

What was at stake in the Succession secrecy

by Anton Harber

A year ago, it seemed as if the presidential succession would be decided in smoke-filled rooms behind closed doors by the party elders, much the way the ANC had previously done it, particularly in the choice of a successor to Mandela. There would be no popular expression, little public debate about the kind of leader wanted and needed. What would emerge would likely be a compromise between competing factions within the party, someone whose first role was to keep the different elements of this broad church singing together, and it would be played out by and large, away from the public eye. It was the way of a secure and comfortable broad-based liberation movement, relatively immune from popular and populist pressures outside of election time.

Essentially, President Mbeki would anoint a successor and, unless someone had the nerve to stand up to this process, which seemed most unlikely, that chosen successor would assume office smoothly and be forever in hock to a relatively young and active ex-president who would no doubt play a crucial behind-the-scenes role. It was not a healthy or desirable scenario but political and media critics could do little more than murmur about it.

Largely, as a result of the Zuma trial and the events around it, that scenario has fallen away with unexpected speed. The succession battle, and all the critical issues which surround it, has been thrown wide open to public debate and is no longer under the strict and easy control of the party bosses. Most importantly, the ideological issues which lurk beneath the surface of this battle, the fight for control of the party between the conservative centre and the populist left, is being canvassed in our media on a daily basis, with Cosatu (Congress of SA Trade Unions) and the SACP (SA Communist Party) leading a charge to ensure that the ANC does not slip back into its old ways.

A year ago, we were securely on a journey towards an imperial presidency, with more and more power influence residing in that office at the expense of Parliament, the Section 9 institutions, the judiciary and others. That seemed immutable. Today, Mbeki has significantly less authority than he had even a few months ago (such as when he dismissed Zuma from his cabinet, to national and international acclaim) and there is growing suspicion that to be anointed his choice of successor is one way to ensure that you do not get the job.

This does not mean one can write off Mbeki, as he still has the power of his office, and a formidable political wiliness, but it does mean that he is on the back foot, probably for the first time in his presidency.

The Zuma trial tested all sorts of important South African institutions, the presidency, the courts, the police and the prosecuting authorities – and no less the media. Of course, it did this in the way any such court case would – testing the capacity of the media to cover the case consistently and accurately, trying to treat both the complainant and

the accused with fairness, and conveying a complex story in a few hundred words or a few minutes of airtime a day. Court cases are always difficult, as they swing one way today and another tomorrow – a good witness today is torn apart the next day. So much more so when one has to cover the outside of the court, and a case with such wide-ranging implications.

What was at stake for the media in this case was, however, much wider than this. And I would define it this way: could the media play its role in throwing open to the wider public the debates which emerged from the trial: issues of justice, of gender and of leadership. A critical factor in the shift which I have described towards an open, competitive, public succession process is the role the media has played in prising open these doors, throwing the gallery open to the public, and ignoring the attempts by the ANC to close them again.

I am on record as saying that I do not believe the media as a whole did as badly as some people have suggested. I think, in fact, that though there were lapses, there were reasonable pockets of coverage that were good at giving us a feeling for what was going on in court and outside it, and, particularly towards the end of the trial, teasing out the implications for gender, ethnic and national politics. This, I think, improved considerably towards the end of the trial, as one might expect it to.

If there is a debate now around these critical issues, it is because the media has thrust them forward in the coverage of the trial and thereafter.

It is true that most newspapers, given the interests they represent, are ranged against Zuma. An interesting aspect of our media coverage is that the new tabloids – given as they are to naked and ruthless populism in their news choices – have not tuned into the political populism of a Zuma. They

remain largely away from the political fray, arguing that their readers are interested in more immediate issues than Zuma's fate. But watch this space – a critical moment in our media and in our national politics, will come when the tabloids discover the political element in their current brand of populism.

One notable exception to the quality of coverage, I think, was the SABC. The SABC kept to the strictest and narrowest parameters of dry, daily reporting, failing to break news stories, or, by and large, to take the major issues forward in discussions, features, analysis or any of the other techniques open to broadcasters. I think the thinness of their coverage, and the more recent controversy over the failure to run a two-part series on Mbeki, is less a sign of outright evil, or political control, as some are suggesting, and more a sign of incompetence, lack of direction and failure of leadership – they don't know how to deal with difficult political issues and keep getting themselves into trouble as a result. I don't see crude political control, but I do see a broadcaster flailing around, uncertain of its role and its identity. ■



Zuma trial?

The Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research held a debate on the wider implications of the Zuma rape trial, here are three points of view...

Tradition/modernity

by Irma du Plessis

In the last couple of months we have seen frank, exciting and vibrant public debate in the country. From the gravity of the crisis, beyond the important personal tragedies and injustices suffered, was born also a new sense of political engagement and energy. It has become a moment for advocacy, strategy, and intervention in which a need for some form of partisanship seemed central.

But I think this has proved to be a risky enterprise indeed. And, ironically, I see this risk as emanating from the very conditions that made it possible for such a large number of voices to speak truth to power, that is, the immediate political crisis. The focus on facing up to the real possibility of Zuma in power, and considerations about how best to partake in and shape current debates, may have the unintended consequence of limiting the way in which we imagine the future and make sense of the challenges we're facing, by locking us into a false opposition.

I am referring here to a debate broadly set up around the tradition/modernity divide. Simply put, I'm talking about a

dominant account about Zuma's backwardness. The content being: Zuma is a polygamist, a loose cannon, he didn't finish school, he is a sexist, if not a rapist, he is avowedly patriarchal, he is charismatic; he is also uninformed, ignorant or plain stupid, he appeals to deep rural sensibilities, he is superstitious, he is someone who dares to speak Zulu in public; he flaunts Zuluness and he is not afraid to play the ethnic card. This figure is then contrasted with the sophisticated, market-savvy, British-trained, urbane, worldly and cosmopolitan leader found in the persona of Thabo Mbeki.

Framing this analysis is a question about the presidency: what kind of person should become the next president of the ANC and the country. Backward or sophisticated? But this kind of analysis is also invested in a specific political outcome. It is an intervention, a normative judgement, that provides part of the answer as it states the question: Zuma it cannot be!

The problem is that the debate capitalises notions of Culture, Tradition and Ethnicity. We are safest, it seems, if culture, ethnicity, language, and tradition are kept in Pandora's box. But this kind of binary thinking does not

differentiate between softer and harder practices of tradition and culture. It does not recognise that many of the characteristics pinned to Zuma and his supporters are in fact far more widely shared across class and social location. It does not recognise that more than a decade after democracy there must be a space in this society for speaking languages other than English without that amounting to playing up ethnicity, buying into a discourse of victimhood or demonstrating anti-modern sentiments. It does not take account of the fact that ordinary South Africans want to recognise themselves in the state.

In the process, the tradition/modernity divide shifts the debate away from issues critical to our political future. It leaves little room for challenging, productive and important discussions about culture, ethnicity, and tradition and their role and place in the society we are making and shaping.

The strong affirmation of ethnicity is a spectre that haunts us. We do not want to become a Rwanda. But the Zuma trial has produced a false opposition: a choice between modernity and tradition, between being cosmopolitan or parochial. It is a false opposition on two counts: both in terms of what choices we have for president and the kinds of sensibilities and debates required to mend the social fabric and produce a society that is both outward looking and locally grounded. ■

Gender sensitivity

by Tawana Kupe

In their reporting, the media that reaches the large majority of ordinary people feed into and feed out of interpretative frameworks about everyday life, which are deeply disturbing in that they do not necessarily question gender-based violence and sexual stereotypes and representations.

Some sections of the media, which reach the elites, framed the trial in a restrained, dignified and ethical manner which, while revealing the essence of the claims of the accused and the accuser, did not emphasise sordid details which do not help the public understand the evidence.

The public interest in this trial is that the media, through balanced information and analysis, help the public to understand the evidence of these serious allegations. What some sections of the public might be interested in is graphic details of sexual acts. It is not the news media's business to indulge such interest and especially if it is at the expense of failing to focus on the core of what is a most serious matter.

The ANC needs to ask itself why supporters of its deputy president – some of whom are party members – still exhibit publicly attitudes and prejudices that are inimical to the party's progressive views of gender equality and the treatment of women. Has the party done enough to ensure that its members actually believe in gender equality and will defend it in all circumstances, even if they might hold a view that one of their own has been falsely accused? What are its gender-sensitisation programmes and how effective are they?

It is not enough for the party to say that it has strongly condemned and censured those

supporters who behaved violently outside the court.

The media need to be asking the ANC these questions and not just focusing on "MaMkhize", the apparent leader of the Zuma supporters outside the court. Further, the media need to be asking questions about why women would be at the forefront of victimising an alleged victim who is also a woman. It would appear, at least in this case, that some women are the 'patriarchal policemen' on behalf of men.

If the media asked these questions and probed these issues it would reveal the extent to which a gender-sensitive consciousness has not developed among our people.

The question also arises whether the media has done enough to probe whether the constitutional values of gender equality guide the actions of ordinary people and are not just lofty principles without a relationship to everyday life.

Gender-conscious parliamentarians need to account for why they have not taken the route of a private member's bill or fast tracked the Sexual Offences Bill to ensure that the courts try rape cases in ways that are consistent with constitutional values of gender equality and sensitivity.

As some have noted, if the Sexual Offences Bill had been passed, Zuma's lawyer would have been prevented from using retrogressive patriarchal ideas about consent in sexual matters and dress codes as a defence, and from questioning the accuser in ways that suggest she was asking for it.

The more all these institutions delay the changes to the law the longer women will take to enjoy hard-won benefits flowing from decades of struggle. ■



Shabba Kgolaetsho: Market Photo Workshop