

Media Perceptions and Academic Responses to South African President Thabo Mbeki

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ABSTRACT This paper is about South Africa's first successor to Nelson Mandela, viz. Thabo Mbeki. The paper covers issues pertaining to the country's politics at national, regional and local levels and his perceived influence at each of these levels. It seeks to demonstrate the enigmatic and interesting political leader that Thabo Mbeki is and the possible directions that can be taken by the end of his term of office. The paper concludes with an assessment of possibilities that range from 'compassionate despotism', to 'pathological patrimonialism', to 'personal rule syndrome'.

In a recent book edited by Jacobs and Calland (2002) on South African President, Thabo Mbeki, only one of the 12 contributions, viz. by Sahra Ryklief (2002) does not see his leadership and ideological make-up as riddled with ambiguity and inconsistency. Ryklief asserts that Mbeki's ideological orientation is in fact clear and that the "principle versus pragmatist" argument is a non-issue. She has declared Mbeki to be an "unabashed conservative", with a fundamentally pro-capitalist approach to economic power. South African President Thabo Mbeki's recent courtship with deposed Haitian President Jeanne Bertrand Aristide and his ongoing relationship of "quiet diplomacy" with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, among other controversial leaders in Africa, has raised serious questions in the media and academic circles about his leadership style and his longer term intentions as head of state. While there was a generally warm welcome for him in the media when he replaced his erstwhile President, Nelson Mandela, perceptions about him changed rapidly in his first term of office, as the quotations below indicate.

"Mbeki is much more intellectual than Mandela. More importantly, he has unchallenged control over the structures of the ANC."²

"When a weary President Thabo Mbeki flew into a wet and blustery London at 5am on Tuesday, he was left in no doubt by Western leaders, his closest aides and diplomats that the Zimbabwean crisis was damaging his reputation and putting his plans for Africa's rejuvenation in jeopardy."³

"South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki begins his political year alienated from his most

powerful ally in Africa, Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo, because of South Africa's obstinate support for Zimbabwe at the Commonwealth's Heads of Governments (CHOGM) meeting last month. The rift has large implications for African unity⁴.

The three statements above were respectively interspersed over a four-year period. The first was made in June 1999 when Mbeki formally assumed the post of President of South Africa, while the latter was made in March 2002 and January 2004 respectively, after much widespread public response to the unfolding of his presidency and the first ten years of democratic rule. In a recent assessment on the cleavage between neo-liberalism and empowerment of the people of South Africa, Chetty⁵ (2002) concluded that his evidence reflected a rather bleak picture for transition from authoritarianism to democracy - despite the miraculously peaceful elections in 1994 and 1999. This paper expands upon this bleakness through discussion of issues on the national, regional, local and institutional levels, with evidence that presumably fits into the paradigms that are offered here as models for locating analyses on contemporary and future politics in South Africa.

In focussing on the President, analysts are simultaneously engaging in debates or alluding to the prospects of the entrenchment of participatory democracy under the African National Congress (ANC). In a recent paper John Daniel (2002) produced an assessment 'of the performance of and prospects for the Thabo Mbeki regime'⁶, illustrating historical and contemporary

performance and perceptions of the ANC. His use of the word 'regime' immediately conjures up an image of totalitarianism and political rigidity that does not place emphasis on participatory democracy. While Daniel is correct, his observation is not entirely new. Two eminent scholars on Southern African political formations and processes had already picked up on these issues. While Tom Lodge (1996)⁷ wrote on the erosion of state capacity since the ANC's assumption of power in 1994, Kenneth Good (1997: 547) made a similar point to Daniel: "While public attention has focused on the stature of Nelson Mandela, there has been at a deeper level in South Africa since 1990 a steep decline in state capacity, and a marked deterioration in democratic practice. The participatory democracy which had so characterised the decade of the 1980s was brought to a sharp end after the return of the nationalist leaders, and the workings of even a liberal representative democracy have also suffered under the rise since 1994 of a predominant party system and elitism." Several issues of national and international importance to South Africa have actually, in the eyes of many, assumed such an inclination since Mbeki became President in June 1999. Daniel's analysis is actually a response to this inclination and to the growing media, public and international interest in Mbeki's style of leadership - both in South Africa and in the entire continent. Daniel's analysis finds much support from the contributions of Filatova (2001)⁸ and Bond (2002)⁹. Both writers focus on the contradictions of Mbeki's rhetoric and his understanding of the world order, as well as in his close collaboration with hostile transnational corporate and multilateral forces whose interests are essentially unsympathetic to the African continent. Their focus on the legitimisation of the new elite (Filatova) or of *compradorism* (Bond) serve as convincing illustrations of how the class structure in the post-apartheid era is re-entrenching itself and re-racialising South Africa's political economy. While Filatova places an interesting slant on how Mbeki is attempting to invert the internationally known practices of democracy, transparency and accountability to be viewed in opaque African terms, Bond provides an exemplary illustration of how Mbeki's ambiguous attacks against and courtship with the G8 countries is actually an acceptance of their political, economic and moral order. Bond's evidence is an indication of Mbeki's impover-

ished understanding of the power relations between the African continent and the G8 countries.

Barely a year after Mbeki was sworn in as President of South Africa his policies and practices have raised more questions than remarks of satisfaction about the suitability of his leadership - within and outside the rank and file of the ANC. Widespread dissatisfaction locally and internationally has prompted media responses that suggest serious rifts within the ranks of the ANC and about Mbeki's future as President, as several media captions below suggest: "*Challenge the President? Don't even think about it*"¹⁰, "*Aids blunder or not, Mbeki is safe*"¹¹, "*New dawn or false hope? Thabo Mbeki's Nepad is increasingly becoming the focus of South Africa's foreign policy and his presidency*"¹², "*The ANC needs a lot more sanity*"¹³, "*How can Mbeki support a tyrant?*"¹⁴, "*Tip toeing towards our very own Zimbabwe*"¹⁵. Given the ongoing negative perceptions in the media about Mbeki's performance, it is not surprising that these captions and reports are complimented by a Markinor survey that reveal a growing discontent with the government's performances. A striking feature of the report was the worsening perceptions by voters of the government's poor record on transparency and accountability. Their endorsement and confidence slid rapidly from 52% to 35% between May 2000 and March 2002¹⁶. It was the government's handling of several critical issues that produced the crisis of perceived poor leadership and management. The handling of the arms procurement deal since early 2001 entrenched the suspicion that the government was not only being closed and defensive but also dishonest in the way they were protecting its members from open public scrutiny. Dissatisfaction with the way in which the President personally handled the political crisis in Zimbabwe, his denial of the link between HIV and AIDS and the accessibility of nevarapine to pregnant women in the Aids crisis in South Africa, has led to the development of grassroots mobilisation from across racial and class boundaries that raise serious questions about Thabo Mbeki's denialism of the disease and of his commitment to the needs of the poor.

The list of such eerie media articles has generated a flood of interest in whether South Africa is leading towards participatory democracy in the sense that it was being touted during the twilight years of apartheid under the opposition

extra-parliamentary leadership of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). Or is South Africa gradually veering towards a system of government that generates more social and political instability than orderliness and confidence? It also raises another question of fundamental importance to the future political leadership in South Africa: "*For how long will Mbeki want to remain as President of South Africa?*" It was only momentarily reassuring to read of Mbeki's stance on Zambia's ex-President Frederick Chiluba's thwarted manoeuvres to secure a third term in office. Mbeki felt that this was "a most disturbing development indeed....Such proceedings in Zambia would communicate the message that, despite protestations of commitments to democracy, our region was in fact, intent on acting in unconstitutional ways and was regressing to the situation when there were presidents for life"¹⁷ - such as the late President Banda of Malawi. Although in a face to face meeting in Namibia, Mbeki congratulated Chiluba for the second time for honoring his pledge to step down after his second term of office and the Zambian people for not tampering with the constitution - in the presence of other Southern African leaders. But the leaders included President Sam Nujoma, who changed Namibia's constitution so that he could rule for a third term and is demanding a fourth; Robert Mugabe, aged 78, who ruled Zimbabwe since 1980 and 'won' the Presidential election in March 2002 under international claims of widespread vote rigging; and President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, who was appointed in 1986 and is scheduled to step down only in 2004.

The question is why is Mbeki so selective about who he chastises for remaining in office as President and what does it mean for the future of the presidency in South Africa? An answer to this convincingly lies partly in Mbeki's support of these leaders because, as one of several assessments now indicate, they led liberation movements like he did¹⁸. But a pivotal question here arises and must be asked: "For how long will Mbeki himself want to remain as President and what form will politics take under his leadership in the next few years?" While it is impossible to respond to this with an accurate prediction, it will be feasible to contextualise the functioning of state and civil society structures within at least one paradigm or more to ascertain present patterns and future scenarios.

Against the data that is produced below, either one or a combination of the following three models alludes to what South Africans are likely to expect under Mbeki's continued reign:

- Compassionate despotism - as outlined by Kenneth Good (1997)¹⁹ with respect to the presidential style of governance in Botswana - is a model that views leadership in Botswana as one that allows for only limited participation in decision making by the electorate but marked by a patrimonial leader who prevails over most of the state's interests and who remains in office for an unlimited term, protected by the constitution.
- Pathological patrimonialism - raised by Zaki Ergas (1986)²⁰ as a situation where a person acquires absolute and irresponsible power, characterised by greed and nepotism, to the detriment of the entire country, as in the case of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo). Although the situation is rife in Africa and prevails through ruling elites despite the ideology they profess, be it capitalist, socialist or communist.
- Personal rule syndrome - introduced by Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg²¹ (1982) and used by Larry Diamond²² to describe Uganda under Idi Amin and Guinea Bissau under Sekou Toure. Under such leadership the state is characterised by institutionalised corruption throughout, exceeding what may be called 'ordinary' levels, primarily because of the bad example set by the excessive greed of the leaders themselves²³.

These models are derived from the widely publicised literature that covers the massive violations in human rights (including genocide, torture and arbitrary incarceration); rampant corruption (embezzlement of public funds, kickbacks on foreign contracts, bribes, etc.); capricious and unpredictable governments; excessive exploitation; and gross administrative ineptitude²⁴. Ergas (1986) rightly points out that these are not exclusively African phenomenon, but they may have indeed reached comparable or even higher levels in for example the Cambodia of Pol Pot, the Nicaragua of the Somozas, and the Haiti of the Duvaliers. While these comparisons are important in the assessment of these issues, my concern here is the extent to which the South African political-economy, under Thabo Mbeki's leadership is showing signs of such inclinations. In commenting on the authoritarian streaks within

the ANC and raising the question as to whether the party will concede defeat in time, Daniel ended his paper stating: "The question may seem preposterous now, but so would it have seemed in Zimbabwe 10 years ago."²⁵

THE NATIONAL LEVEL

In the celebration of South Africa's hard won political emancipation a new liberal democratic constitution was spawned - from an agreement between two major political forces - the National Party and the ANC. Despite their major differences - the former being an all-White Afrikaner dominated political party functioning within a parliamentary system, and the latter being a political movement opposed to White domination and functioning as an extra-parliamentary movement - their commonality lied in their resolute rejection of liberal democracy. Although racially exclusive, the National Party had partly embraced democracy while the ANC provided the excuse that its exiled status could not allow it the luxury of unfettered and free entry into its structures. For this reason Daniel argued that while it embraced notions of democracy, it was not truly democratic in practice. "In reality, it was a small elite led, top-down hierarchical party with neither a significant working class nor a rural base. It took that tradition and culture into exile, where in an initially largely hostile western environment, in conditions of semi-clandestinity and heavily reliant on its Soviet and East German allies, it transmorgified into a tightly knit, highly centralised vanguard party. Its political modus operandi became that of democratic centralism, with policy largely devised behind closed doors and then passed down to the lower ranks".²⁶ Despite his critical evaluation of the ANC under Mbeki's leadership, Daniel's assessment on the immediate future of the organisation and the President remains optimistic and hopeful. On a more weary note, the editorial of Focus raised a more discerning question in reference to the ANC's record: "Those who suggested that the ANC's support of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and its behaviour over the Quatro camp atrocities betrayed more deep-seated anti-democratic tendencies were not heard. With apartheid abolished surely all parties agreed that they would be bound by the rules of the new constitutional order?"²⁷

An understanding of Mbeki's position as State President is more appropriately located in

an understanding of the years prior to his assumption of the position. South Africans expectations of democratic practice by the ANC while in exile was based upon its understanding of the structures and modus operandi of its surrogate partner, the UDF. Formed by activists who remained in the country but who lent their entire support to the ANC, they organised themselves into viable democratic structures and operated differently from their exiled counterparts - but largely unknown to the masses. United by the common purpose of defeating apartheid, the UDF was made up of a coalition of hundreds of different types of organisations that transcended class, racial, urban and rural boundaries in all the provinces. This accomplished for the ANC what they were unable to achieve in exile. With a leadership that was intent on establishing a scenario for future democratic practices, the UDF modeled itself along looser and less hierarchical structures, actively promoting a form of participatory democracy. While it was intended to serve as the antithesis of apartheid structures and processes, it ironically served a similar purpose for its more rigid and hierarchical external progenitor.

It was in the UDF's succumbing and absorption into the ANC after the latter's unbanning in 1991 that the insider-outsider dynamics began to manifest. While the UDF tried to transfer its practices of participatory democracy into the ANC, it was being continuously stifled by the norms of centralist practices. But it was, as Daniel also rightly argues, being "hidden largely from view by the so-called magic of the Mandela era"²⁸, which tirelessly promoted reconciliation through its notion of *rainbowism*²⁹. Mandela's incarceration in prison actually set him above the politics of the ANC (outsiders) and UDF (insiders), thereby forbidding favour of one over the other. But it was from this period and into the mid-1990s that a subterranean struggle for hegemony within the ANC began. Beneath Mandela were serious contenders such as Chris Hani, Thabo Mbeki and Cyril Ramaphosa. After the assassination of Hani, the only other powerful contender for the leadership of the ANC was Ramaphosa - an 'insider'. His 'withdrawal' from politics in 1994 is still viewed by many as banishment by the 'outsiders', led by Mbeki, into the private sector. It was only during the first two years since April 1994 that Mandela effectively served as *de facto* President. Mbeki, elected as ANC Vice-President after a

hectic period of jostling for positions and control of the party, began serving as *de facto* President after Mandela preferred to serve as *de jure* President - to focus mainly on reconciliation while Mbeki was asked to focus on governance. The event also signified the triumph of the ANC's democratic centralism over the UDF's preference for a nascent form of a more participatory democracy.

The events that followed on national decision-making bear testimony to this analysis. The most powerful centralist structure of the ANC is the National Executive Committee (NEC), chaired by the president of the party. A major shift in ideology occurred when the Reconstruction and Development Program³⁰ spawned by the ANC through its socialist ideals, was subtly replaced by the Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation) inspired economic policies - Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). Although GEAR was touted by the state as an employment creating model and had forecasted the creation of up to 400 000 jobs per annum, unemployment rapidly increased. No framework was provided for how and where the 400 000 jobs were going to be created and for what periods people were expected to be employed. Despite persistent challenges to provide the information on how this was to be made possible and to engage the state in public debates on the estimated job creation, the NEC either fudged the issues from public platforms or continued to ignore this.

Mbeki's confirmation as President in June 1999 after Nelson Mandela withdrew from political office, was followed by a number of significant events that has brought critical focus to Mbeki's commitments to democracy, accountability and transparency. At least five prominent issues have acquired currency in the media and academic spheres: his two nation theory on rich Whites and poor Africans, the arms procurement deal, the availability of anti-retroviral medication to HIV positive pregnant women, the Zimbabwean presidential election, the rapid devaluation of the rand in December 2001 and widespread corruption. On the last issue Tom Lodge argued with convincing evidence that the ANC leadership and government are not in fact bothered about corruption³¹. Mbeki's Opening of Parliament address in 2000 drew sharp reactions from the public when he simplistically divided South Africa's population into two groups viz. rich

Whites and poor Africans, inferring that the former category was made up of insensitive people committed to maintaining their privileged positions of the past. Africans, it was inferred, remained underprivileged and stagnant in their economic niche because of the hegemony that Whites at large maintained. The position softened substantially after months of criticisms and challenges that assertively aimed at the extravagances among South Africa's emerging African political elite. These counter accusations found a supportive base in the NEC's handling of its parliamentary Chief Whip, Tony Yengeni and his involvement in the arms procurement scandal. Yengeni was accused of being bribed with a luxury German vehicle in return for lucrative contracts. The NEC acquiesced in Yengeni's flagrant defiance of the parliament's ethics committee, precluded the Heath unit, the country's acclaimed anti-corruption committee, from examining the arms deal, and used the offices of the Public Protector, Prosecutor General and the Speaker of Parliament for partisan purposes.

In the protracted saga of the government's position on the link between HIV and Aids, Mbeki continued to defy the dominant practice in orthodox medicine by rejecting the link and denying pregnant women access to anti-retroviral treatment. An astounding defeat was delivered to the NEC, but particularly Mbeki, in April 2002 when the High Court and the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the Treatment Action Campaign's (TAC) interdict against the state for not providing anti-retroviral treatment. This was despite two intimidatory announcements by senior NEC members Dr. Manto Tshabalala Msimang (Minister of Health) and Penuel Maduna (Minister of Justice) that the government will not abide by a High Court ruling if it decided in favour of the TAC³². Although it eventually accepted the Courts' ruling, the Ministry of Health's announcement that implementation was only possible in a year's time. Likewise Mbeki's stance of quiet diplomacy with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's anti-democratic and pathological behaviour in the run-up to the March 2002 Presidential election militated against popular national and international opinion. Mbeki only succumbed to Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth after British Prime Minister Tony Blair threatened to withdraw support for his New African Partnership for Development (NEPAD)³³ project. And despite astute attempts to shield Tony Yengeni

from answering to the courts about his involvement in the arms procurement scandal, he has been successfully removed from his parliamentary position through opposition and public pressure and called to answer to the justice system. Taken together, amidst a range of other misdeeds, these acts do not only reveal and compromise the ANC's rigidity of democratic centralism, but they also indicate a clear disregard for the spirit of participatory democracy and the direction towards which the ANC is heading.

Of course speculation that these issues have had a direct impact on the devaluing of the rand, abounded. The decline of the currency has also been publicly linked to the ANC take-over of the country. Since 1992 to December 2001 the rand lost at least three times its value to the major international currencies, simultaneously impacting upon public confidence in Mbeki and his stance on each of the issues discussed above. One of the criteria against which the impact can be measured is the enormous flight of capital and professional and technical expertise from the country. In illustrating this, Bond (2002) also emphasised the concomitant effect the weakened rand had on the weakening of people's morale.

THE REGIONAL LEVEL

Regional politics in South Africa since 1996 has unfolded in ways that continue to reveal the power and control that the NEC asserts. Autonomy of regional structures exist only to the extent that they function strictly within the guidelines set out by the NEC rather than the spirit within which the ANC constitution was conceptualised and written. Between 1996-1998 there were significant signs of fission within the ranks of a number of the uppermost political regional structures, exposing the centralist style of governance that Mbeki brought with him. It has been normative within the ANC at the most senior level of the provincial governments, i.e. the office of the Premier, that the appointments are made from the party list of preferred candidates from each region. Therefore in each province the Premier owes his/her appointment to the party hierarchy rather than to the electorate that is served. Survival in each of these positions will therefore depend upon nurturing and patronage of that hierarchy before addressing the needs of the populace³⁴. The failure to conform to organisational norms has led to precedents that compromised several people in their positions at

regional level. From December 1996 there was a series of crises in at least five provinces between the ANC's central structures and provincial leaders

- Patrick 'Terror' Lekota was dismissed as Free State Premier in 1996
- Northern Province Premier Ngoake Ramatlhodi was ousted as provincial chairman in defiance of the national leadership
- Eastern Cape Premier Raymond Mhlaba announced his resignation amid pressure from the ANC
- KwaZulu-Natal militant Sifiso Nkabinde (now assassinated) defied an order from the ANC's national leadership not to contest the post of secretary-general in the province³⁵.
- Mathews Phosa was replaced, after an NEC decision, by Mr. Mahlangu as Mpumalanga's Premier

Such instances of centralist impositions present an overt contradiction in the image that Mbeki is trying to create for himself internationally. At a forum on Africa's upliftment he spoke of his understanding of the African Renaissance: "None of us seek to impose any supposedly standard models of democracy on any country, but want to see systems of government in which people are empowered to determine their own destiny".³⁶ Although seemingly well intended, the comment is not without contradiction and without future intention. It is in such acts of bigotry that perceptions and belligerence begins to emerge. The Focus (journal) editorial on this sums up the feelings of a wide spectrum of South Africans: "When the occasion suits him, Mbeki says that the ANC is a transparent, democratic body that welcomes open competition for its posts. Nobody believes him. Indeed, one would be foolish to do so. Over and over we have seen the pressure used to prevent such open competition. When whole provincial executives no longer suit the leadership, it simply dissolves them. Its disrespect for the elective principle could hardly be more blatant. Local ANC delegates must now be scared of openly punting their preferences ahead of provincial congresses - let alone a national congress. Transparency is preached but fear reins - and is meant to. The ANC appears to be an authoritarian party uncomfortably adrift in a liberal constitutional system."³⁷ Similarly, Daniel commented: "Thus, for example, the usurpation by the ANC's deployment committee (read the

president) of the right to depose and impose premiers and mayors is consistent with the commandism of the ANC's Sovietist model. So too is the practice of placing tried and trusted party loyalists in key state and parastatal organs like the Reserve Bank and National Intelligence Agency."³⁸

In other cases of belligerence against the state, more specifically against the principal force Thabo Mbeki, acts of defiance have emanated on numerous fronts. A particularly interesting situation emerged in several provinces against the dissident view that HIV does not lead to AIDS. It unfolded as a principled challenge by doctors who had to choose between moral responsibility and legal obligation. For instance, in Mpumalanga province's largest hospital, eighty doctors, nurses and support staff signed a memorandum to the regional Minister of Health committing themselves to treatment of pregnant women with nevirapine if they tested HIV positive, in order to save the lives of their unborn babies. Two specialist doctors declared that meeting their constitutional and Hippocratic Oath responsibilities was more important than the unfounded legal imposition by the state. In other hospitals doctors resigned in protest against the state's policy of ignoring the orthodox but more popular view that nevirapine is effective in the treatment of HIV diagnosed pregnant women.

Allegations of corruption, embezzlement of public funds and mismanagement at national level have never been reason enough to either suspend or terminate or avoid public servants appointments ever since the ANC came to power. On a regional level similar allegations have not deterred appointments to public office. For instance, in the case of Mathew Phosa's removal from the Premiership in Mpumalanga, it was the appointment of corrupt officials that led to his alleged downfall. Soon after he was removed, the very same officials were re-appointed in their previous positions. Charges ranged from embezzlement, overseas trips, drivers license scam, and a range of other charges.³⁹ The charges against Phosa worsened when the Minister of Police Services publicly accused him, together with Cyril Ramaphosa and Tokyo Sexwale, of strategising to overthrow Thabo Mbeki. Although senior in the hierarchy of ANC officials, these individuals were branded as political rivals to Mbeki and were especially being targeted for the threat they posed to his position as President. Revelations later

emerged that the intelligence services were used by Mbeki to spy on such political rivalry.⁴⁰ The extent of acrimonious relations between national and regional leaderships has led to disbelief on how Mbeki has flaunted both the ANC and national constitutions. In the spirit with which participatory democracy supposed to be developing in one of the main pillars of democracy, the Parliament, Helen Suzman, South Africa's most respected liberal opposition party politician replied to the following question about her role in Parliament during apartheid:

Q: "What do you think of the level of debate there (in Parliament) in now?"

A: "I'm sorry to say I think it has really deteriorated....There's less respect for the actual institution of Parliament, and certainly much less respect for the role of the opposition. I never had to put up with that roar of hatred that greets Tony Leon whenever he rises.... Without a doubt, I ended up with a lot of respect from the other side"⁴¹

Immediately below the Helen Suzman interview, three letters to the editor of this nationally distributed Sunday newspaper appeared under the heading: "Mbeki has failed democracy in Africa".

THE LOCAL LEVEL

Local level politics, in municipalities and similar but smaller structures have displayed an alarming level of extravagance in the remuneration packages of their managers. Their benefits are a striking resemblance of the *compradorism* that Bond raised in his paper about swiftly rising affluence among ANC appointees. For instance, in KwaZulu-Natal most of the salaries of the municipal managers are known to exceed the recommendations of the KwaZulu-Natal Local Government Association – which had already based its proposals on private sector salary scales.⁴² Ironically, although municipalities are junior partners in government, most of their managers were actually earning more than their public service counterparts. The absence of budgetary control was seen in the discrepancies in annual incomes and salaries packages within the municipalities structures. For instance, in the tiny Okahlamba municipality in the hinterland of KwaZulu-Natal, the municipality spent R1.35 million (65%) on salaries of its annual income base of R2.1 million. In uThukela district council the manager was being paid R704 000.00, despite a

recommendation of R430 000.00. Such a payment was only possible because the council was surviving on a bank overdraft. The eThekweni municipality-manager's package was the most extravagant of all – R830 870.00, plus a performance package of R507 204.00. Another extreme example came from the Vulamehlo municipality that did not have a rates base, but was planning to pay its manager R469 655.00.

Apart from these comparatively outrageous salary scales, municipalities have also been exhibiting evidence of clandestine operations, acrimony, lack of respect for the opposition parties and a form of authoritarianism not unlike that of the country's president. A classic example of these manifestations is to be found in the eThekweni Municipality (incorporating the city of Durban), whose Mayor, Obed Mlaba, was awarded by President Thabo Mbeki a distinctive honour for making it one of the best run in the country. However, soon after bestowing the accolade, revelations about how problematic officials and the public have been finding the functioning of the Municipality, made media headlines. Its employment and hiring policies, due respect to a party that gave the ANC in eThekweni a hedge over other opposition parties to dominate politically and flaunting of meeting procedures, were among many other issues that cast this ANC dominated structure in a negative light.

One of the unconvincing examples of its hiring policies was revealed in a contractual agreement with a publicity company for the eThekweni Municipality. Apart from the exorbitant fee of R112 000.00 per month the questionable background of the chief consultant for the company had cast the entire municipality in a negative light. She was an ex-attorney who was struck off the legal roll for embezzlement of funds held in trust for her clients. Apart from this, the municipality continued to ignore calls for the function of publicity to be handled by existing employees who were sufficiently competent and at no extra cost. But the call went unheeded and the sudden axing of the company through a unilateral decision by the Mayor did not happen with any remorse from either him or the Council's ANC members.

This amounted to a growing sign of arrogance and a gross misunderstanding and misuse of power that could no longer be contained within the walls of the eThekweni Municipality buildings. It also unfolded in ways that demonstrated

the mortal life-span of the ANC in this municipality as one of its political partners that kept it in power threatened to withdraw its support. The authoritarianism of Obed Mlaba as Mayor was unveiled in a startling headline in the Sunday Tribune: *"My word - and my word only"*.⁴³ The report revealed that the inner circle ANC council officials were increasingly nervous about providing information to councilors or to the media, often strictly referring even routine queries to the Mayor's office. Access to information of public interest has been increasingly denied to officials and to the press. Allegations of an unwritten policy that anyone who is seen to be 'too transparent is immediately sidelined'. In one case, a senior official who had disciplinary charges made against him and withdrawn later, was reportedly kept under regular surveillance. The flow of information remains tightly controlled, with rank and file officials often complaining that issues of importance are not included in their agendas for their perusal. The media similarly complains that only cover sheets of issues to be discussed are given to them, and not any substantive information. One of the reasons for the firm control of information outflow emerged in a damaging report that revealed the names of a number of ANC officials who were not paying their rates and services bills. A request to the city treasurer's department for the names of all councilors who did not pay their bills was referred to the mayor's office. In purging the overpaid publicity consultancy firm the Mayor also aimed to strengthen his position via his new consolidated team. The Sunday Tribune report ended with an ominous conclusion that takes us back to the commandist style of Mbeki: *"Given recent trends, there are fears that this new team will try to further consolidate the flow of information, and hence power, around the figure of the mayor."*

But the figure and power of the mayor in eThekweni is largely dependent upon the support of the Minority Front, an entirely Indian dominated party. Without its support, the ANC's control of eThekweni, one of the biggest municipalities in the country, is unlikely to continue. This possibility brought a sobering thought to the ANC when the Minority Front's leader, Amichand Rajbansi, euphemistically referred to as the 'Bengal Tiger', publicly threatened to withdraw his support when his party's choice for the Unicity Manager, a key position in the council, was ignored. The candidate was allegedly a

person of Indian origin. Amidst accusations that the ANC only wanted to appoint its 'comrades' to key positions, Rajbansi charged that the party failed to show sensitivity towards Indians. But larger than this was the realization that the withdrawal of support for the ANC would destroy its hegemony in the council. Political domination by the ANC in the council occurred when it was given a lifeline by the Minority Front, after the Democratic Alliance and the Inkatha Freedom Party formed a united front in the 2000 municipal elections. Although it only had ten councillors out of the total of ninety four, the Minority Front played a crucial role in the balance of forces within the council. Ignoring this party's choice for the position actually produced a plethora of race based accusations and numerous analyses of the ANC's racially biased selection of candidates for important political positions. In the public row that emerged the insecurities that people of Indian origin were apparently feeling in the Council were largely a result of the Mayor's alleged intransigent attitude and inability to value the support of a close ally. Rajbansi's response was revealing: "Look at the budget allocation, Indians came off worse. I struggle to get meetings with the senior ANC leaders, and the mayor, Obed Mlaba, says there is no political problem. I think he is fast asleep. The ANC is reluctant to consider the appointment of Indians to senior positions in the council on merit."⁴⁴ After trying to re-convince the Minority Front to remain in partnership with the ANC, especially after an alleged special appeal from ex-President Nelson Mandela, Rajbansi withdrew his threat to sever ties with the ANC and changed his stance from 'alliance' to 'working relationship'⁴⁵.

The repercussion against Mlaba within the ANC structures was ominous. By mid-April 2002, Mlaba's style of leadership had evidently irked his councillors, regional and national colleagues. In his decision to travel to Europe and South America, reportedly in defiance of party orders, he was considered to be expressing either a sense of supreme self-confidence or misplaced arrogance.⁴⁶ What occurred in his absence was an expression of these notions about him. It was confirmed that national and regional party insiders were seriously considering redeploying him. This move became evident when the regional caucus called an election of office bearers and completely ignored him in all of the posts. In branding this a palace coup, Alan Cooper, of the

Sunday Tribune starkly wrote: "Spare a thought for embattled Durban Mayor Obed Mlaba, who appears to have fallen victim to that hoariest of African political clichés – never leave home when your position is shaky." In a face-saving gesture that was meant to serve as a projection of stability in local governance, Sbu Ndebele, the ANC's regional leader, made a public statement that Mlaba will remain a mayor until the end of his term. Significantly, no expression of confidence was made on his behalf.

THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Compelling evidence from institutions across the spectrum of service delivery has unfolded since 1994 and more particularly since 1999 - that show consistency with national, regional and local politics. The most glaring quest for conformism occurred in 2001 and early 2002, when doctors who refused to heed state policy in the administration of anti-retroviral drugs to pregnant HIV positive women, were either dismissed or suspended, as noted earlier. In other areas, such as in justice and in education, conformism has coexisted concomitantly with maladministration, nepotism and an obvious lack of accountability and transparency.

In a report by Dato Param Kumaraswamy, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers in South Africa, several significant issues of concern were raised, but barely heeded by the authorities. Kumaraswamy urged that the system of appointing acting judges be reconsidered because one of the essential elements of judicial independence is security of tenure. A violation already exists by virtue of the state's adoption of the limited probation of judges by the Constitution as open-ended. His concern arises out of the record thus far that the Judicial Service Commission, whose task is to interview candidates and recommend suitable people for appointment, as well as advising the government on judicial matters, is completely bypassed when it comes to acting appointments. It was found that there are no interviews, no process of public scrutiny and no system of recommendation. The decision lies solely with the Minister of Justice and with the Judge President of the relevant division. While the spokesman for the Ministry of Justice shrugged off the issue by stating the system allowed inexperienced disadvantaged Blacks exposure to the judiciary, ironically the same system was used during

apartheid to see if the judges were 'suitable'⁴⁷. Equally questionable is the management of the Ministry's budget – which was under spent by at least R152 million in 2001, but yet it did not provide sufficient funds for magistrates to make telephone calls outside their buildings. The judicial situation is bizarre when one considers that backlogs go back for more than a year, despite the realisation that telephone services are instrumental in expediting cases.

In education, a comedy of errors actually began in the era of Mandela's Presidency and continue to persist at tremendous costs to the annual budgets and confidence that the public once had in it. Prior to Mbeki's appointment, the then Minister of Education, Mr. Bhengu, offered premature retirement packages to the most productive and experienced teachers, particularly from previously Indian dominated schools. The results were disastrous in that they could not be replaced and shortages of teachers, books and stationary continue to abound in government dependent schools. In addition, he experimented with an Outcomes Based Education model for 2005 (OBE 2005) at the astronomical cost of more than one billion rands, only to have it abandoned by his successor, Professor Kader Asmal. The Education Policy Unit of the University of Witwatersrand revealed that in December 2001, through its current school register of needs survey, little has improved in this tier. The survey showed that at least 35.5% of the schools were without any form of telecommunications, and 28% did not have access to water.⁴⁸ The administration of the budget also produced on an ongoing basis stories of a system that is in serious need of proper leadership. For instance, several months after this report, two more damaging reports appeared adjacent to each other in the Daily News with the following titles: "Rotten to the core: KZN education 'in shambles'", and "Teachers furious over department's failure to pay salaries". In the first case, a principal of a high school who was serving a five-year jail sentence for fifty two counts of fraud, was still receiving a full salary with benefits. In the second case, KwaZulu-Natal teachers who were promoted to management positions and at least nine thousand newly employed level one teachers were not paid for four months. In both instances officials acknowledged the situation.⁴⁹ Although the KZN Ministry of Education was run by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the problems were

symptomatic of the wider conditions in the public services.

In universities in South Africa, equally bizarre cases of maladministration have been reported since 1994. When one considers the historical role of universities as centers of excellence, consciousness of the nation and as think tanks for national policy making, the symbolism surrounding such issues add up to nothing against the backdrop of endemic corruption and lack of credible leadership. Both administration and the culture of learning in most African dominated universities have prompted the national Department of Education to arm itself with legislation to encroach upon the sensitive and relatively independent sphere of education. When Thandabantu Nhlapo was appointed by the state to investigate conditions in the University of the North, he described it as "some kind of fallen behemoth with many parasites living off its carcass but with very few of them committed to, or even interested in, the core business of universities everywhere in the world: teaching, learning and research."⁵⁰ At the University of Transkei the state had to enforce a moratorium on enrolling first year under-graduate students, and had to redeploy one of its chief directors of education to effect this. The problem emerged as a result of 'abnormal governance' and mounting debts that ran into tens of millions of rands, with little sign of accountability and transparency.⁵¹ At the University of Fort Hare an astronomical overdraft of ninety million rands forced the state to change administration personnel at the highest level. In less than two years the debt was reduced by forty million rands. In July 1998 the magazine *Focus* inquired into the dictatorial management of the University of Venda and focussed on the credibility of the Vice-Chancellor. It was found out that the Vice-Chancellor contract at a previous educational institution was not renewed because he did not inform them that his PhD was withdrawn from Yale University for alleged plagiarism. A report by R. W. Johnson revealed serious financial misdemeanours on the part of the Vice-Chancellor that was supported in a finding by the Heath Unit of credit card fraud, as well as gross abuses of human rights and disregard for the law. The Chairperson of the Venda University Council, Barney Pityana, who was also the head of the Human Rights Commission, was so enraged that he published a full page advertisement in the press at tremendous cost to

the university, attacking the Helen Suzman Foundation and a professor who was an outspoken critic of the Vice-Chancellor. The Vice-Chancellor later dismissed the professor from the Council and from his job at University. In April 2002 the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) ruled in favour of the professor and ordered that he be reinstated to the Council and his academic post. The Council however, continued to ignore the ruling.⁵² Barney Pityana was also appointed as Vice-Chancellor of South Africa's biggest distance education college, the University of South Africa (UNISA), against the ruling of the national Ministry of Education, whose plans were to with-hold senior appointments until the completion of the restructuring of tertiary education. Soon after the appointment, Pityana's extravagant spending of UNISA's money was made public.⁵³ The Mail and Guardian revealed that he cancelled the sale of a six million rand house owned by UNISA, which in turn cost the university R1.7 million rands; he arranged to take the entire Council to Mauritius for a *bosberaad*, and spent hundreds of thousands of rands on refurbishing his office and his new home. Pityana's greatest support came from the Chairperson of the UNISA Council, who broke the norms of other Chairpersons of university Councils in South Africa by claiming at least R360 000.00 for his services. The Minister of Education's request to the Auditor General to investigate the issue led to a finding of 'improper use of the University's resources' and to reclaim it. Pityana was subsequently appointed the head of South Africa's national lottery in March 2002. In the midst of these debacles the Chairman of the UNISA council and other like minded councilors met Mbeki to inform him about their intention to take the Ministry of education to court on the merger process. Mbeki did not stop it.

At the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa's first and only Black woman Vice-Chancellor, was accused by staff and students of an equal degree of authoritarianism as in Venda University and was probed by the Revenue Services for tax evasion. Staff alleged that she was responsible for exacerbating instability in management structures because of sheer incompetence as a Vice-Chancellor. These beliefs about her led to a motion of censure, followed soon after by a vote of no confidence in her by the Senate, but was met by a stony silence by the

University's council and national Ministry of Education. In a pamphlet sent out in April 2002, the University's Academic Staff Association made a challenging statement that reflected the harsh reality of staff concerns: "Evidently our sophisticated structures and processes have now been reduced to a primitive form of political patronage where anyone from anywhere is simply hauled into management without due process to pay lip service and fulfil statutory obligations without the necessary qualifications or experience. It is therefore important to reflect on the state of our management at UDW, such as it is. When the vice-chancellor was appointed four years and some months ago, it was hoped that she would bring stability and permanency to our University management and our university as a whole....We are no further along the road to stability than we were five years ago." This trend has entrenched itself in most of South Africa's tertiary institutions, with the full knowledge of the State President. In a subtle attempt to draw the public's attention to the prevalence of opportunism and incompetence in tertiary education in South Africa, the then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, publicly declared: "The move by universities and technikons towards hiring people with sound management skills is important, but it should never come at the cost of good scholarship-based leadership, of having people who in their record and practice exemplify achieved authority in knowledge, research and intellectual accomplishments."⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

The evidence above presents a bleak scenario for the entrenchment of participatory democracy under Mbeki's leadership. The idiom that "children's behaviour is a reflection of parental values and upbringing" is easily transferred to the way in which the state functions at a national level and the example this provides for its structures at the regional, local and institutional levels. What transpires at the highest levels of government is often manifested at the lower levels. South Africa's most demanding contemporary challenge lies in its untangling the seemingly impermeable social formations that have closed itself off from open public scrutiny and accountability. Embezzlement, corruption, incompetence and complacency are evidently still at the core of

the political-economy of post-apartheid South Africa. If the trend towards imposing conformance and subordination continues to shape the power relations between Mbeki and his subjects, the possibilities for either 'compassionate despotism', or 'pathological patrimonialism' or 'personal rule syndrome' will become an ever increasing reality. But of the three possibilities, which scenario is most likely?

On the possibility of 'compassionate despotism', evidence on Mbeki has shown that while he is ruthless in removing contenders from his path towards entrenching his position as leader of the ANC and the country, as he allegedly did, he has to date not gone beyond that. In a frank assessment of the reality that South Africans will be faced with in the immediate future, political commentator for the Daily News, Max du Preez wrote: "In fact, those South Africans dissatisfied with Mbeki's performance who believe we deserve better leadership, should start making peace with the fact that, bar an act of God, he will be our president for the next seven years. So if we can't replace him, perhaps we should try to rehabilitate our president and his relationship with the nation." In trying to soothe and persuade the readership of this practical stance to Mbeki, du Preez produced an anecdotal incident that made convincing reading: "A senior civil servant told me a telling story last week. The cabinet ordered an investigation into a certain problem. The investigators produced an honest report, which was not appreciated by certain cabinet ministers and was quietly shelved. Behind their backs, Mbeki spent a night or two on his private phone to people involved with the problem, from local officials to private citizens. When the report was again brought up in cabinet, the ministers dismissed it in the same way as they did before. And then Mbeki stood up and told them about his own findings. The report was immediately accepted by cabinet."⁵⁵ But a more revealing investigative report in the Mail and Guardian in the same week (April 19 to 25 2002) about how Mbeki also uses his after hours time and electronic means of communication all but nullifies du Preez's gentle persuasion. The report was written after acquiring information from a high profile intelligence leak. It revealed that electronic versions of two controversial documents promoting the dissident view of HIV/AIDS carry indisputable signatures that suggest that they were written on President Thabo Mbeki's computer.

Although computer experts cautioned that this should not be considered as conclusive proof of authorship, the presidency issued only a guarded response and not a denial of its origins. One of the documents, titled *Castro Hlongwane, Caravans, Cats, Geese, Foot and Mouth Statistics*, was distributed to senior ANC members in March and early April 2002. Reporters from the Mail and Guardian and other political observers pointed out strong similarities in style between this document and other public writing by Mbeki on, among other subjects, HIV/AIDS. The second document, also bearing trademark signatures of Mbeki's computer, was an insultingly critical letter signed by Limpopo Province Premier Ramathlodi, to Professor Malegapuru Makgoba, (Head of the Medical Research Council), for his public view that HIV causes AIDS and that anti-retrovirals can combat the syndrome. It was suggested by highly placed political sources that Mbeki was indeed the author of the letter, as the software records received by the Mail and Guardian had imprinted on it: "Author: Thabo Mbeki" and "Company: Office of the President".

While the discussion above is tantamount to a semblance of a sophisticated form of political undermining, what also transpired prior to these incidents create a worrisome precedent for other possible contenders for the post of President while Mbeki is still in office. Threats to incarcerate senior opponents within the ANC such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Mathews Phosa and Tokyo Sexwale arose through hearsay and were touted by senior Ministers of government as a case for their possible arrests. Only the consequent public outcry against the relevant ministers and critical analyses of Mbeki as an over-ambitious individual served to swiftly neutralize such a possibility. Similarly, Mbeki's sudden cowering to international pressure in March/April 2002 on the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth and to internal pressure on making nevarapine available to HIV infected pregnant women, showed his sensitivity to public opinion. But it came at a tremendous cost to public confidence in him as a president and to his leadership. How does one read into such political gymnastics? Is it a reflection of a withdrawal for the sake of reevaluating to radically change course of action or is it to bide time only to re-impose in different ways? This is indeed difficult to predict. That Mbeki is a product of a commandist style of

leadership rather than from a trend of participatory democracy is perhaps the yardstick to use to foresee his remaining years in office.

On the possibility of moving towards 'pathological patrimonialism' Mbeki's continued silence on the hiring of corrupt staff in important state positions, in tertiary institutions and in parastatals reinforces Tom Lodge's statement that the ANC is not concerned about corruption. In usurping the roles and responsibilities of regional and local authorities and replacing them at his will and in ignoring Tony Yengeni's dismissive behaviour towards the parliamentary ethics committee, Barney Pityana's role in upholding the appointment of Gessler Nkondo as Vice Chancellor of Venda University after being found guilty of improper use of the University's credit card, the fact that the Chairman of the University of South Africa went against established tradition and sought payments for his duties and ignored the moratorium on senior appointments in tertiary institutions imposed by the Ministry of Education by appointing a new Vice-Chancellor, Mbeki prosaically demonstrated his proclivity towards pathological patrimonialism. If the structures and procedures within the highest symbols of democracy are either violated or ignored by those who by their very appointments have to act as custodians of it, they inevitably contribute towards their dismemberment and eventual dissolution.

On 'personal rule syndrome', Mbeki's continuous courtship with Robert Mugabe and uncritical stance towards Namibia's President Sam Nujoma who changed the constitution at his will to continue office for the third term and is anticipated to do so again for the fourth term, does legitimately raise questions about what he is likely to do by the end of his first term of office. The evidence of pathological patrimonialism within South Africa's structures of governance, civil service and higher institutions of learning establishes a platform for the onset of 'personal rule syndrome'. The possibility of its entrenchment is profoundly alluded to in the recent amnesty of prisoners who Mbeki released through his prerogative of Presidential Pardon of 'political prisoners'. Media coverage of this issue unanimously record this event as an act of defiance against the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which received international acclaim for its work, but who Mbeki avowedly disliked. Under the cover of 'amnesty for political prisoners', Mbeki released: the men who battered the

American student Amy Biehl to death because she was White and was driving through an African township, members of the Azanian People's Liberation Army who gunned down innocent civilians in a church and tavern, and a number of security policemen who had tortured and killed in cold blood or sent lethal letter bombs to civilians⁵⁶.

NOTES

- 1 Associate Professor, School of Anthropology, Gender and Historical Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I would like to thank the University and the National Research Foundation for funding my participation in the 15th World Congress of Sociology, Brisbane, Australia, where this paper was first presented.
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- 25 Daniel, *ibid*
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- 47 The full text of the UN Special Rapporteur's report is available online at www.sundaytimes.co.za/business/legal
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