How Mbeki Failed

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A Legacy of Liberation: Thabo Mbeki and the Future of the South African Dream by Mark Gevisser. Palgrave Macmillan, 376 pp., $29.95

Even a politician more thick-skinned than Thabo Mbeki, South Africa’s recently ousted president, might have felt oppressed under the long shadow of Nelson Mandela, his universally heralded predecessor. Mbeki, who functioned as Mandela’s de facto prime minister and wrote most of the speeches on the theme of reconciliation that the country’s first black president then delivered with powerful effect, found Mandela’s shadow so smothering that he once made the great man wait for more than a year before granting him an appointment he sought. In an odd toast on the occasion of Mandela’s eightieth birthday in 1998, President Mbeki exposed his wish to see him disappear into quiet retirement by recalling Lear’s fond invitation to Cordelia on their way to jail to “live, And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh /At gilded butterflies.” Mbeki’s diligent and not unsympathetic biographer makes the inescapable point: Mandela had already done time; twenty-seven years, to be precise.

Though Mbeki’s casting of Mandela as Lear was less than apt, there’s still a tragic element in the multilayered narrative Mark Gevisser has painstakingly constructed. It attaches to both the country and Mbeki. Freed from the scourge of apartheid, a liberated South Africa wasted the better part of a decade before starting to marshal its considerable resources to confront the scourge of AIDS (by which time nearly 30 percent of pregnant South African women were estimated to be HIV-positive). Thabo Mbeki was the central reason for that catastrophic misjudgment. In his suspicious mind, the notion that HIV and AIDS were causally related was only a “thesis” propounded by multinational drug companies bent on opening new markets in Africa.

In private sessions with his party’s caucus, Gevisser tells us, Mandela’s successor speculated about the likely role of the Central Intelligence Agency in supporting these exploiters; his aides sometimes worried aloud that the President’s life might be in danger because of his determination to probe beneath the science establishment’s analysis of the plague, which, he convinced himself, grew out of a racist obsession with the sexual behavior of black men. Meanwhile, his chosen health minister, who lost her job only after Mbeki was summarily forced to resign as president last September by the African National Congress, prescribed garlic, beetroot, and olive oil as antidotes to the disease.

Mbeki’s biographer struggles mightily—sometimes wordily, drenching his subject in adjectives like “guarded,” “paranoid,” and “repressed”—to reconcile the brooding recluse who sat up late into the night at his computer in presidential mansions in Cape Town and Pretoria, exploring the speculations of AIDS deniers, with the charming, reassuring diplomatic operative who in the 1980s sold the path of negotiation both to a nervous white establishment and to an underground movement that imagined itself bent on armed struggle. Even though the underground had accomplished very little in the martial line over more than two decades, its strategic aim remained a “seizure of power” through “mass insurrection.” In another context, it spoke of making the country “ungovernable.”

Mbeki, as a secret member of the Politburo of the South African Communist Party, had himself supported that strategy. But he realized that a country that became ungovernable for whites would not easily be made governable by their black successors. Possibly no one, not even Mandela, deserved more credit for the South African miracle—the peaceful handover of power that occurred on May 10, 1994, to international acclaim.

Gevisser labored prodigiously over a period of eight years, comprising all but the final year of the Mbeki presidency. Mbeki, who had scrappy relations with the press, sat still for twenty hours of interviews. When the biographer set out, he had every reason to imagine that he was writing the life of the chief architect of a new South Africa. He traveled to Brighton to reconstruct his subject’s life as a student at Sussex University in the 1960s; to Moscow to visit the building that once housed the Lenin Institute, where Mbeki was enrolled for nearly two years; and to interview his Soviet teachers and handlers; to an obscure village in the former Transkei Bantustan called Mbewuleni, his subject’s birthplace (unvisited by Mbeki himself in his first fifteen years after returning from exile, even when his mother was still there).

He had searching interviews, it seems, judging from a list of over two hundred names appended to the bibliography in the South African edition, with practically every consequential black or white who crossed paths politically with Mbeki; also mentors and lovers, and all the members of his far-flung family, with the glaring exception of Zanele Mbeki, the former president’s much admired and, we learn, often neglected wife. Also missing is Oliver Tambo, the leader of the ANC in exile, Mbeki’s political patron, who died before the research began but not before he’d positioned his protégé to succeed Mandela (who had a clear preference for an Mbeki rival, Cyril Ramaphosa).

The result was an 892-page book that came off the presses in South Africa in late 2007; too soon by a matter of weeks to include the first bumb in Mbeki’s precipitous political downfall: his crushing defeat in December of that year when he sought reelection as president of the African National Congress, which after thirteen years in power still functioned with some of the conspiratorial secretiveness, the institutionalized paranoia, of the beleaguered underground it had been. A grievously wounded Mbeki staggered on as head of government for another nine months, but the outcome of the internecine contest made it plain that he’d permanently lost his grip on the movement and that power would swing to the man who’d vanquished him—one of his most trusted ally, his bitterest enemy—Jacob Zuma, a Zulu populist. The version of Mark Gevisser’s book that now appears here after Mbeki has been driven into sullen private life manages, somewhat breathlessly, to cover the final stages of his fall, filling the gap in the original text in less than half the length of the South African edition. Only specialists will miss the details that have been condensed here or hacked away.

Some of the effort Gevisser devoted to spelunking through the hidden recesses of Thabo Mbeki’s psyche might have been more usefully expended on the split personality of the movement that fostered and then spurned him, a governor of the intellects of a beleaguered underground attuned to fending off the next attack. The grandson of first-generation African Methodists and son of first-generation African Communists, Mbeki, who was born in 1942, was reared to think of the African National Congress as more his family than his actual kinship group, which was scattered across the continent and its diaspora. His father, Govin Mbeki, turned his back on the family homestead to pursue clandestine political work for the banned Communist Party when his eldest son was ten. The father, a dedicated ideologue who would spend twenty-three years in jail on Robben Island where he sometimes feuded with Mandela, never again had any close- ness with his son.

Sent off to mission schools that were then taken over by the apartheid regime, Thabo was expelled for leading a strike at the age of sixteen. Back home in the Transkei, he had a brief fling with a woman three years older than him. The relationship, to which his only child, a boy named Kwanda whom he would never know and whose disappearance and presumed death at age twenty-two are among countless un- raveled destinies of the apartheid era. The age at which the son disappeared turns out to have been the age at which the father he longed to meet had earlier fled the country to give himself to the movement.

A younger brother also vanished, turning up in a morgue in Lesotho, victim of a politically motivated killing that appears to have involved allies of the African National Congress; another went on his own way politically, eventually surfacing as a sharp critic of his broth- er’s policies (especially on Zimbabwe). When Thabo Mbeki went into exile in 1962, he traveled exceedingly light, as far as his accessories were concerned. He had been able to determine, when it came to feelings for the family he left behind. Presumably he had wounds, but these were covered in scar tissue; he never let them show.

Mbeki wasn’t simply being defensive when he warned his biographer not to dig too deeply into the psychological side of his makeup in search of a master...
key to his conduct. At any given stage, he said, his feelings were shaped by the needs of the movement. For most of his twenty-eight years in exile, he kept a home behind a high steel gate in a comfortable suburb of Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. But he led a peripatetic life as the movement’s top diplomat and spokesman, living out of a suitcase in hotels around the world, changing his political vocabulary with each new city, depending on whom he was tasked with persuading: a Soviet paymaster one week, a Nigerian general or Scandinavian diplomat the next; Western businessmen hedging mineral investments in southern Africa; fellow exiles, in or out of the movement; even American journalists.

Adaptability was a necessary trait but it laid him open, in the more doctrinaire sectors of the movement, to the charge of being a front man who was too remote from the struggle, too flexible ideologically. The fact that his father was a leader imprisoned on Robben Island made him an aristocrat in the movement, a “crown prince,” but it didn’t protect him, on at least one occasion, from the suspicion that he might be an “enemy agent” himself. The exile movement, constantly on guard against infiltrators dispatched from South Africa, was chronically suspicious of its own.

By 1985, all but five of the twenty-nine members elected to the movement’s National Executive Committee were simultaneously members of the South African Communist Party, according to Gevisser. Yet that was the year white liberals and business potentates from Johannesburg began what were called “safaris” to places like Lusaka and Dakar for meetings with Mbeki and his colleagues. The question of whether the movement could tolerate, let alone sustain, a market economy was a big one on both sides. Though the talks were preliminary—the movement, after all, was still in exile, still at war with the regime—assurances had to be given about the legal structure for democratic reforms in a post-apartheid era.

Mbeki, a smooth point man in all these futuristic exercises, had no choice but to wear different ideological hats if the discussions were to keep moving forward. In one week in April 1989, he flew from an Aspen Institute session with Afrikaner intellectuals in Bermuda to a Communist Politburo meeting in Havana. The next month he received word that the white government in South Africa was ready to talk to the outlawed movement without preconditions. “Yes, here we are, the terrorists,” Mbeki is said to have called out as he and Jacob Zuma, who was at the time chief of intelligence of the ANC in exile, walked into the hotel suite in Lucerne where the first official exchanges took place. “Mbeki’s life,” Gevisser writes, “had become an almost-impossible layering of covert encounters.” Yet a half-year later, Mandela was freed and the exiles were on their way home.

Of course, it was no coincidence that these epochal events coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall and end of the cold war. With the movement’s Soviet backers fast losing interest and Western sanctions against the white regime biting, neither side in the South African struggle had any prospect left of outside support. Still, the idea that Mbeki had exceeded his mandate, that he had “sold out” the armed struggle, persisted in the movement he’d one day lead. On the eve of his return, his biographer says, he was “deeply unpopular” in the ANC, even more so for the acclaim he’d already started to receive from white journalists in Johannesburg.

For his more militant colleagues, such lionizing was further proof of his bad faith. Before the terms of the transition were nailed down, he was dropped from his lead role in the negotiations and replaced by Cyril Ramaphosa. The factional intrigues and power plays that landed him back on top as Mandela’s designated successor are of interest now only because they show how difficult it was for the exile movement to adjust to its new role as the majority party in an open parliamentary system.

From a distance it has seemed that the deepest cleavage was between those who had spent long years in exile and those who came up in the struggle in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. Those who spent years in jail on Robben Island were endowed with a kind of sanctity so long as Mandela was on the scene, but they were never quite equal in political clout to the cadres who had languished in Lusaka, Angola, Moscow, Havana, or East Berlin. In this perspective, a great liability of anyone with a background like that of Cyril Ramaphosa, a one-time trade union leader, was that he was too new to be fully trusted, having lived his whole life in South Africa.

If this could be the case for people inside the ANC, the bar was set even higher for those who grew up in rival groupings such as the Black Consciousness movement that formed around the martyred Steve Biko in the 1970s. Mbeki himself worked hard to recruit Biko’s followers into the underground as they fled into exile but few ever made it into leadership positions. Antiapartheid whites found there was even less use for them in the emerging power structure. Gevisser is the kind of writer who can’t help squeezing a metaphor dry through constant repetition. When it comes to Mbeki’s relations with well-meaning whites, he finds the metaphor of seduction irresistible. Of course, in this portrayal, the whites end up feeling jilted and ill-used. Most prominent among these was Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, a brainy,
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made clear, to Mbeki’s disastrous falling out with Jacob Zuma, who replaced him as leader of the ANC. Not long after taking power, the new government invested in a series of arms deals for German frigates, British fighter planes, and other European armaments, worth some $5 billion, which ultimately gave rise to allegations of tens of millions of dollars passing under the table to members of the ANC. Mbeki appears to have been deeply involved in these deals and in blocking some subsequent investigations of them.

Gevisser explores various possible rationalizations for lavish spending on arms at a time when glaring social needs cried out to be met. One reason to think, he tells us, that the new leadership was nervous about the loyalty of the military, which was the same South African Defense Force that had been trained to crush the African National Congress under the old regime. (The formal transition agreement provided for a shotgun marriage: members of the former underground would be integrated into the force at all levels with needed retraining.) Looking forward, Mbeki already felt that South Africa needed to assert leadership on the troubled continent that was its hinterland, and that this would involve a projection of power. He may also have been sensitive to his shaky standing with the military wing of the former underground, whose top leaders were now settling into defense headquarters in Pretoria.

The arms deals thus came to pass in a cloud of allegations. Only later, when a middleman on a side deal with a German subcontractor was convicted on a charge of bribing Jacob Zuma, was a split between Mbeki and Zuma revealed. In 2005, after Zuma himself was charged with accepting those same bribes, Mbeki finally demanded his resignation as deputy president.

Gevisser suggests that the bribe charges may have given President Mbeki an occasion to do something he wanted to do anyway, that he may have already started to mistrust Zuma. Possibly this was because he sensed that Zuma had started to mistrust him. Sorting out the accusations of bad faith in this relationship is like trying to assign blame for the failure of a marriage. To the stunned surprise of Mbeki’s inner circle and most onlookers, the party then rallied to the fallen politician despite the fact that Zuma by then was facing a concurrent charge of rape (on which he was subsequently acquitted). Faced with a choice between a remorseful, irascible power-wielder and a rival perceived as an approachable, all-too-human son of the soil, it dumped its unloved president. If there was a Shakespearean parallel this time, Zuma would be unlikely to be the one to point it out, but it was Macbeth, not Lear; and he’d been cast as Macduff, notwithstanding the criminal charges he still confronts.

It’s too soon to say how it will all work out. A parliamentary election has been called for April 22. Zuma is expected to head the ANC ticket and there’s still every sign that he would then take office as president. (An interim president, Kgalema Motlanthe, has kept the seat warm since the party turned on Mbeki.) Zuma’s swearing-in would then take place less than four months before he’s due to stand trial in the old bribery case. It’s not clear what pretext could be found for postponing the trial of a head of state, but an actual trial of a sitting president would seem to be the least likely of outcomes. The case could be withdrawn. Or he could stand aside temporarily, even permanently, having been vindicated at the polls. Or a further postponement of his trial, lasting for the duration of his presidency, might be arranged.

Before it gets to that juncture, the ANC has to overcome its first serious split. In the aftermath of Mbeki’s fall, his diehards combined with other Zuma doubters to form a new party calling itself the Congress of the People, a hallowed name harkening back to a gathering in 1955, in a place called Kliptown, which drafted the Freedom Charter, the manifesto of a movement that was soon to be banned and driven underground. The name thus presents the new party as a legitimate claimant for the mantle of the struggle; in effect, as the true African National Congress.

The party is led by a credible politician, a former defense minister named Mosiuoa Lekota, known as “Terror” from his days as a hard-charging soccer player. To make a lasting difference in South African politics, breaking its descent into the corruptions of one-party rule, COPE (as it’s already called) first has to win seats in Parliament. Today the official opposition, called the Democratic Alliance, is led by a white liberal, an articulate former journalist named Helen Zille; it finds scant support among the black majority. A black-led opposition could represent a stride forward for South African democracy, especially if the split in the majority were not on stark ethnic lines, non-Zulus vs. Zulus.

Meanwhile Thabo Mbeki sits in his new Johannesburg home like Nixon in San Clemente. Perhaps he’s waiting for his David Frost to show up in order to get his story out. Or maybe he has started to write it himself. If he’s capable of suspending his defense mechanisms and reflecting on his remarkable journey with something approaching candor, as few politicians ever are, he could clear up some of the ambiguities that linger in the story Mark Gevisser tells.

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