

WEEKEND RE

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Thabo Mbeki: A difficult man to love

Mark Gevisser's biography leaves



THE historian and author RW Johnson is rightly considered by many black South Africans to be insufferably conservative, one of those beyond-the-pale right-wingers who, until April 27 1994, considered the African National Congress (ANC) to be a terrorist organisation.

One of my favourite clichés holds that even a broken clock tells the time right at least twice a day. And every now and again Ol' Bill, probably inadvertently, gets the time just right.

He was in one of these happy coincidences on the pages of *Business Day* this week, arguing why President Thabo Mbeki had to be put out to pasture without delay, so that the country will get to work, undoing some of the more ghastly failures of his time in office.

"Mbeki has his merits," he wrote. "But his demerits are greater. He has brought racism to the centre of our national life, making it fearful, divisive and ugly. He has, through his AIDS denialism, been responsible for several hundred thousand unnecessary deaths, and he has supported Robert Mugabe — remember all those photos of them walking hand in hand?"

"He has somehow convinced himself that Mugabe represents the 'progressive' side, and that it is thus, somehow, okay for him to destroy his country's economy, force a quarter of the population into exile, and kill many more of them. Thus he has supported genocide here and genocide next door.

"To extend his power would be a vote for more of the same and there is no doubt that we would get it. There is every sign that the paranoia that has been his undoing is increasing, not lessening, and heaven alone knows what state he might be in a few years from now, unless he is put out to grass.

"In any case, he is so busy abroad and with quashing dissent that precious little attention is paid to the task of governance, with the results we see all around us. Who can possibly want more of that?"

In the hurly-burly of the ANC succession battle, the question still needs to be asked, let alone be answered, why it is that the ruling party is willing to countenance the perpetuation of Mbeki's rule beyond its natural and constitutional end-date, all because of the false obsession of "legacy".

After all, with the "benefit" of the past eight years of Mbeki's rule to look back on, it does not appear that the legacy — creditable macroeconomic management peppered with a dangerously pathological denialism — is worth preserving.

Yet Mbeki is hard at work today doing just that, fighting tooth and nail to get himself re-elected as ANC president so

that he may "protect" his legacy from the likes of Jacob Zuma.

It is a bitter irony of African politics that our leaders stay in office beyond their welcome, so that they may fix problems that are wholly of their own creation. Johnson diagnoses it perfectly (remember he gets to be right twice in a 24-hour cycle): "We are at a crossroads where the central possibility is the indefinite extension of one-man rule by a paranoiac. In a word, Mugabeism."

Mugabeism, the curse of modern African politics, which apparently is capable of afflicting even this, our Rainbow Nation, with its "world-class" constitution and progressive grass-roots politics. All of which brings me to Thabo Mbeki: *The Dream Deferred*, journalist Mark Gevisser's heavy biography of South African democracy's second president.

I do not expect Gevisser to condemn Mbeki for his unseemly desire to hang onto power, at least not quite like Johnson condemns him. But I did expect the biography to pay some regard to the contemporary politics of the ANC, and Mbeki's role therein. I was disappointed.

Why would eight years of meticulous research, unparalleled access to Mbeki and 800-odd pages of sometimes clever text fail to grasp so obvious an insight that a Jurassic wall-clock managed to give it an accurate name?

This blind spot is no doubt related to Gevisser's moral ambivalence over what Mbeki is trying to achieve. There can be nothing wrong with antidemocratic tendencies, so long as their ultimate motive is to "stop Zuma". Gevisser has suggested as much in interviews, and his public lecture to launch his book.

Perhaps Gevisser's generosity towards Mbeki is also underscored by the fact that he shares with Mbeki a filial class bond, albeit across racial lines. His meticulous research into the histories of the Mbeki and Moerane families from which his subject is sired, makes clear this class bond. It is also clear that he does not share it with Zuma, nor Tokyo Sexwale, nor Kgalema Motlanthe, nor any of the other presidential wannabes.

"Like Mbeki, I too come from an intellectual, entrepreneurial class that was upwardly mobile," he writes. Clearly, while Gevisser acknowledges that no one can really "know" Mbeki, he "feels" the president at this level.

"But as I delved into Thabo Mbeki's personality and his past, I became convinced that if a certain persona had developed around him, he had had some hand in the making of it," Gevisser explains.

"He was a profound strategist and he knew that if he was going to carve a niche for himself beneath the overwhelming



WHAT'S THE REAL STORY? Mark Gevisser, author for his own identity at a Wits University lecture on Mor

shadow of a universally beloved Nelson Mandela, he needed to affect the image of the vigilant backroomer rather than the warrior at the front line. He knew that because people would never love him the way they did Madiba, they would need to respect him, even if it meant fearing him."

It is of course nearly impossible to love Mbeki. Not in the way one can love Mandela, or even, for that matter, Zuma. "Let me have men about me that are fat, sleek-headed men, and such as sleep a' night," said Caesar to Mark Anthony. "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous."

Gevisser seems to suggest that this is the Mbeki personality, hence our own difficult relationship with him. We've always known that he's dangerous (at least to his political enemies) and therefore could not love him.

But far more disturbing is the thought, which Gevisser does nothing to dispel in more than 800 pages, that he cannot ever love us. He is too busy thinking.

"Show me a character whose life arouses my curiosity, and my flesh begins crawling with suspense," said Fawn McKay Brodie, the biographer and professor of history at UCLA, best known for *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, a work of psychobiography.

Although Brodie eventually became one of the first tenured female professors of history at UCLA, she is best known for her five biographies, four of which incorporate (with varying degrees of success) the alleged insights of Freudian psychology.

Her psychobiography of Thomas Jefferson became a bestseller and reintroduced Jefferson's purported slave mistress, Sally Hemings, to popular consciousness even before advances in

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DNA testing were also construed to support a liaison. Nevertheless, Brodie's study of the early Richard Nixon, completed while she was dying of cancer, demonstrated the hazards of psychobiography in the hands of an author who loathes her subject. We therefore don't need an Mbeki biography by Johnson either.

In his compelling introduction to his book Gevisser talks about how Mbeki's life has been guided by the “loadstar of self-determination that has often seemed to leave him quite isolated, politically and even emotionally”.

So, on another level Gevisser's work is much more than a mere biographic narrative spanning Mbeki's family origins, or simply tracing his childhood and early school career; his nascent political activism during his youth that would eventually torpedo him into the thick of revolutionary struggle; his life as a student at Sussex in England; or even Mbeki's role as a protégé learning at the feet of illustrious elders in ANC, while navigating the petty jealousies and intrigue that came to characterise the exile community in Africa and Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Nor is it only the story of Mbeki's return to SA as heir apparent, which culminates in his eventual control of the ANC, and the state, when he takes over from Mandela first as ANC leader in 1997, then as president of SA in 1999.

In attempting to frame Mbeki's mental paradigm, Gevisser argues that Mbeki's family background, as a descendant of Eastern Cape's detribalised Mfengu, born of enterprising Christian amagqoboka stock, provides a potent core to his psychological make-up. By delving into his

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family background Gevisser succeeds in constructing out of the “shards” of history a more rounded picture of a man who has eluded understanding by even his most devoted mandarins.

It is in Mbeki's family background that he finds the origins of the president's intellectualism and his manic work ethic.

In chapters one to three Gevisser details at length the dispossession of the Mfengu, SA's first British colonial subjects, who later found themselves at the mercy of the mining industry — and located the beginnings of Mbeki's paradoxical relationship with the west.

Some have suggested that Mbeki's love-hate relationship with the developed world is illustrated by his continued defence of Mugabe or SA's inexplicable backing of dodgy leaders on the continent and elsewhere.

In fact, it has its origins in this complexity that stretches back decades into the Mbeki family



POWERFUL ENIGMA: President Thabo Mbeki drew supporters when he addressed the National Council of Provinces in Pniel, Stellenbosch, this month. Picture: ESA ALEXANDER

history. It is hard to know for sure. I suspect that the ambivalent political relationship with the west — posturing against western “imperialism” while the Harvard

Group writes your economic policy — may not be peculiar to Mbeki. It is a feature of the post-colonial condition everywhere.

Certainly, it is endemic in SA.

But insofar as there is there is an interplay of this universal condition with the personal obsessions of one powerful individual, we are entitled to ask why it is that we as a country should pay the price.

At the launch of Gevisser's book at Wits University on Monday, a panel of grandees posed questions to the author following his lecture. Probably the most pertinent, certainly the most cutting, was asked by columnist Xolela Mangcu: "Why should we be implicated in one individual's search for identity?"

Indeed millions of South Africans have over the past 10 years paid the ultimate price for Mbeki's own battle with his demons. There is no better demonstration of this fact than what The Independent called his "scandalous failure" on HIV/AIDS.

For there is no denying that Mbeki's dalliance with dangerous pseudoscience had much to do with his attempts to reclaim the dignity of his African manhood against what he perceives to be centuries of assault from western

racism. That may be a worthwhile goal, but it is deeply personal, and should have no place in public health policy. In SA it has found a central place, with near-genocidal consequences.

Gevisser's comments that Mbeki is not an AIDS denialist, "but an AIDS dissident", will come as cold comfort to South Africans who are not quite as adept at the games of semantics. Given the scale of the pandemic in SA, and the wholesale failure of Mbeki's government to provide the essential political will and leadership to combat the disease, Gevisser's obfuscation plays right into the hands of the Mbeki spin machine, which has sprung into action since the book reveals that the president, despite having "withdrawn" from the AIDS debate, is at heart a denialist. It is ironic that Gevisser is so aware of Mbeki the "political seducer", as he describes the president, because in the end it appears as though he too is not immune to Mbeki's powers of "political seduction".

Gevisser's attempt to "clarify"

Mbeki's stance on AIDS contradicts what he says in his book. In chapter 41, he writes: "And then, a few weeks later, in the invitation he (Mbeki) issued to prominent scientists to participate in his Expert Advisory Panel on HIV/AIDS, he made it clear that he was willing to take the question of whether HIV existed too: the first topic he urged the panel to assess was whether there was 'evidence for the viral aetiology of HIV'."

In other words, Mbeki questions the very existence of a virus, not just its link to the deadly syndrome of disease responsible for the death of at least 2-million South Africans so far.

Gevisser's book is breathtaking in its scope, extraordinary in its erudition and delightful for the sheer depth of its insights. But his sympathetic reading of his elusive subject is such that you can't help feeling that despite the monumental length of this book, significant parts of the Mbeki story still have not been told, and can perhaps be told only when Mbeki himself puts pen to paper.