



By Mwangi Githahu



Cape Town, South Africa - APATHETIC MIDDLE CLASS TAKES TO THE STREETS

President Jacob Zuma is not going anywhere in a hurry. However, a number of South Africans are battling to understand why not.

As far as they are concerned, factions are rife in the ruling party, there are whispers and dark mutterings about private armies being recruited to defend party headquarters and to infiltrate opposition protests. There have been high-profile sackings from the Cabinet and resignations from parliament. As a result, a normally apathetic middle class has taken to the streets to demonstrate with opposition parties, trade unionists, senior members of the clergy and civil society.

These South Africans are also concerned about what they perceive as the securitisation of the state. The recently appointed police minister is talking about fighting fire with fire in his threats to those who dare protest against the state. The acting police commissioner is dismissive of court rulings allowing protests. There is open lawfare in the courts. Parliament is once more discussing a motion of no-confidence even though the ruling party's numbers in the House mean it is at best a waste of effort.

Unhappy South Africans can see signs that their economy is under attack, with international ratings agency after agency giving the country the thumbs down. This middle class coalition of black and white South Africans is hurting and are upset by the stories they read in their newspapers, magazines, see on TV and hear on their favourite talk radio stations about the perceived influence of the shadowy Gupta family in affairs of state.

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They are up in arms that a recent reshuffle saw the well-liked finance minister Pravin Gordhan fired and as a direct result the country's credit rating was revised to 'junk' status - meaning hard times lie ahead.

Furthermore, these people are upset that last year, the president was found by the Constitutional Court to have failed to uphold the Constitution.

Meanwhile, the president at the centre of all the dissension and intrigue appears unmoved, unimpressed and unamused as he chuckles and pushes his spectacles higher up on the bridge of his nose using his middle finger. In fact if anything the president is digging in his heels, whipping up sympathy in his substantial constituency of diehard supporters, among whom are the majority of South Africans who make up the grassroots of this democracy. He is also reliant on a top political leadership from within his ruling party that seems unable or unwilling to take him on, in any meaningful way.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if a fly on the wall of the presidency were to report that President Jacob Zuma, in the manner of Effie White - the character from the Broadway musical and film, *Dreamgirls*, who refuses to accept that her relationship with her boyfriend is on the rocks - was defiantly humming 'And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going' to himself in response to the chants of 'Zuma must go' coming from the street protestors.

THE FIRST REAL AFRICAN BIG MAN SINCE 1994

If anyone bothered to ask them, many from north of the Limpopo - that place that some South Africans like to refer to as 'Africa' as if it were not the same landmass that they live on - could tell these angry, increasingly vocal middle-class South Africans protesting Zuma's continued reign that in fact what they are experiencing is their first real African Big Man as president since the dawn of democracy in 1994.

The much revered Nelson Mandela was the country's first black president. He remains a world icon loved and admired by his people and the world. Most importantly he relinquished power after only one term, even though, had he wished to, he could have had a second.

Mandela's chosen successor, Thabo Mbeki was renowned as an intellectual who popularised the African Renaissance idea in his famous 'I am an African' speech. However, he displayed very 'un-African' tendencies by not fighting tooth and nail to cling to power when he was challenged by his former deputy. Mbeki was just not cut out to be an African Big Man.

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Mbeki was briefly succeeded by Kgalema Motlanthe. Aware he was a stop-gap, Motlanthe served as South Africa's president for only six months, during the ANC's most tumultuous period in post-apartheid South Africa - the recalling of President Mbeki by the ANC in 2008. Motlanthe could have

done the African Big Man thing and swindled President Zuma out of the top job, but instead gave in to the party's wishes and made way for the man who had engineered Mbeki's downfall.

Jacob Zuma arrived in office a heroic veteran of the struggle against apartheid. He had also been Mbeki's deputy and was seen by his supporters and others on the SA political scene as a man more sinned against than sinning. This, despite a series of scandals that would have ended the careers of many politicians.

In fact, it would appear that what some have described as Zuma's 'charisma and strength in adversity' helped buoy him up during his first years in office. To quote the Kenyan teacher, actor and journalist John Sibi-Okumu, who was writing elsewhere on the subject of the African Big Man, 'The overriding thesis is that the goodies transmogrify themselves into baddies, mainly courtesy of external influence driven by the desire to pillage our considerable resources.'

Today this same 'charisma and strength in adversity' continues to attract supporters to Zuma from the ANC grassroots and give the president comfort in the knowledge that the majority of the people are still with him.

The numbers don't lie - at the last test of Zuma and his party's popularity, the 2016 local government elections, the ANC was the largest party overall, earning 53.9% of the total vote. The main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, had 26.9% and Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters party garnered 8.2% of the vote.

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These numbers and the way the ruling ANC is run plus the party's dominance of parliament where at the 2014 general election the ANC acquired 249 out of a total 400 seats are what give Zuma the confidence to say - to loud cheers from the audience by the way, as he did during his 75th birthday celebrations on April 12 this year, 'Don't be scared of them [the opposition parties who have recently been turning up the pressure his presidency] when you see them marching saying Zuma must go... But what has Zuma done?'

This is the classic African Big Man stance that sticks in the craw of the country's middle classes who fill the airwaves on talk radio stations and letters to the editor columns in the serious newspapers around the country calling on President Zuma to 'do the right thing' and resign.

THE BIG MAN'S QUINTESSENTIAL TOOL - THE APPOINTMENT OF CRONIES

One of the ways that President Zuma has cemented his grip on office has been by using the quintessential tool in the Big Man's bag of tricks to cling onto power - the appointment of cronies to the various institutions including parliament, where he has carte blanche.

According to observers and analysts, over the past few years, Zuma has used cadre deployment to his advantage, packing the security services, the public service including parliament, and of course the ANC itself, with loyalist cronies who will support him with their last breath.

At the same time, members of Zuma's family have amassed vast personal fortunes reportedly through corrupt deals using their family connection to the Big Man.

This centralisation and personalisation of power is being seen to have gradually laid the foundation for the edifice that President Zuma presides over. It is in its way no different from what other Big Men have done through the history of the continent. The likes of Mobutu, Moi, Mubarak, Mugabe and Museveni – to name a few – relied on such patronage and loyalty to ensure their grip on power.

The next big set piece in the battle to remove Zuma or shame him into quitting is yet another parliamentary vote of no-confidence, now set for May. The last motion of no confidence against Zuma, tabled in November 2016, failed when 216 voted against it and 126 MPs voted in its favour.

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In the past few years, there have been a number of failed parliamentary votes of no-confidence against President Zuma. Serious political analysts know that the system as it stands today is designed in such a way that makes it impossible for these votes to succeed unless the members of the majority party in parliament rebel en masse and vote with the opposition. As long as the ANC's rules govern how its MPs behave in parliament, this is unlikely to happen. Zuma will win again.

The South African proportional representation electoral system works in the following manner: Voters vote for a political party, not individuals. The political party then gets a share of seats in parliament in direct proportion to the number of votes it got in the election. Each party then decides on members to fill the seats it has won.

Professor Ben Turok, an ANC stalwart, anti-apartheid activist, economics professor and former South African MP, explained the reasons for Zuma's confidence during a recent radio interview on the Eusebius Mackaiser show on CapeTalk 567 that featured a discussion on 'yet another upcoming parliamentary vote of no-confidence against the president.'

Prof Turok said, 'I think you people [the media] are raising a red herring. We have been down this road [motions of no-confidence in Zuma] quite a few times and in every case, the caucus of the ANC meets and discusses it, and takes a decision and all members are bound by that decision. If you do not follow that decision you will lose your job. It's as simple as that. So why is there so much speculation about whether people are going to break ranks?'

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Turok added that hopes for a successful rebellion by ANC MPs against Zuma were unrealistic, 'I know that within the ANC there are many whose conscience is bothering them a great deal and would love to vote against Zuma, but they can't and will not.'

A FEW VOICES SPEAKING OUT

Indeed there have been a few voices from within the parliamentary ANC speaking out against Zuma. For instance, ANC MP Makhosi Khoza, chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Service And Administration, recently broke ranks with a scathing critique of how 'the politics of patronage has claimed the sanity' of her party's leaders. In an interview with the *Times* newspaper she said the ANC had to fix its internal problems before 2019 or face a heavy defeat at the polls.

Reminded that a number of MPs could pursue careers out of parliament if they lost their seats, Turok averred that the reality was a political zero sum game and just simply crossing the floor as in some other parliamentary democracies was impossible in the South African system. He said that while it is true that a number of ANC MPs have professions and other options to fall back on, and here he gave himself as an example (he resigned from parliament to return to academia) the only thing that would change the current situation was if for instance the EFF were to double its vote in the national election, thus gaining 20 seats to offer rebels.

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Those who constantly undermine Zuma forget one thing. He is trained in sabotage and if you are taking on the president you must keep in mind that he was recruited into Umkhonto we Sizwe, the militant arm of the ANC, in 1962 by a stalwart of the liberation struggle, the late Moses Mabhida, and participated in sabotage operations in KwaZulu-Natal. He then joined the South African Communist Party in 1963 and as a member received military training in the Soviet Union. He later joined the African National Congress Department of Intelligence where he was the head of intelligence.

Like any other African Big Man, President Zuma is not going to be forced to do anything he doesn't want to do unless and until the anti-Zuma momentum builds up to become an unstoppable force. But then again, it is not as if the president will be standing by watching this happen without having a few tricks up his sleeve.

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