Can South Africa’s ANC Survive Zuma’s Culture of Corruption?

James Hamill  | Friday, Nov. 25, 2016

Even by the standards of his scandal-ridden and largely disgraced presidency, the past month in South Africa has represented a nadir for Jacob Zuma. He was humiliated twice in the space of three days, first on Oct. 31 when the National Prosecuting Authority dropped spurious charges against Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan, who Zuma wanted to remove. Then, on Nov. 2, the outgoing public protector, Thuli Madonsela, published her report on the scale of so-called state capture by Zuma’s friends and business associates, the Gupta family, after Zuma dropped his legal objections to its release. South Africa’s government watchdog recommended a full-scale judicial inquiry (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/world/africa/jacob-zuma-corruption-south-africa.html?_r=0) into the affair, which threatens further embarrassment for Zuma.

Earlier this year, South Africa’s highest court ruled unanimously (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/01/world/africa/south-africa-court-president-jacob-zuma.html) that Zuma violated the constitution when he used some $16 million in public funds to renovate his private house and ignored an earlier demand by the public protector to repay some of those millions. Has this notorious survivor finally run out of time?

If the current clamor for Zuma’s resignation (http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/calls-for-zumas-exit-grow-louder-2086274) was confined to opposition parties, the liberal South African press and a variety of civil society groups, he might be able to dismiss his critics and continue with what passes for business as usual within his administration. Unfortunately for Zuma, calls for him to stand down are now widespread within the ANC itself, as well as among its partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party. Over 100 “concerned ANC stalwarts,” including those who went on trial alongside Nelson Mandela under the apartheid regime in 1963 and 1964, have signed a petition (https://www.businesslive.co.za/politics/2016-10-27-for-the-sake-of-our-future/) lamenting the “self-enrichment, corruption, nepotism and abuse of power” within the ANC leadership and its betrayal of the movement’s values.
In ordinary circumstances, any one of these calls for resignation, let alone the corruption scandals, would be enough to destabilize a presidency. But in the Zuma era, the abnormal has been normalized, so it is far from clear that Zuma will be pushed out. Nonetheless, a critical mass of opposition is forming that may make it difficult for Zuma to serve out his full term as party leader, due to expire in December 2017, or as South Africa’s president, which will end in 2019.

A growing clash of political cultures within the ANC is at the root of this crisis. A patronage faction that is dependent on Zuma’s leadership views the state principally as a gateway to plunder and self-enrichment and seems oblivious to the impact of its actions on South Africa’s economy, investors or credit ratings. Opposed to this group are those who, whatever their ideological differences, want to run a rational technocratic state—a clean government, in effect—and who are strongly attached to constitutional values.

For over a year, Zuma has been attempting to gain control of the Finance Ministry and remove the most important government department from the hands of technocrats, who are an obstacle to his faction’s attempt to direct state resources toward their clients; fund grandiose projects ripe for graft, such as a proposed nuclear power deal with Russia; or bankroll mismanaged and corrupt state-owned enterprises. This behavior is entirely consistent with the “vampire state” model commonplace throughout postcolonial Africa, which leads to a hollowed out state incapable of performing its functions and then, in the worst case, to a failed state. Some South Africans are increasingly looking warily at neighboring Zimbabwe, where another former liberation movement, ZANU-PF, has monopolized political power since Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980 and driven the country and its economy into the ground.

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Without an independent Finance Ministry as a check, the way will be clear for state capture. The integrity of Madonsela, the former public protector who insisted on upholding the constitution (http://www.financialmail.co.za/coverstory/2016/10/21/thuli-madonsela-s-last-battle-how-sa-s-heroine-stuck-it-to-zuma-again) in the face of severe intimidation from Zuma, is a step in the right direction. Recent events have also confirmed the independence of the judiciary and the media. Although Zuma, like his predecessor Thabo Mbeki, has abused the criminal justice system (http://mg.co.za/article/2016-11-07-how-zuma-has-used-the-capture-of-sas-state-institutions-to-stay-in-power) to resolve internal ANC power struggles, many of South Africa’s democratic institutions are still demonstrating resilience in the face of government pressure.
Will all this add up to Zuma’s early removal? The arguments for it should be compelling for many inside the ANC. Under Zuma’s leadership, the ANC’s popularity at the ballot box has declined in every election since 2009, culminating in August’s municipal elections (https://articles/19635/local-elections-are-a-day-of-reckoning-for-anc-and-a-victory-for-south-africa), which resulted in the party’s worst showing since the end of apartheid led to South Africa’s first democratic government in 1994. Zuma’s authority with the ANC rank and file has certainly been damaged.

As the ANC looks toward the national elections in 2019—now shaping up as South Africa’s most critical election since 1994—it will not want to campaign (https://theconversation.com/tide-begins-to-turn-against-south-africas-president-and-his-supporters-68096) against the backdrop of a presidency mired in scandal. Even those immersed in the ANC’s patronage politics may see that a weakened Zuma now has far fewer spoils to distribute (http://www.rdm.co.za/politics/2016/11/02/politics-live-why-these-are-zuma-s-final-days-in-power), tempting them to look elsewhere for new patrons.

Yet Zuma is likely to cling to his office unless he can be given assurances that he will not face criminal prosecution through the likely reinstatement of the 783 charges of fraud, racketeering and money laundering against him, which were controversially dropped (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/24/south-african-court-rules-jacob-zuma-can-be-charged-corruption) on a technicality in 2009. That raises the question of amnesty (https://theconversation.com/why-south-africans-should-resist-an-amnesty-deal-for-zuma-68101) as a way of engineering a soft landing for Zuma, which would generate considerable opposition given the constitutional stipulation that all South Africans must be considered equal under the law.

Moreover, given the economic stakes involved, the patronage faction of the ANC is unlikely to surrender its gains without a struggle. Zuma still commands considerable support from the party’s various women’s, youth and military veterans’ leagues, as well as the backing of the ANC’s most powerful province, KwaZulu-Natal. Removing Zuma could therefore potentially trigger wider splits within the party. The ANC finds itself in a no-win position.

To remove another president prematurely so soon after 2008, when Mbeki was forced to resign by the ANC after a long internal power struggle with Zuma, would send disturbing signals of instability. But not acting against such a deeply compromised figure as Zuma would also send unmistakable signals (http://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2016/11/05/Zuma-and-ANC-run-out-of-road-as-bad-news-piles-up) to investors, markets and ratings agencies that state capture, corruption and patronage are too deeply embedded to be removed and that the ANC itself is beyond redemption.

Of even greater importance than the fate of one individual is the need to root out the insidious culture fostered by Zuma that has, in effect, licensed stealing from the poor and selling the state to the highest bidder. The ANC’s patronage faction will no doubt attempt to leverage into position another leader who,
rhetoric apart, will leave intact the machinery of plunder and state capture. Hopefully the ANC’s own reformers can block that. But if the rot inside the party is too advanced, a broader progressive coalition of ANC members, opposition parties, civil society organizations, trade unions, independent state institutions and ultimately the electorate itself must act (http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/voters-may-act-if-anc-fails-uproot-patronage-steven-friedman-bdlive-10-august-2016).

This is a decisive moment for the future of South African democracy and a test to protect and revive the values of 1994, which Zuma has seriously eroded. Without a spirited and successful reform campaign, the specter of Zimbabwe—and of the ANC becoming its own Zanu-PF—will continue to hover menacingly over South Africa.

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