



BOOKS

28 NOVEMBER, 2017

Adekeye Adebajo unpacks the complexity of Thabo Mbeki and the ANC

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There has been a plethora of publications on Thabo Mbeki. Many are either rabidly anti-Mbeki or unashamedly pro and so there are only a few balanced accounts of democratic South Africa's second president. In 2016 a biography by Adekeye Adebajo was released, titled *A Jacana Pocket Biography: Thabo Mbeki*. It describes the leader as a "complex figure, full of contradictions and paradoxes".

Without romanticising the former president, the book seeks to restore him to the towering and influential political figure that he once was.

Mbeki is generally seen as 'distant' and 'aloof' and so he isn't the usual, ideal biographical subject. Instead he is often misrepresented and this applies to the major policy decisions he made whilst in power. Being

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distant and aloof arguably aided his rise to power during apartheid era paranoia and uncertainty that stifled normal political life. But in post-apartheid South Africa when everyone was basking in the engulfing euphoria, a different kind of temperament was required to win, warm and reassure hearts. Mbeki would rather buckle down to the grim, and for him, mirthless task of building South Africa anew. He wasn't always rewarded or applauded for his choices.

Adekeye Adebajo, in his biography, *Thabo Mbeki* makes a large claim in stating that Thabo Mbeki was “the most important African political figure of his generation.” He goes on to call him a “philosopher-king”, drawing meaning from the Socratic definition of the term. Philosopher-kings were meant to rule ancient Greek city-states that were considerably less populated, arguably less complex and most certainly less bureaucratized than modern nation-states.

In Greek city-states, the tragic execution of Socrates, their most influential unofficial philosopher notwithstanding, reason was not the sole preserve of lofty thinkers, mathematicians or public orators. Reason was meant to be exercised by all freeborn men and perhaps even also slaves existing within the under-recognised precincts of society. As such, the Greek city-state was founded and functioned based on the principle of reason.

As noted, Mbeki has a reputation of being rather standoffish. He is often described in this manner without adequate explanations and wherefores. Nonetheless, it is now possible to understand why he may have developed such personality traits; he had to endure a distant and often absent father, Govan, a family that suffered the systemic violence of apartheid headed by matriarch, Epainette, a childhood marked by constant movement and shifting familial homes and alliances, the agonies of protracted exile, the debilitating paranoia and tribulations that generally afflict revolutionary movements (such as the African National Congress) and the still unexplained loss of his younger brother, Jama. All of these factors coupled with the effects of battling the extraordinarily malignant political concoction called apartheid would make anyone aloof and distant to say the least.

Mbeki rose to power via assiduous backroom political manoeuvrings and the support of key ANC figures such as former mentor, Oliver R. Tambo and Walter Sisulu, in short, with the backing of the famed “Xhosa Nostra” that had also included Nelson Mandela. But the era of those party stalwarts was fading without a concerted rejuvenation of the attitudes and ethos they upheld.

A major policy misadventure, Adebajo points out occurred when “Mbeki was, in fact among the chief architects of the controversial move away from the redistributive, state-led Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)- which formed the ANC's election manifesto in 1994 and which set out to prioritise jobs, welfare, housing, education and health- to a neo-liberal, market-led Growth, Empowerment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy in 1996”.

Another enduring blot on Mbeki's legacy is his administration's stance on what critics dubbed "Aids denialism". Adebajo notes a "Harvard University report published in November 2008 estimated that 305,000 people could have avoided premature death if ARVs had been provided timeously".

It is quite easy to discern that the political character of the ANC and South Africa changed with the emergence of Jacob Zuma as party leader in Polokwane in 2007. Mbeki had ruled through a technocracy made of ex-political exiles, intellectuals and suave technocrats- notably, Aziz and Essop Pahad, Joel Netshitenzhe, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Frank Chikane, Trevor Manuel, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Alec Erwin, Tito Mboweni- who often lacked sizeable grassroots support.

Zuma, on the other hand, unleashed a beast within the ANC, subordinating party structures and rigid traditions to whim and political expediency. But in spite of these upheavals, the ANC remains the foundation of political power. After Mbeki was forced out of power, wings such as the Youth League, the Women's League, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) veterans and provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Mpumalanga and the Free State were cultivated with their leaders treated as sacred cows. New pacts were also made with the ANC alliance partners notably the trade union COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP). These developments occurred as Zuma continued to consolidate his grasp on power and marked the end of the Mbeki way of conducting politics.

Actually, the assumed diminution of the Mbeki influence within the ANC has to be qualified. Indeed, the ANC transitioned from a revolutionary movement to a ruling party. In its rhetoric it still adopts the stance of revolutionary movement while maintaining the pace and responsiveness of a highly bureaucratized entity unduly overburdened by laborious consultation, procedure and custom. Party bigwigs warn constantly about the dangers and the indiscipline of acting and speaking outside "the party structures." And within that rhetoric, adherence to tradition rather the pursuit of much-needed innovation takes precedence. This aspect of the ANC's psychology has ossified into an almost permanent feature and arguably, Mbeki played a major role in this development.

Nelson Mandela remains the gold standard to which all within the ANC and beyond aspire. He exited power with grace and aplomb and all manner of political aspirants evoke his name to gain credibility and respectability. In this way, his own particular legacy has moved beyond the ANC which can no longer solely claim him but must scramble like all the rest to be illumined by his glow.

When the ANC turned against Mbeki, it also momentarily pulverised the foundations of its own bureaucratized make-up; in order to get rid of one man, it literally set its fangs against itself but once that perceived obstacle had been removed, it resumed its own self-imposed strictures of regimentation while solidifying the powers of new heroes who would reign without clear-cut political beliefs, ideals or oversight. Whatever grave failures those heroes may be responsible for are hastily brushed away under the cloak of collective responsibility. The ANC can always be relied upon to take care of its own. But what is becoming increasingly uncertain is whether it possesses the ability to replenish itself, or continue

to aspire towards its revolutionary ideals beyond mere rhetorical posturing after the considerable moral debacle and fragmentation that followed Mbeki's exit.

Many analysts claim Mbeki can be regarded as “the Nkrumah of the present age.” Ali Mazrui, the illustrious Kenyan political historian stated, “Nkrumah's tragedy was a tragedy of excess rather than contradiction”. Mbeki's shortcomings are rather more muted. This is probably why his exit from power was far less cataclysmic and why his eventual and complete rehabilitation may be less tortuous.

During his years of exile in England, Mbeki cultivated the English traits of restraint and stiffness which might have made him less vulnerable to the excess Mazrui observed led to Nkrumah's downfall. But those attributes could also make Mbeki's pursuit of pan-Africanist ideals less total and convincing. Nkrumah's pan-Africanism was undoubtedly expansive and all-inclusive. Mbeki's, on the other hand, often guarded and cagey, had to contend unsuccessfully with constant and violent outbreaks of xenophobia in South Africa.

Jacob Zuma had triumphed riding a different kind of political animal that clearly seeks to wipe out the influence and legacy of the Xhosa-Nostra. In contrast to the deft horse-trading through which party cadres were funneled in the Mbeki era, a politics of earthy commingling, raucous mirth, vigorous backslapping, ethnic chauvinism, blatant cronyism, warm loins and unmistakable postcolonial decadence has come to characterise the current political climate.

Adebajo understandably dwells extensively on Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' project which forms a core aspect of his pan-African ideals and praxis. In 1996, he delivered his famous “I am an African” speech parts of which read:

“I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land...I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their actions, they remain a part of me. In my veins courses the blood of Malay slaves who came from the East”.

Adebajo adds that Ali Mazrui pointed out, “no other African leader other than a black South African president could have made Mbeki's “I am an African” speech without being marched off to an asylum”, perhaps because he sounded so out of touch with the rest of the continent. An anthropologist has also observed that Mbeki's “I am an African” public utterances amount to a “bland, shallow, generalized concept of African heritage.”

Indeed in framing his African Renaissance project, Mbeki may have drawn on the ideas of pan-African pioneers such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Cheikh Anta Diop and Pixley Seme but the very term “renaissance” echoes a similar project of African cultural regeneration in the shape of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States.

The Harlem Renaissance which had poets, artists and philosophers as its leading figures is usually remembered for the invaluable contributions of philosopher Alain Locke, novelist Jean Toomer, poets Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps and of course the novelist Zora Neale Hurston. Collectively, this varied and colourful gathering of writers, artists and poets created a tradition of African American arts and culture that has had global reach and significance.

Mbeki observed the timidity of the black South African intelligentsia in relation to its white counterpart and decided the way to confront the situation was to re-vitalise black African culture and as mentioned, it isn't difficult to discern what his cultural antecedents were. Even the poetic lines of his "I am an African" speech appear to draw from the same thematic and inspirational fount as Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", which bears the lines, "I've known rivers, ancient, dusky rivers and my soul has grown deep like the rivers."

Adebajo rightly suggests that Mbeki's legacy, just as Kwame Nkrumah's, resides in his foreign policy initiatives and pan-Africanist credentials. Credentials that Mbeki himself undermines on account of his knotty Anglophilia and at times, dispassionate internationalism. And just as Nkrumah was in his day, he is often derided in his own political constituency. In the era of his nemesis, Jacob Zuma, there seems to be a concerted effort to obliterate his trace within the ANC but it is likely that just as Nkrumah was eventually resurrected politically, Mbeki's political fortunes may be revived sooner than later as South Africa continues to slide into economic and political decline.

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