

3 Lessons Zuma's Disastrous Presidency Has Taught Us

The lesson going forward is to understand that South Africa must come first before party loyalty.

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MIKE HUTCHINGS / REUTERS
Former president Jacob Zuma in happier days.

MARC DAVIES/ HUFFPOST SA

Say what you like about Jacob Zuma – he has forced the country into a deep reflection about what the real leadership requirements of our democracy are. Through his leadership, it is not an exaggeration to say that he has destroyed the very fabric of our country and exposed the fact that the ANC leadership can hardly go through the eye of the needle.

What is worse is that after months of increased calls for his resignation, he carried on as if no one had spoken. At the ANC conference, he gave a speech that suggested that everyone else was to blame for the trouble that the country experienced. He was dismissive of the whiff of scandal that characterised the presidency – he even prefaced state capture as "so-

called", in what was the most arrogant summation of his tenure in office. In summary, he said to all gathered, "It's not me; it's you!"

This is the main reason for his recall, in case he needs his memory jogged. This is what he has done wrong: failure to acknowledge his poor leadership. His legacy is characterised by failure to build a nation in many aspects. The evidence is all around us, in collapsing health and education systems and in the most horrific economic indicators that represent the Zuma years.

Instead of an economic recovery, the country experienced a recession and junk status – stuff that in no small measure can be linked to his horrendous decision making.

SIPHIWE SIBEKO / REUTERS Former president Jacob Zuma gestures after announcing his resignation at the Union Buildings. February 14, 2018.

This horror story of his years at the helm is made worse by the fact that he was aided and abetted by many of us – from ordinary people who danced to his tunes, to leaders who turned a blind eye to his misdeeds because of the debilitating culture of patronage.

Of course, these days to find anyone who supported him will be like finding a needle in a haystack – but we know them. Suddenly everyone will be so free to talk about how good it is that South Africa should see his back.

That is how the political cookie crumbles. Oh, by the way, there is nothing "radical economic transformation" about the Zuma years. Absolutely nothing. Whether it be land reform or lifting black people out of poverty – this was the stuff of slogans and not concrete action. Quite frankly, we know this to be true.

But Zuma was not alone in the plunder of our resources and the subsequent destruction of the economy. The failure of his presidency is the failure **of the entire ANC leadership to go through the eye of the**

needle. It only took his faction losing power for the NEC to gather a modicum of courage and recall him. This after he has caused so much damage to the country and the ANC.

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Since he was not alone in making us the most unequal society in the world, what do we now need, to avoid the situation getting worse? How do we ensure that those who were in fact accomplices in his wrecking-ball ways do not carry on with his project to destroy South Africa? What are the key leadership lessons from the Zuma years? I will focus on just three – accountability, the big-man syndrome, and the culture of corruption.

Public accountability is no longer a luxury

The Nkandla saga was a lesson in leadership accountability, in which party loyalty trumped compliance and respect for the Constitution. On the other hand, failure to uphold the Constitution by both the president and Parliament brought the party-political system into utter disrepute and exposed its flaws. ANC deployees in Parliament are often very bright people. I am not prepared to believe that none of them knew that what they were doing over the Nkandla report cover-up was morally and politically wrong.

Many knew, but thought they could get away with silence. They chose to make being accountable a luxury they could not afford. The lesson going forward is to understand that South Africa must come first before party loyalty. If you consider the last motion of no confidence in the President – in which some ANC MPs broke ranks in an attempt to remove Zuma – it is clear that this new consciousness is possible. Will the new ANC under Ramaphosa ensure that such a culture is entrenched going forward? Or will the call for ANC unity be a new rallying call for blind loyalty to the party instead of the country?

MIKE HUTCHINGS / REUTERS

South Africa can no longer tolerate a big-man syndrome

The scandal-prone presidency of Jacob Zuma also showed that the ANC president has too much power and influence. I am not prepared to believe that of all the brains in the NEC, there were not enough to ensure that the ANC is not sucked into the self-destruction mode we have seen in the past decade. Under the watch of almost 100 brains, the ANC took a terrible beating at the polls and ignored advice from its own research – and its own veterans, where Zuma was concerned.

It seems that to protect the big man that Zuma had become, the ANC was willing to lose power – and it did. Metros that command more than half of the GDP are not in the ANC's hands anymore, but even this was not enough for the ANC to get rid of Zuma, when it had numerous chances to do so in the past two years.

The result of this is that the courts have become the new standard bearers in our society, constantly telling the executive to do the right thing. Is Cyril Ramaphosa going to be the new big man in the ANC? Or will the ANC take lessons from the past decade and instead ensure true leadership collectivism takes the ANC and the country forward?

The scourge of corruption is an emergency

Both the Nkandla report and the "State Of Capture" report have laid bare the fact that corruption has taken over our body politic – in which the theft of public resources is an acceptable way of doing business. Other developments in the past year related to private-sector companies that have aided and abetted this situation have shown that this is not just a public-sector matter, but a societal problem – the corrupters and corrupted are on all sides of our society. It is clear that fine words on public platforms will not be enough to combat this, as that will only make the master thieves chuckle away and continue.

Starting with Ramaphosa's new Cabinet, we will get a strong sense of whether the ANC will take these lessons, or if we will be subjected to more of the same.

Electing a new leader is only a small start. He must visibly act against the corrupt if he is to be taken seriously – starting with his inner core (the tigers) and even some "insignificant branch leader who stole membership fees" (the flies). Those in the leadership who are accused of serious crimes must be recalled from their positions like Zuma was, so that there is a new fear of being caught stealing. Corruption must be made an emergency.

The R700-billion that is said to have been lost to corruption since 1994 should be redirected to lifting 55 percent of the population out of poverty. The integrity commission that Zuma ignored, Ramaphosa must support – and in fact pressure to do more to keep the fingers of ANC leaders out of the cookie jar. Once this has happened, the rest will take care of itself – suddenly the private-sector thieves will have no one to bribe, and will face the prospect of being brought to book.

I remain hopeful that there are enough words that point to this ideal future. Now we await action. Starting with Ramaphosa's new Cabinet, we will get a strong sense of whether the ANC will take these lessons, or if we will be subjected to more of the same. Quite frankly, the jury is still out.