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Book Reviews



Adekeye Adebajo. 2016. *Ohio Short Histories of Africa: Thabo Mbeki*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. 190 pages. No price stated.

Professor Adekeye Adebajo has written an elegant and insightful book about the life and times of Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki, the first Deputy President and the second President of post-apartheid South Africa. Mbeki was born in 1942 to Govan and Epainette Mbeki, who were middle-class Christian parents. His father, Govan, was a peer to both Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, then foremost African nationalists and liberation warriors. Like Mandela, the older Mbeki was influenced by young Marxists at Fort Hare. Although Thabo Mbeki was ideologically influenced by these giants of African liberation, his political ideology evolved from being left-leaning to a lot more pragmatic approach.

In specific terms, Professor Adebajo disclosed that there is a chance that, if the charismatic ANC leader Chris Hani had not met his tragic death, Thabo Mbeki might have missed out becoming South Africa's President (p. 68-9). In other words, Mbeki was not the initial choice of the rank-and-file of the ANC adherents, even though Hani himself "had great respect for his [Thabo Mbeki's] intellect" (p. 43). Yet, one cannot ignore the facts that Mbeki's pedigree and his own astuteness, as a leader of the ANC in exile, endeared him to the liberation movement's core leadership, including then ANC President Oliver Tambo.

As the author notes, Thabo Mbeki served under Oliver Tambo as his political secretary when they were based in Lusaka, Zambia. In the position, Mbeki drafted Tambo's speeches and became his major confidant. In many ways, his closeness to Tambo also gave him a chance to serve as the *de facto* custodian of ANC's assets, especially when Tambo was travelling on his numerous international assignments. Eventually, Mbeki himself became a "globe-trotting ANC diplomat", which provided him with extensive international networks that explain an important part of his presidential style.

Since Mbeki's term as President of South Africa did not end on a high note, one might be inclined to think that Adebajo's work is an attempt to resurrect

Mbeki from the dustbin of history, but that is not quite so. Instead, the author skillfully places Mbeki among Africa's greatest leaders, a giant of sorts. Adebajo is very successful at weaving through complexities of African history and the exigencies of the global political economy to provide a truly refreshing narrative on the enduring need for freedom and dignity of African people. Stated differently, readers learn that Mbeki's ideas and legacy are about bequeathing Africans with hope to overcome oppression and build societies that are prosperous.

Meanwhile, there is more to the significance of his formative years within the liberation movement. He was considered a foremost thinker, who Adebajo includes among the list of Africa's philosopher – kings, to borrow from Plato's *Republic*. He added that Mbeki's political philosophy was couched in deep moralism, which the author compares to that of Africa's political giants like Ghana's late President Kwame Nkrumah. He notes, however, that while Nkrumah was instrumental in the formation of the Organization of African Unity, Mbeki was at the fore of the establishment of the African Union (AU). Furthermore, he recognizes that the two leaders were about the promotion of an African Renaissance as well as reclaiming of its past glory.

Professor Adebajo also depicts Mbeki as a prophetic leader and a revolutionary, explaining that the future South African President showed his prophetic tendencies through his lyrical oratory and vision of an African Renaissance. He adds adding that Mbeki had the desire for Africa's economic development and political freedom, while he wished to see Africa would achieve rapid economic transformation and eradication of poverty through a more risk averse and pragmatic strategy. Different from the ideological doctrinaire positions of his father (Govan).

Even though Thabo Mbeki contributed to the *African Communist* publication, it was a fact that its influence on him waned with time. For example, the author has shown that the young Mbeki rejected Joe Slovo's attempt to move the ANC towards a social path, as Mbeki termed it suicidal and unrealistic. Perhaps, his growing up very distant from the elder Mbeki turned out to help in cementing his pragmatic approach to economic development. Yet, several facts in the book demonstrate that he was also a student of his father, in the sense that his Govan did inspire him to excel intellectually and politically (p. 29).

Mbeki's pragmatism is evident from both his role as Deputy President under Mandela and, later, as the President of South Africa and as a global peacemaker (p. 37). In fact, Adebajo disclosed further that Mbeki was Mandela's *de facto* prime minister and a defender of ANC's core values.

1 Mbeki's Illustrious Career

While Mbeki effected ANC thinking on “national democratic revolution,” he also chose a pragmatic economic ideology that discarded the redistributive state-led Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), opting for a manifesto that embraced foreign investments and countered excessive leftist dogma. His pragmatism was also evidenced in his support for South Africa's big business interests. He also preferred that Black empowerment be encouraged through methods that were similar to those adopted in Malaysia under former Prime Minister Mathathir Mohamad (p. 99).

One of Mbeki's most successful projects was his empowerment of women and also promotion of South Africa's black middle class. As a result, many observers of politics in South Africa credit the Mandela-Mbeki administration for providing crucial leadership in increasing the number of women candidates running for political office. Mbeki's presidency continued to push for the empowerment on both economic and political fronts. By some measures, his efforts at economic stability outperformed those of any other post-colonial African nation (p. 101).

Perhaps, emanating from his philosophical position that South Africa's freedom should contribute to global efforts to reshape international relations and promote peace, Mbeki was the father of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD as well as the African Union (AU), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), and the Pan-African Parliament, among other institutions. Professor Adebajo, among other details, notes: “It is in the area of foreign policy-particularly in Africa-that is likely to be the most noteworthy legacy of Thabo Mbeki's presidency,” (p. 111). Mbeki became a leader in his efforts to restore peace in the Congo, Zimbabwe, Cote d' Ivorie and other places on the African continent.

And true to his promotion of African Renaissance, Mbeki called for Africans to “discover a sense of their own self-confidence after centuries of slavery and colonialism, which has systematically denigrated their cultures and subjugated their institutions to alien rule” (p. 113). Overall, Mbeki's philosopher-king legacy is about Africa's renewal, adaptation of democracy without compromising principles of representation, accountability and eradication of abject poverty on the continent.

Although those were noble ideas promoted by Mbeki, Adebajo also observes that Mbeki did not use his lieutenants to promote his idea of African Renaissance. The author pointed out that he also lacked charisma of the other “philosopher-kings”, and hence he may be blamed for the mismanaging

of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that was rampant during his time as president. Furthermore, Mbeki's leadership style was often considered monarchical and intolerant to dissent.

Professor Adebajo has provided to readers a balanced view of one of Africa's most distinguished leaders. In his view, Mbeki's legacy is mixed and transformative in terms of placing race at the center of African transformation. In my view, Adekeye Adebajo's book is a formidable first discussion of the topic of contemporary leaders of Africa. He opens the door for other scholars to examine the roles of other 21st century historical figures, who have shaped African societies.

In his balanced biography, Professor Adebajo makes the case for Africa to have leaders, who are committed and rational thinkers. This work is a great start for scholars and practitioners of political management to understand the link between leadership and African development. The author lays out the international and domestic settings of the workings of the African National Congress (ANC), teasing out the roles and actions of key figures in the bid to end apartheid and to deliver freedom to the country's many African citizenry.

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