Has South Africa Finally Reached a Tipping Point in Zuma’s Disastrous Presidency?

James Hamill | Thursday, April 13, 2017

Have the events of the past few weeks in South Africa provided the long-awaited tipping point for President Jacob Zuma’s dysfunctional presidency? His reckless sacking late last month of respected Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan was driven not by any economic logic, but by narrow political and financial ambition. It has helped unite previously disparate forces against Zuma and brought closer the prospect—though not the guarantee—of his removal.

This emerging opposition goes well beyond the official opposition parties and now embraces a large section of the ruling African National Congress itself. Last year over 100 ANC veterans called for Zuma’s resignation, including some of the most revered figures in the movement that led South Africa’s struggle against apartheid. So low is Zuma’s stock in parts of the ANC that even before Gordhan’s sacking, South Africa’s president was discouraged from attending the funeral of Ahmed Kathrada, an anti-apartheid veteran and comrade of Nelson Mandela. It was an unprecedented snub for an ANC leader who would normally be expected to give the eulogy at such an occasion.

In the wake of Gordhan’s dismissal, things steadily worsened for Zuma as the deputy president of party and state, Cyril Ramaphosa, condemned the sacking as “totally unacceptable.” The ANC’s secretary-general, Gwede Mantashe, complained that the party’s senior leadership had been informed but not consulted and was clearly troubled by the decision. The ANC’s own Integrity Commission, charged with overseeing the standards and behavior of party members, has demanded Zuma’s resignation.

To compound Zuma’s woes, the ANC’s governing partner, the South African Communist Party or SACP, joined the chorus of calls for his resignation.
Zuma’s presidency, which has been trending downward since he took office in 2009, has finally reached its nadir.

This hemorrhaging of support and authority takes Zuma into uncharted territory. In an orthodox Western democracy, his position would already be untenable. But in South Africa, and particularly in the murky, subterranean world of ANC politics, things are rarely so simple.

It is clear enough why he acted. Gordhan had been foisted upon Zuma in December 2015 by the ANC after he sacked a previous finance minister, Nhlanhla Nene, and replaced him with an underqualified crony, Des Van Rooyen, causing a financial meltdown. For Zuma, though, that simply recreated the problem that had led to Nene’s removal in the first place: He was getting in the way of Zuma and his patronage networks accessing state coffers. The president and his allies have long viewed state-owned enterprises as a rich source of plunder.

The National Treasury has tried to act as a barrier to that corruption by insisting on proper oversight and accountability. That was the overriding explanation for the rapid deterioration in Zuma’s relationship with Gordhan. It reflected a clash between two fundamentally incompatible approaches to governance: a kleptocracy in which the looting of the state is paramount versus a rational, technocratic government.

Zuma is disinterested in, even contemptuous of, orthodox economic logic. He is, as Ian Bremmer has noted, “functionally illiterate on economics,” as his lack of concern over Gordhan’s sacking made clear. It inevitably caused the rand, South Africa’s currency, to plummet and the country’s sovereign credit rating to be downgraded to junk status. The downgrade will inflict considerable damage on the South African economy by raising the cost of borrowing, producing an outflow of capital, causing higher inflation and diverting resources from socio-economic projects for the poor.

Yet faced with all this, Zuma’s priorities remain patronage above all. The appointment as the new finance minister of another arch loyalist—Malusi Gigaba, a man whose economic knowledge appears meager—is designed to achieve precisely that.
The most likely outcome is that a delinquent president will stagger on until 2019, dragging South Africa deeper into the economic mire.

So, what now? Will the ANC summon the moral authority to “recall” Zuma from office as they did with Thabo Mbeki in 2008? Political self-interest dictates that it should. The ANC is a party in decline. Its support fell sharply from 63 percent in 2014 elections to 54 percent in last year’s municipal vote; its majority at the national level will certainly be at risk (https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2017-04-04-anc-has-every-reason-for-alarm-over-losing-control-in-2019-election/) in 2019 if Zuma remains in office.

With a stagnating economy and unemployment rising, Zuma’s proposed “radical economic transformation” will be undeliverable. ANC members at risk of losing their seats may see Zuma’s removal as a necessary survival strategy, but that will entail aligning with the opposition for a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly. That is unlikely for two reasons. First, it goes against the grain for ANC members to do so. But second, and more practically, if the vote fails, dissenting lawmakers might be removed from a future electoral list by the party leadership. Yet if they don’t act and instead attempt to muddle through until 2019, many lawmakers may lose their seats anyway.

Ultimately, the ANC’s National Executive Committee, or NEC, will have to recall Zuma. Only then, if he chooses to contest the decision in parliament, can ANC lawmakers vote against him secure in the knowledge that they are doing the party leadership’s bidding and there will be no retribution.

Although the situation inside the ANC is currently fluid and unpredictable, this still remains a long shot. The ANC’s National Working Committee has reaffirmed its support for Zuma, and he appears to have enough support on the NEC to face down his opponents as he did before last November. The fact that Mantashe and Ramaphosa have already toned down their earlier criticisms highlights a failure of political nerve (https://www.ft.com/content/2863a994-19ff-11e7-bcac-6d03d067f81f) on their part; they are unlikely to lead any campaign against Zuma.

Instead the most likely outcome is that a delinquent president will stagger on until 2019, dragging South Africa deeper into the economic mire. Worse still, Zuma’s presidency may even have a life beyond 2019, given his plans to secure the continuation of his rule by other means by placing his ex-wife, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, into both the party and state leadership. Her role will be to keep the patronage networks serviced and ensure that the 783 criminal charges hanging over Zuma for fraud and money-laundering come to nothing.
The ANC’s unwillingness to deal with Zuma and the possibility of a de facto extension of his rule should embolden the opposition. For them, Zuma is the gift that keeps on giving. Every day that he remains in office will generate greater support for opposition parties—and so their interests might be best served by a no-confidence vote that wounds rather than removes him. On the other hand, a failing government and economy raise the specter of social unrest and violent upheaval, and with them risks to orderly constitutional and electoral politics.

Zuma is taking South Africa to a dark place, and yet the ANC is paralyzed. This crisis now transcends Zuma himself. The ANC, which seems unable to self-correct (https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2017-04-06-natasha-marrian-vegetative-anc-plays-with-its-life-support/), is now widely perceived as a vehicle for self-enrichment with any progressive values long since extinguished. It is no longer the standard-bearer of South Africa’s liberation, but increasingly a threat to it.

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