Review article: Just another country?

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After Mandela: The Battle for the Soul of South Africa
Alec Russell
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A Legacy of Liberation: Thabo Mbeki and the Future of the South African Dream
Mark Gevisser

South Africa’s Brave New World: The Beloved Country since the End of Apartheid
R.W. Johnson

What Went Wrong? Why? The three volumes under review each—in their separate ways—attempt an explanation of how South Africa shed the lustre acquired during the Mandela presidency and failed to meet the initial high expectations generated by its successful transition from Apartheid to democracy. What we are offered is a detailed analysis of Thabo Mbeki’s stewardship focusing on the reasons for his downfall and the prospects for his successor, Jacob Zuma.

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True, Mbeki made many errors of judgement during his presidency, but these have to be contextualised. Mandela’s single term of five years in office represented a political honeymoon for the ‘new’ South Africa. His retirement, virtually at the height of his global fame, his commitment to reconciliation and forgiveness of past wrongs had given his country an exemplary reputation for good international citizenship. There was, too, the external expectation that the country would play a key role in restoring the African continent’s fortunes by solving conflicts between one-time enemies. Thus, South Africa might serve as a model for what constituted not only the ideal of good governance but, perhaps more important, how to achieve it in practice via a negotiated rather than revolutionary violent outcome.

Certainly, Western governments expected great things: at last the burden of peacekeeping and peacemaking could be shared with a country seemingly well placed to undertake those responsibilities; the stimulus provided by the revival and development of the South African economy would serve to invigorate its stagnant counterparts in the region; South African skills—diplomatic and military together with the release of its entrepreneurial energies—would breathe new life into the Southern African Development Community (SADC) providing fresh, well-trained recruits to revitalise its cumbersome bureaucracy. There was, too, the hope of wider influence in the councils of the United Nations, particularly in the field of arms control and disarmament following the dramatic and well-received renunciation of South Africa’s nuclear programme. Leadership roles beckoned in the organisation of African Unity (OAU), the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and a host of international organisations dedicated to rectifying an unequal balance of power between the rich North and the poor South.

Indeed, South Africa was quickly enrolled in the ranks of so-called emerging powers. Arguably it had all the qualifications for such status: domestic stability; an enabling environment of reasonably efficient and legitimate political, economic and judicial institutions; and it was free of corruption characteristic of societies elsewhere on the continent. It had, too, ‘a rectitude base’ of democratic government and the rule of law; a vociferous and influential civil society, including a vigorous and free media outlet; well-established universities and think tanks together with a highly skilled business community determined to break free of the shackles imposed by Apartheid-induced sanctions.

Of course, South African aspirations in the post-1994 period and their support from external sources—governments, regional and international organisations—involved paying a price in domestic terms. The emergence of the ‘new’ South Africa coincided
with the end of the Cold War and acknowledgement that henceforth the pressures of
globalisation would reinforce the role of the free market as the only reliable mechanism for
promoting growth in developed and developing states alike. Thus, the Mandela
administration had to jettison the ‘socialist’ principles embodied in the Freedom Charter
of 1955. If Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) was to be encouraged from abroad, potential
sources required reassurance that the ‘new’ South Africa was willing and able to play by the
rules of the global market place. The hope was that the fruits of economic growth—the
result of overseas investment and expanding trade—would fund the vital and
overwhelming imperative to raise the living standards of the black majority: decent
housing to replace shanty towns; electricification; clean water; schools and health clinics;
and above all jobs for the mass of the unemployed. These were the key objectives of
domestic policy and unless these were met, or at least their achievement seen to be
gathering momentum as resources became available, the country’s ‘emergence’ would be
stymied. The perception of South Africa’s ‘exceptionalism’ would, therefore, fade as South
Africa became ‘just another country’.

It was this combination of incentives and constraints that constituted Mbeki’s
inheritance. Succeeding Mandela was bound to be a massive challenge, yet as Alec Russell
stresses ‘the consensus abroad was that it was time for a more vigorous leader to build on
his success and address the next phase of the post-Apartheid story—and that the right man
had been identified for the task’ (Russell, 10). Russell’s analysis of Mbeki’s regime is
perhaps the most useful for the first-time visitor or potential investor wanting a detailed,
perceptive reading of post-Mandela South Africa. He wanders about the country gauging
reaction about the Mbeki dispensation from a variety of interlocutors—disaffected
Afrikaners, black workers, die-hard ANC supporters, academics and journalists. His
conclusion is stark: ‘outside the multi-racial elite and some very poor communities, South
Africa’s races were like tectonic plates. Much of the time they glided smoothly past each
other, but there was intermittent friction and every now and then, they crashed against
each other, sometimes with spectacular results’ (Russell, 48).

Russell, as does Gevisser in a masterly account, fully acknowledges Mbeki’s skill in
handling the economy; he was impervious to criticism from the ANC’s allies—the South
African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions
(COSATU)—and their pressure to engage in state-driven ‘socialist distribution policies’.
Indeed, his willingness to stick with Trevor Manuel, his cautious and well-regarded finance
minister, demonstrated his recognition that South Africa had no alternative but to accept
both the incentives and constraints of capitalist theory and practice. Thus, the economy grew, reaching a rate of five per cent in 2004, while Manuel kept inflation down and the budget deficit under control.

But despite their best efforts ‘there had been no post-Apartheid dividend. Foreign investment had not poured into South Africa after the unveiling of GEAR [Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme]. Rather, it had come in a trickle. There were other more attractive destinations in Asia and Eastern Europe, where societies were not still embroiled in debates over how to deal with the past. A decade into the post-Apartheid era, like many other developing countries, South Africa found itself battling against the unforeseen phenomenon of jobless growth’ (Russell, 94).

But, as all three books emphasise, Mbeki was determined to avoid becoming the West’s ‘poodle’; he was an Africanist at heart and attempted with some success to broaden the country’s economic links with new partners in Latin America, India, Africa and China. He was also profoundly committed to reforming Africa’s continent-wide institutions: the OAU was restructured into an African Union (AU), which in theory permitted intervention in states guilty of human rights abuses and which hitherto had been protected by an African version of the principle of domestic jurisdiction. Mbeki was also the key architect of the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) designed to encourage, by peer review, the establishment of good governance. As Russell rightly claims, the Mbeki–Manuel combination of political skill, economic prudence and refusal to bow to pressure from the left did produce results for the alleviation of poverty for many of the dispossessed: ‘between 1994 and 2007 the ANC built 2.6 million houses. The number of homes with electricity doubled to 8.8 million. By 2007, over 87 per cent of people had access to clean running water. As of March 2008, 14.1 million people in South Africa were benefiting from the largest social welfare programme in sub-Saharan Africa’ (Russell, 93). Gevisser, too, provides a perceptive account of NEPAD together with the Black Economic Empowerment programme (BEE). Both he and Russell agree that these were instruments devised to give substance to Mbeki’s idea of an African Renaissance ‘to liberate the continent from its dependence on the West’ (Gevisser, 221).

Johnson is severely critical of Mbeki’s Africanist aspirations and he is scathing about the BEE programme and affirmative action policy in general. He detects no qualitative difference between the discriminatory policies of the Apartheid era and those introduced by the Mbeki government. ‘The major difference’, he claims, ‘was really just that the
Apartheid governments have legislated to favour whites while the ANC government legislated to favour blacks’ (Johnson, 381.)

But this is to ignore context: as David White remarks in a review in Survival, ‘the case for corrective policies was a matter not only of justice but also of political necessity, to preempt a build-up of explosive social pressures. The country could not afford to wait for inequities to work themselves out [however], its main beneficiaries are a black elite composed of the super-rich and well-connected’. And Johnson, with a wealth of examples, rightly emphasises the deleterious impact of the BEE’s outcome.

All three authors rightly point to several major weaknesses in Mbeki’s domestic and external strategies. Firstly, there is the devastating observation that there were areas where, despite the availability of resources, little was, in fact, distributed, largely because of inept bureaucratic performance; where resources did become available for provincial and local governments—the sharp end of distribution—incompetence and a lack of skilled manpower were obstacles to their effective use in improving the lives of the poor. And this obstacle is made worse by the poor quality of black education in South Africa—a topic on which both Russell and Johnson are especially perceptive. Indeed, many of those who did emerge against all the odds with talent and skill were very often snapped up by business, the civil service and the professions. Teaching in a township school was clearly a far less attractive career option.

Secondly, South Africa is, of course, not unique in its failure to meet the expectations of its people. Both under Mandela and Mbeki, the government had little alternative but to accept a peculiarly South African version of the globally-dominant neo-liberal economic orthodoxy. And the difficulty with this strategy is that its positive impact is in the long term based on the assumption that careful economic management at the centre will result in a ‘trickle-down’ of resources to the periphery where the need is greatest. It also assumes that those requiring help can and will be patient. As David Welsh once famously remarked, the key to success, however limited, is that the queue for the satisfaction of basic needs should be seen to be moving; if it fails or, worse still, halts dissatisfaction rises and street protest—possibly violent—is the result. Russell vividly describes this outcome: ‘the apparent willingness of so many blacks to be patient for the fruits of liberation was as remarkable as was the modesty of their aspirations. Time and again, […] people across the country said that all they were looking for was the opportunity to live a life in dignity, have access to running water and electricity, and to have a roof over their heads. Yet after a
decade or more of patience, residents in some townships started to become more restive’ (Russell, 96–97).

Thirdly, Mbeki’s achievements were greatly overshadowed by his blunt refusal to acknowledge the link between HIV and AIDS. Johnson is scathing about Mbeki’s failure in this context, accusing him of ‘deliberate obscurantism’ (Johnson, 194). A wealth of well-researched evidence is provided to support Johnson’s findings. He is particularly interesting in explaining Mbeki’s aberrant posture in terms of his profound hostility to the West: thus ‘AIDS was also a metaphor in a grander sense. Mbeki’s whole posture was one of victimhood of castigating white guilt for colonialism, racism and apartheid—all rolled into the single, timeless term, oppression. This […] led inevitably to a huge sense of entitlement: the white developed world must acknowledge its guilt—which could then be expatiated via contributions to NEPAD, Debt Relief and an endless stream of other paybacks’ (Johnson, 224).

Fourthly, Mbeki’s reputation as a skilful operator in foreign policy—the result of tramping the corridors of power in exile, then as Mandela’s deputy and ultimately as president—was badly damaged (certainly in Western capitals) by his prevarication over the AIDS issue. And scepticism about his competence was reinforced by his handling of the Zimbabwean issue and the apparent failure of his ‘quiet diplomacy’ to persuade President Robert Mugabe to abandon his persecution of opponents, both white and black.

All three authors provide a wealth of detailed analysis of this issue. What emerges by implication is that Mbeki was once again caught between two competing imperatives. On the one hand, he was under pressure from Western governments (which, incidentally, showed little inclination to take forceful measures themselves), however, Mbeki refused to condemn publicly Mugabe and engage in forceful measures against the latter’s regime. On the other hand, his Africanist instincts, in particular the belief that African solutions must be found by Africans for Africa’s problems, led him to give precedence to liberation solidarity with fellow African leaders over human rights as defined by the continent’s former colonial masters. In his defence Mbeki would no doubt claim that his ‘soft power’ intervention did at least produce a coalition government which has so far survived, if somewhat shakily. But what rightly appalled his critics—especially Johnson—was the spectacle of official South African delegations approving the conduct of clearly fraudulent elections in Zimbabwe when all the evidence pointed the other way.

It was this combination of the AIDS debacle and prevarication over Zimbabwe that effectively undermined Mbeki’s reputation abroad, no matter that he had eschewed
employing South Africa’s military capabilities in peacemaking operations abroad. He recognised that his country inhabited a rough neighbourhood, but he nevertheless committed himself to UN Chapter Six techniques of conflict resolution, such as mediation and the use of good offices. Nevertheless, Mbeki enjoyed some success in helping to ease conflict—if only in the short term—in, for example, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But again, South Africa’s reputation was tarnished by its United Nations Security Council voting record, where it earned unwanted criticism by voting against resolutions condemning human rights abuses in, for example, Darfur, Burma and Zimbabwe. Indeed, critics made much of the ANC’s stand against Apartheid and the contradiction involved in failing to criticise bad behaviour elsewhere on the continent.

In summary, all three books under review offer in varying degrees a trenchant critique of the Mbeki regime. Johnson’s is the most detailed, arguing his case with tenacity and coruscating anger; he is the voice of the profoundly disillusioned liberal, but there can be no denying the depth of his research underpinning—as it does—a well-written and cogently argued examination of Mbeki’s stewardship. He is especially strong on corruption in the ANC, although he does not give sufficient credit to South Africa’s civil society, and the press in particular, in exposing this particular evil in the body politic. Interestingly, his analysis does not end on a despairing note: he acknowledges the strength and durability of South Africa’s political institutions and notes the paradox that the ANC inherited structures from the past which included a tradition of strong statehood, a parliamentary system of government, a courageous, if battered, judiciary and a vigorous civil society. He is especially perceptive on this issue, arguing convincingly that a descent into authoritarianism is unlikely. This, he claims, ‘would be strongly resisted by South Africa’s major trading partners, by the Commonwealth, by the gallery of international opinion which supported the Apartheid struggle. South Africa is far more integrated into that international world than Zimbabwe ever was, and its leverage matters’ (Johnson, 617).

Moreover, its allies—COSATU and the SACP—already critical of the ‘increasingly rough tactics used by the police against strikers and township protestors’ (Johnson, 617) would constitute, together with the opposition, a highly vocal source of dissent from any ANC attack on constitutionally-enshrined civil liberties. In this context we should note the uproar both at home and abroad which arose following strong government hints that a degree of press censorship was to be introduced.

By contrast, Gevisser is more sympathetic to Mbeki. He tries manfully to probe the depths of his personality and the psychological imperatives and constraints that drove him
both in exile and in office. His account is a result of massive research and several lengthy interviews. Mbeki is compared to Shakespeare’s Coriolanus—a tragic figure—who, in Mbeki’s own words (in a private letter), was a ‘revolutionary role model precisely because he was prepared to go to war against his own people, who had become a “rabble”, an “unthinking mob, with its cowardice, its lying, its ordinary peopleness”’ (Gevisser, 329).

This is a revealing quotation, as Gevisser argues, in explaining Mbeki’s fall from power, and his analysis in general provides a trenchant critique of Mbeki’s administration. Gevisser notes, in particular, ‘his disconnection from his electorate, exacerbated by the insulation that inevitably comes with high office’ (Gevisser, 331).

Finally, all three speculate on the prospects for Jacob Zuma, Mbeki’s successor as president. Clearly, he is no intellectual in Mbeki’s mould. He is not especially versed in the economics of statecraft; he is certainly charismatic but tends in his public utterances to tell a variety of audiences what he thinks they want to hear. His strength lies in his capacity to ‘knock heads together’ to secure agreement between rival factions, as he did so notably in contributing to ending the 20-year violent conflict between rival Zulu supporters of the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in Natal Province.

What may we expect from his term of office? Bear in mind that he defeated Mbeki in the contest for the presidency of the ANC (and ultimately of the country as a whole) for two reasons: firstly, he promised to restore the government’s links with its electorate, to be unfailingly less aloof and distant than his predecessor; and secondly, and more important, to speed up the pace of delivery of social and economic goods for the poverty-stricken.

Whether he has the drive and commitment required to regenerate stagnant and ill-trained bureaucracies, to weed out the corrupt at every level of government, is very much an open question. One wonders, as does Johnson in particular who doubts, ‘whether the country will succeed in consolidating and building upon what was good in this history […] The country’s government is clearly not coping. But it is unlikely that the country will take the short cut to dictatorship that Ghana, Guinea and many others did’ (Johnson, 618–619).

This reviewer’s guess is that Zuma will have to concentrate his very considerable energies on domestic issues at the expense of grandiose foreign policy initiatives of the kind that so appealed to his predecessor. He will be under constant pressure to deliver to the black majority from allies in the SACP and COSATU, whose support was vital in his election contest with Mbeki. True, South Africa was invited in late December 2010 to become a member of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) group of countries. This, no doubt, was
because of a BRIC consensus that Africa required representation among their number and South Africa was the most obvious candidate. Leaving aside the issue of what this disparate group of powers can and will do to exercise global influence, South Africa will never be seen as more than a junior partner. South Africa is not in their league in terms of resources, capabilities and global influence. To pretend otherwise would be to stretch the energies of an already overburdened military and diplomatic service. There is simply too much to do at home. As Russell concludes: ‘reformists in the ANC have to keep the more avaricious populists in check. Otherwise the fate of so many other liberation movements awaits the party and South Africa will—in a decade or so—find itself led by an ossified ruling party overseen by bickering apparatchiks presiding over a sclerotic dysfunctional state’ (Russell, 289). Johnson and Gevisser would certainly concur with this judgment.

All three volumes—it must be admitted—make depressing reading. And yet, one ought not to underestimate South African capacity to improvise and cope despite all the odds. Its success, for example, in organising the World Cup is perhaps the best example of this feature of South African society. On the other hand, one must acknowledge that organising a major sporting event pales into insignificance when compared with the long-term structural problems the country faces. Yet, South Africa will probably stumble on, but its leadership may yet surprise us.

**Endnotes**


**Reference**