

How Mbeki Failed

Joseph Lelyveld

A Legacy of Liberation: Thabo Mbeki and the Future of the South African Dream

by Mark Gevisser.

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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,

Thabo Mbeki

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 scratchy 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 2007,¹ too soon by a matter of weeks to include the first bump 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

¹Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007).

that he'd permanently lost his grip on the movement and that power would swiftly flow to the man who'd vanquished him—once his most trusted ally, now 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, and still come in at 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 governing party with the instincts 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 subcontinent and its diaspora. His father, Govin Mbeki, turned his back on the family homestead to pursue clandestine organizing and pamphleteering 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 closeness 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 himself that resulted in the birth of 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 unraveled 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 his own way politically, eventually surfacing as a sharp critic of his brother's policies (especially on Zimbabwe). When Thabo Mbeki went into exile in 1962, he traveled exceedingly light, as far as his industrious biographer has 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 onetime 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,

telegenic former leader of the liberal opposition in the white Parliament who organized the earliest “safaris” to bring influential whites into contact with the outlawed movement. For a period of months and years, he and Mbeki were warm friends and drinking buddies. Then, as in a Nadine Gordimer story, the powerful black, with huge demands on his time, had little to spare for the white friend. When Slabbert made the faux pas of suggesting to Mbeki that he might consider setting up panels of experts to advise him on thorny issues, he faced a sudden and permanent chill. Mbeki, he later wrote, “is the only person I know who demonstrated to me that my friendship was expendable.”²

It’s easy to read this as a racial incident, to imagine that Mbeki shut Slabbert out because he took him to be saying that he couldn’t expect to govern effectively without leaning on a coterie of white experts. But it could also be that Mbeki understood better than his erstwhile friend ever could how unwelcome such appointments would be to his suspicious, patronage-hungry supporters. The African National Congress came to power without a settled program and with instincts, on economic issues in particular, hostile to the market-friendly policies that were rammed through by Mbeki, leading to a run of sustained growth but lagging job creation in a country with an estimated unemployment rate around 30 percent. Once he’d replaced Mandela as leader, he must have understood that he’d never been the party’s favorite son, that its ranks were still full of those who’d doubted him for years. Gevisser isn’t able to pinpoint a time when the leader’s prudence shaded into paranoia. But even after being reelected in 2004 by a margin bigger than Mandela’s, Mbeki seems never to have felt secure.

Gevisser’s biography doesn’t begin to resolve the issues of character it repeatedly raises. The chapters on Mbeki’s handling of the AIDS crisis and his failure to intervene effectively before starvation and disease became rampant in Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe leave the reader with a conundrum familiar to anyone who has tried from afar to keep up with these issues. Was it that Thabo Mbeki could not resist defying the conventional wisdom of those who were not black Africans—intrusive white busybodies of all description—or was he responding to political pressures the busybodies did not perceive or appreciate?

In the case of AIDS, Mbeki faced no significant resistance from within the African National Congress until Nelson Mandela finally made an issue of his denialism. In view of the scale and duration of the calamity, the question of why the government’s unresponsiveness never became a burning political

²Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, *The Other Side of History: An Anecdotal Reflection on Political Transition in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2006), p. 58.

issue for the movement and its basic constituency can’t be seen simply as a function of one man’s overrationalized hang-ups. Obviously, there was a drastic failure of leadership. But if there were no cultural inhibitions in the way of common-sense public health policies, why wasn’t this the issue on which he fell? Helen Epstein’s 2007 book, *The Invisible Cure*, based on articles that first appeared in these pages³, offers a more sensitive consideration of such questions than this study of the doleful story’s central figure.

For several years, in apparent retreat, Thabo Mbeki managed to lower his voice on the subject of AIDS, having been persuaded by advisers that his regular polemics were getting him nowhere and doing damage to the in-

Thabo Mbeki and Robert Mugabe in Harare, Zimbabwe, during an attempt to negotiate a power-sharing agreement between Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, July 30, 2008

ternational standing he craved. Then in 2007, as Gevisser’s book was about to go to press, he phoned his biographer for the first time, asking whether he was aware of an anonymous “monograph” that had been circulating on the Internet since 2002—an angry, rambling screed that basically put the case against the promoters of antiretroviral drugs in a racial context, arguing that it was these drugs rather than HIV that poison and kill. Gevisser knew this text well and shared the widespread assumption that Mbeki was its author. The next day a government messenger delivered to Gevisser’s door the latest version of this lengthening stream-of-consciousness, twice as long and no less furious than the original. “We will no longer allow,” it raged, “that our fear of the colonial mother, which has imprisoned our minds and our souls for far too long, makes us meek and gentle with the butchers of the truth.” Mbeki was signaling Gevisser that his position hadn’t changed.⁴

On Zimbabwe, the picture is a little less murky without being any more encouraging. While it’s true that South Africa has the power to blockade

³Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁴The original document can still be found at www.virusmyth.com/AIDS/HIV/anccdoc.htm where it links to www.rethinkingAIDS.com, a dissident Web site.

Zimbabwe’s main trade route and even shut off its electricity, it was always politically unthinkable for one African state to consider employing sanctions in this way against another. If Mbeki ever tried to threaten Mugabe, whose patronage he had courted on behalf of his movement in its period of exile, the old despot would have been certain to call his bluff. Here too Mbeki had to function within a climate of opinion not reflected on Western editorial pages. However corrupt, brutal, and self-defeating, Mugabe’s vendetta against commercial white farmers in Zimbabwe was bound to strike a chord in South Africa, where virtually all productive farming land was reserved for whites until the end of apartheid. The last thing a prudent South African

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leader would want to do by inadvertence is open up South Africa’s own land question as a result of a breakdown across its borders. Mbeki could not have counted on support from his own party for a public call on Mugabe to stand aside. It’s also clear that the halfhearted diplomatic efforts he did make came to naught, with the result that roughly 10 percent of Zimbabwe’s oppressed population is now estimated to be living illegally in South Africa, undercutting in their desperation the country’s legions of homegrown job-seekers.

The changed political context may help explain, if not excuse, a third failure of the new South Africa, one that has been just as blatant and alarming: the startling rates of murder and criminal assault, which have yet to be identified by the governing party as a national crisis, though they’re largely responsible for an exodus of citizens with needed professional skills—not just whites but Indians and persons of mixed race. It irritated Mbeki to be asked about this subject, on which Gevisser is largely silent. Crime prevention was never a priority in segregated black areas under apartheid, the President would say. Lawlessness was controlled in white areas under the ancien régime by the infamous pass laws, harsh restrictions on the free movement of black citizens. Fundamentally, crime was a reflection of joblessness, of economic desperation, so obviously these more fundamental problems had to be higher priorities.

All true, all reasonable responses. But they came to sound fatalistic or out of touch, rather than reasonable, as the years wore on. Soon it will be fifteen years since the African National Congress took power. Horror stories about people yanked from cars by hijackers or shot in their homes remain staples of middle-class conversation, nonwhite as well as white. At some point, it might not be inappropriate for the party in power to hold itself at least partly responsible for its failures to invest in training, police discipline, and technology that might begin to make a difference.

The most notable security investment it did make is tied, in ways yet to be

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.⁵ 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. There's 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 remote, 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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⁵Craig Timberg, "99 Arms Deal Returns to Haunt S. Africa's Top Leaders," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2008.