



Response

February 15th, 2018

The Zuma Lessons

Very few South Africans will fail to welcome the resignation of Jacob Zuma as President of the country. His failures and wrongdoings have been thoroughly examined and lengthily documented, and may yet see him standing in the dock on serious charges of corruption.

His late-night announcement brought an end to weeks of speculation on the part of the media and the public, and of negotiation and machination by the newly-elected leadership of the ANC. We can now look forward to the installation of Cyril Ramaphosa as the fifth President of democratic South Africa and, with that, hopefully to a new and more honourable era in our national politics.

In the process, we should not overlook the many lessons that can be learnt from the turmoil of the Zuma years. Among them, there is one that relates to the past; one to the present; and one to the future.

Firstly, it should be remembered that Mr Zuma was put in power by a consortium of disaffected constituencies within the ANC precisely because they wanted a weak, malleable, pliant leader to replace the supposedly aloof and authoritarian Thabo Mbeki. The coalition of Cosatu, the Communist Party and the ANC Youth League, abetted by various journalists and spin-doctors, knew exactly who they were promoting. Mr Zuma's already notorious record of corruption, dishonesty, cronyism, philandery and self-advancement did not bother them at all as they foisted him on us, and thereby set in motion the disastrous decade that has sullied our reputation and set us back economically, institutionally and politically. Not all those responsible for creating the 'Zumanami' have yet apologised to the nation.

Secondly, despite the tension of the last few weeks, and the growing impatience with which the country has awaited a resolution of the impasse between Mr Zuma and his party, we should not lose sight of the fact that the matter was resolved in an orderly, procedural and peaceful manner. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo people are dying every day because of President Kabila's refusal to vacate office; in Venezuela people are starving as Nicolas Maduro clings to the presidency; in Russia and Turkey opposition leaders are thrown into jail to prevent them challenging for power; in Uganda the constitution is amended to prolong Yuweri Museveni's endless rule. Here, each of our democratic Presidents has handed over power voluntarily, even before their terms have ended. Mr Zuma may have cavilled, but let us allow him credit for saying, and meaning it, 'No life should be lost in my name.'

Thirdly, we must remind ourselves that the governmental rot did not start with Mr Zuma's ascent to the presidency, and it will not end with his exit. The ANC faces deep structural challenges: too many of its

members and leaders believe that, as the dominant liberation movement, it has a right to govern indefinitely and with scant regard for the norms of a modern, multi-party, constitutional democracy; that it is somehow its destiny to rule the country. This fallacious attitude fosters unaccountability, cadre-ism, and a sense of untouchability. It is the central reason why so many otherwise decent and committed ANC leaders – cabinet ministers, MPs, top-sixers – chose for so long to overlook or ignore Mr Zuma’s depravities; and thereby enabled them.

We do not know what Mr Zuma’s fate will be – a quiet retirement at Nkandla or a drawn-out series of court appearances. We do know Cyril Ramaphosa’s fate: to try to rebuild an ethos of good governance; to restore trust in the institutions of democracy; to resurrect hope for a better life for all; and to regain the straight and narrow way of constitutionalism, the rule of law, and a politics of service.

It is a Herculean task.

Mike Pothier
Programme Manager