has for years been mired in scandals and corruption. He served as Deputy President of South Africa under President Thabo Mbeki from 1999 to 2005, when he was fired after his financial adviser was convicted of bribery. This was amid a bitter struggle within the ANC between the factions around Mbeki and Zuma, who was backed by the SACP and the trade union federation COSATU.

Elected president of the ruling ANC in 2007, Zuma became President of South Africa after winning the 2009 elections. His government was characterized by corruption and nepotism with some \$32 billion reportedly stolen during his period in office. At the same time, Zuma presided over a sharp decline in the nation's economy, conditions that made international capitalists nervous about investing in South Africa, as unrest grew over rising unemployment and poverty and a strike wave spread across the country.

This flowed inexorably from the ANC's agreement with the white South African elite to preserve capitalism while empowering a wealthy black elite, under the mantle of programmes like "Black Economic Empowerment," —a political arrangement that significantly benefitted both Zuma and current President Cyril Ramaphosa, and the rest of the ANC's leaders at the expense of the working class. South Africa became one of the most socially polarized countries in the world, worse even than under apartheid.

In December 2017, amid mounting corruption

scandals and bitter in-fighting, he lost the ANC presidency to former trade union leader and multi-billionaire businessman Ramaphosa. Two months later, the ANC forced Zuma to resign as State President, fearing it would lose support in the 2019 elections. While Ramaphosa made pro-forma statements about rooting out corruption, he has largely targeted his political rivals.

Last November, Ramaphosa's main rival, ANC secretary general Ace Magashule, appeared in court charged with corruption, money laundering and fraud in relation to the looting of public funds under Zuma. Last month, Health Minister Zweli Mkhize was forced to resign as an investigation into his alleged "impropriety" in the awarding of Covid-19 contracts gets under way.

Zuma faces another trial, which has been repeatedly postponed, on 16 charges of fraud, corruption and racketeering relating to a 1999 \$5 billion purchase of fighter jets, patrol boats and military gear from five European arms firms, brokered when he was Mbeki's deputy. The charges, that he accepted \$34,000 annually from the French arms company Thales in return for protecting the company from an investigation into the deal, were reinstated after the ANC forced him out of office. The alleged bribe was part of a broader corrupt relationship between Zuma and one of the consortium members that won a major bid to provide combat suites for new navy frigates.

These exposures are just the tip of the iceberg of the corrupt operations of the ANC government, which has used programmes like Black Economic Empowerment to turn party officials and their business cronies into multi-millionaires.

While the Zuma ruling is expected to strengthen Ramaphosa's faction, it will not end the corruption or lessen the crisis within the ANC which is haemorrhaging support. The Ramaphosa government's handling of the pandemic has only intensified the bitter class divisions, as, like its counterparts around the world, the ANC has sought to place the full burden of the global recession that has hammered the mining and manufacturing sectors on the working class.

The economy contracted 7 percent last year amid the impact of the global recession, the fall in demand for minerals and raw materials—South Africa's main exports—and lockdown restrictions. It follows a years-

long decline in GDP per capita as growth failed to keep pace with the increasing population. The government's budget deficit for 2020-21 reached 11 percent of GDP, with more than a fifth of the budget going to servicing debt that has reached nearly 65 percent of GDP. According to official statistics that are a vast underestimate of the real situation, around one third of South African workers are now unemployed, trapping millions in poverty and contributing to the obscene levels of inequality that persist nearly three decades after the end of apartheid in 1994.

The ANC's inglorious record is no different from any of the other national liberation movements in the Middle East and Africa, all of whom pursued similar policies, making their peace with imperialism and pursuing wealth and privilege for a narrow layer. It confirms that the national bourgeoisie, dependent upon imperialism and fearful of revolution from below, is incapable of resolving the fundamental democratic and social tasks facing the masses. There is no way forward for the working class in South Africa, or elsewhere, outside the class struggle, with the working class taking power into its own hands and overthrowing capitalism, as part of the international struggle to put an end to imperialism and establish world socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)