

O PINION

EDITORIAL

A FIGHTER, AN ICON, A GREAT SOUTH AFRICAN

THE family of Gerrie Coetzee and the boxing fraternity will pay their last respects to the fallen fistic icon at a funeral service in Bloubaai, Cape Town, today.

It speaks volumes about the stature of Coetzee that the international media, including the two great American newspapers, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, have provided saturated coverage of his death.

Apart from his feats, so much has been written about the man on so many fronts as he bravely fought his way through life. In a few months, an American company will release a biopic, aptly titled *Against All Odds*, on the life and times of Coetzee.

Coetzee spent his adult life fighting essentially on three fronts. As a boxer, he had opponents to contend with.

His second fight spanned two decades of professional boxing because his fragile hands were a constant source of distress. He had 22 operations on the right hand alone, but he never gave up the fight. X-rays taken after winning the WBA world title showed that he had landed the telling right hook with a broken right hand.

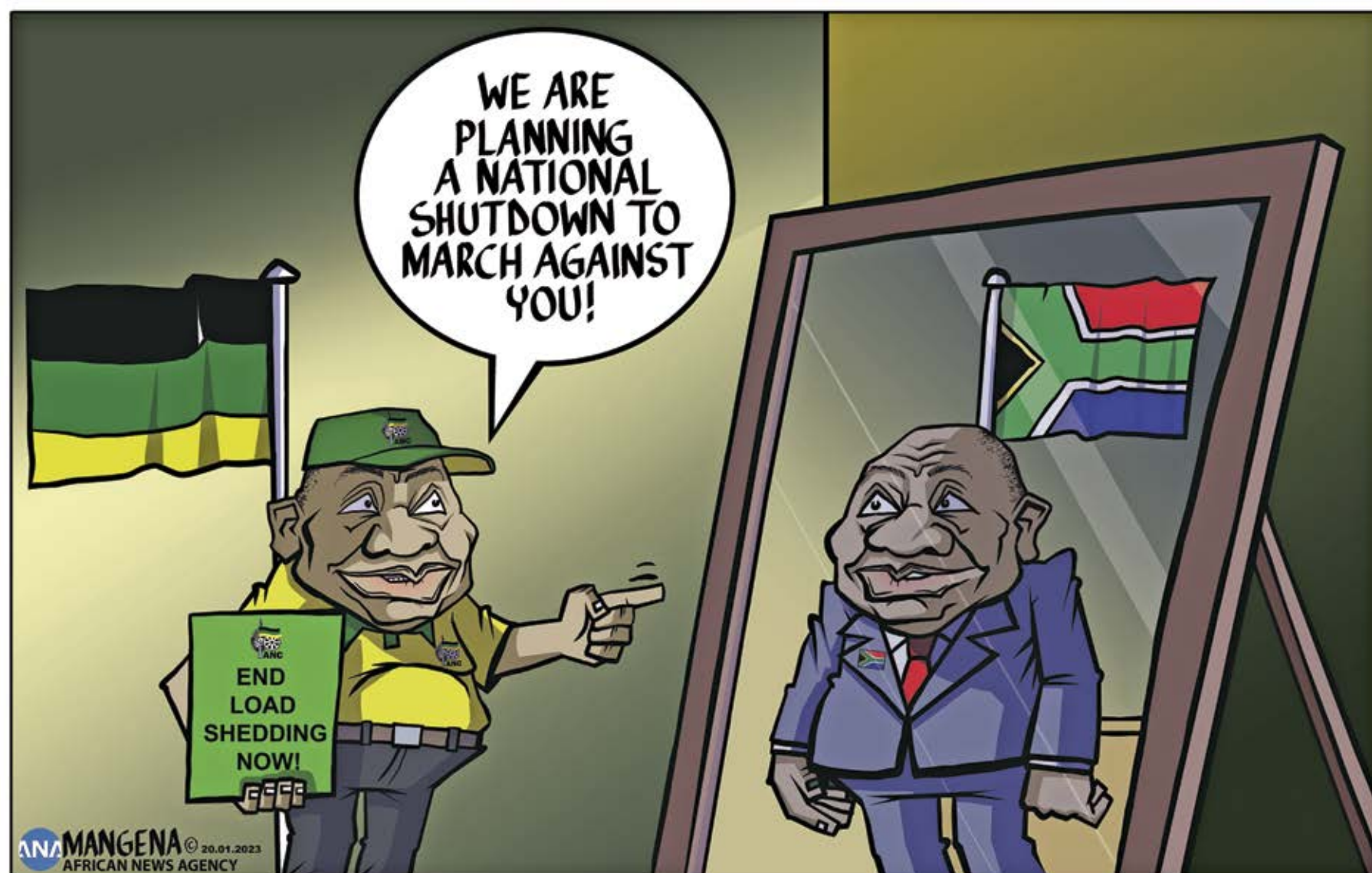
His third fight, perhaps more than his fistic achievements, won him unbridled worldwide acclaim. Among his biggest admirers was "The Greatest", the late Muhammad Ali. Coetzee was a staunch anti-apartheid activist and fought the evil system at every opportunity.

Who will ever forget the story of a young black boxer who asked Coetzee to train him? Coetzee eventually adopted the orphan who then lived in his house in Boksburg, a hotbed of Afrikaner nationalism.

Coetzee was humbled by the ruthless security police who wanted to know: "Where does the boy sleep, where does the boy bathe?" Eventually, he was hauled before a Johannesburg court for violating the Group Areas Act.

When people showered him with admiration, Coetzee gave his parents credit for inculcating morals and values such as respect, responsibility and resilience.

At the peak of his career, his resilience was wonderfully illustrated. After two failed world title attempts, he won the title with his third attempt, even though he had broken his hand earlier in the bout.



Ramaphosa's humiliating U-turn on the world stage

Missed opportunities as president returns to SA amid self-inflicted energy crisis

IS THERE no end to President Cyril Ramaphosa's absenteeism from the world stage?

His transformation in a space of two years from being the "preferred choice" African leader the West can do business with, to a "deferred choice" partner is as revealing as it is remarkable.

Fresh from his conspicuous absence at the 2022 US-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington DC in mid-December – the most important annual gathering for African leaders at the nexus of global political, economic and security power – the president has done it again.

This time, it is a humiliating volte-face regarding his participation in the World Economic Forum (WEF) – the annual beauty parade at the Swiss luxury ski resort of Davos, of the "great and good", the "blingerati" and the billionaires. There, the ideas of do-gooding and sorting out the economic, financial, trade and development travails of the world piously dominate the public platforms during the day, while nefarious deals, powered by an endless flow of cocktails, are conjured in private by bankers, businessmen and their cohorts at night.

On January 16, the Presidency abruptly announced that Ramaphosa had cancelled his trip to Davos and would not be participating in the forum because of the entrenched energy crisis at home where South Africans have been subject to repeated outages and power cuts.

To add insult to the public's and business's simmering anger and frustration, the beleaguered electricity utility, Eskom, said it would implement its worst-yet outages until further notice.

Ramaphosa was complicit in the instruction. Presidential spokesperson Vincent Magwenya, in his weekly media briefing four days earlier, confirmed that "President Ramaphosa deeply regrets the current energy situation which has placed the country into Stage 6 load shedding. The president acknowledges the frustration of households, parents and learners who have commenced the school calendar year facing power shortages. The devastation to small businesses and the adverse impact on the economy remains severe for South Africa's recovering economy".

And yet, on the same day, Magwenya was trumpeting the impor-

COMMENT



MUSHTAK PARKER

tance and prestige of the president's attendance at the WEF and that he was accompanied by a bevy of ministers, led by Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana and captains of industry, to fly the flag for South Africa as an investment destination of choice.

Gone was the opportunity to hobnob with fellow leaders, investors and even thinkers, and to participate in the Annual Breakfast Meeting of the African Heads of State/Government on the progress of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area, and the annual meeting on Investing on Infrastructure for Resilience.

In Washington, it was the stigma of the impeachment motion against Ramaphosa, aka the \$5 million cash-in-the-sofa scandal at his private farm in Phala Phala, and the spectre of him being ousted as the president of the governing ANC. It was the party that prevailed by defeating the motion and re-electing Ramaphosa, but at what cost to the integrity of the South African state, people and psyche?

The amorality of Davos aside, the optics of a president summarily forced to quit a global event because of a self-inflicted energy crisis at home, and a presidency, nay government, defined by incompetence, inertia, insensitivity to the needs of the constituents it professes to represent, and scapegoating others for the blame, is threatening to turn what is widely perceived as Africa's most industrialised economy into a governance laughing stock.

The marginalisation of championing South Africa's national interest at the top table, whether in the US capital or in Davos, at a time when the country is faced with entrenched structural socio-economic challenges in a global environment of multiple uncertainties, is turning out to be a step too far.

The economic costs of South Africa's energy crisis have been festering for years, with the debt at a record R400 billion.

Eskom was a disaster waiting to happen. The Zuma era saw it as the cash cow of state capture. Radical ANC apparatchiks see it as the sacred cow of the state. In between, an indecisive Ramaphosa got lost in translation.

But there is another power player in South Africa's energy mix – Mineral Resources and Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe. He was narrowly re-elected party chairperson, and is a signed-up member of the fossil fuel and nuclear energy supporters club, because his support base is in a coal mining constituency.

Is Ramaphosa's ill-advised decision to retain him as energy minister coming home to roost? Mantashe's support for coal is a threat to South Africa's much-applauded policy of just transition to clean energy, away from coal. He has led the chorus against Eskom CEO Andre de Ruyter, accusing the utility of seeking the overthrow of the government, and failing to secure sufficient power for the country.

As if load shedding merely materialised under his watch. De Ruyter resigned, effective March 1, 2023, because of the lack of political will on the part of the government to sort out the utility.

Many senior ANC officials appear unwilling to accept responsibility for their failures relating to Eskom and other state-owned entities. But cometh the brink, cometh the president.

"Currently the president is convening a meeting with leaders of political parties represented in Parliament, Necom (National Energy Crisis Committee) and the Eskom board," declared Magwenya.

To what extent Western Cape Premier Alan Winde's "threat" to pursue an intergovernmental dispute; requesting the national government to take the energy crisis seriously; and lawyers, leaders, and major groups issuing a letter of demand to De Ruyter and Public Enterprises Minister Pravin Gordhan over the Stage 6 load shedding precipitated the president into "action", is a moot point. It is just as well. The self-styled gatekeepers of the global economy and credit opinions are watching South Africa like a hawk.

"The most important point for our near-term analysis of South Africa," says Jan Friederich, the head of EMEA

Sovereign Ratings, at Fitch Ratings, "will be the evolution of the electricity sector and the scale of load shedding. We do not assume a significant improvement this year, but it is still unclear how the crisis is affecting growth in the short and medium term. There are still downside risks that power supply will worsen further, although upside surprises offering fewer unscheduled outages, and faster delivery of new supply are also possible."

For a utility under the administration of the Ministry of Mineral Resources and Energy, with load shedding increasing to beyond crisis point, public bailout widening and the army engaged to protect key Eskom assets, is Eskom salvageable?

"The most immediate impact of Eskom's troubles," says Fitch's Friederich, "comes via load shedding and the impact on the economy. The effect of load shedding is non-linear – higher levels of outages have much greater economic impact than lower levels. However, the drain on public resources also remains important. We already factor a debt transfer of R50 billion per year over the next four years into our ratings, but additional support needs are possible."

The energy crisis could also affect South Africa's rating outlook, which if it worsens, could precipitate a downward revision which, in turn, would push up the cost of finance in the domestic and international markets, adding further pressure to the burgeoning debt service ratio.

Fitch's South Africa rating, of "BB-" with a Stable Outlook, incorporates substantial over-performance on fiscal revenues and the government's strong efforts to control expenditure.

But as Friederich warns: "It only takes an upside risk the possibility that the government is successful in stabilising debt in FY22/23 (excluding Eskom debt transfers) while we still expect debt to continue rising."

The rating and outlook also incorporate continued political risk and socio-economic pressures that could have negative repercussions on public finances and broader economic performance. Notably it does not assume a near-term amelioration of the electricity crisis."

Parker is an economist and writer in London

COMMENT



VUSI GUMBI

What left-wingers can learn from the political right

LEFT and right originally referred to where people sat in the French National Assembly, the legislature that was established in France following the French Revolution, in 1789: to the right, as seen from the Speaker's vantage point, were nobles and higher-ranked religious figures – those disposed to preserving existing conditions and institutions, with nationalistic viewpoints including fascism and some oppressive ideologies.

The seated commoners and clergy were to the left – who represented more radical viewpoints related to attaining greater social and economic equality. That became the birth of left-wing and right-wing politics as we know it.

Major turning points in politics globally have been generally driven by and associated with the left.

In recent years, however, as the world becomes more polarised than ever, right-wing politics have shown more courage to go after what they want. In some instances, even if it means disregard for the rule of law.

On January 6, 2021, outgoing US President Donald Trump's supporters stormed Congress in an attempt to block the certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory in what was the end of a presidency whose rise was due to racism becoming more accepted in American politics and the Republican electorate being radicalised.

Two things in particular stand out on this particular matter concerning Trump urging his supporters to protest at the Capitol to prevent the election from being "stolen".

◆ It brought attention to the insidious normalisation of far-right politics.

◆ Despite the gravity of the situation and the terrifying nature of this fascist coup attempt, many Republican leaders continued to support Trump to the extent that he is seen as the front-runner to be the party's presidential candidate in 2024.

The attack on the US Capitol showed how determined right-wingers are in pursuit of what they truly want; they showed the courage historically associated with left-wingers, but which has sadly faded away at a time when it is needed the most.

In Brazil, leftist Lula da Silva completed his political comeback by being inaugurated as president on January 1, 2023, after a narrow win over President Jair Bolsonaro, a right-winger.

In what became déjà vu-like, seven days later, on January 8, the former president's supporters stormed the capital, Brasília, destroying property and demanding that Bolsonaro be reinstated.

The extent to which right-wingers will go to get what they want must serve as a reference point for leftists who seek to achieve greater social and economic parity.

In South Africa, the DA lost conservative voters in the 2019 general elections to the right-wing Afrikaner political party, the Freedom Front Plus.

This was due to the DA's attempt to try to appeal to black voters, which unsettled conservatives who had backed the party previously. The DA has prided itself in being a diverse party, and it is quite telling that they lost electoral ground primarily on that basis.

Right-wingers are resolute, they are unwavering in their pursuit of a society they want. Whether it's the formation of an AfriForum that will build a whites-only university, or going to court to fight for the legalisation of the apartheid flag, they are resolute.

Whether it's the development of a whites-only town in South Africa, where Africans are not allowed, they are resolute.

And that is what the left can learn from the right, and the confluence to do it with one voice.

With the rise of China and a shift in the global balance of forces, the echoes of the Cold War in US-inspired Russia-Ukraine war (which signal the need for a new world order) and the return of Lula da Silva in Brazil, this is what the global south can learn from the global north; this is what the East can learn from the West.

Being resolute, unwavering and intentional... most importantly, being united.

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LETTER

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Armageddon lies at our doorstep

THE conflict in Ukraine is escalating out of control. The US is led by a president who has no grasp of the potential for the conflict to go nuclear. When you read the news, it seems mankind is always at war somewhere.

Nato and Putin are shadow boxing for a full-blown conflict that could envelope the entire world.

War is almost considered inevita-

ble, and peace is only a vague utopian dream. It was US general Douglas MacArthur who issued this solemn statement at the end of World War II: "Military alliances, balances of power, league of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be

the way of the crucible of war. The utter destruction of war now blacks out this alternative. We have had our last chance. If we do not devise some greater and more equitable system, our Armageddon will be at our door."

It is only in the past 65 years, barely

a tick of the cosmic clock, that we have developed, deployed and used weapons capable of omnicide.

It took nearly 15 billion years to create the self-awareness of the universe that we humans represent. This self-awareness could be lost in the blinding flash of a thermonuclear war. Armageddon lies at our doorstep.

FAROUK ARAIE | Johannesburg