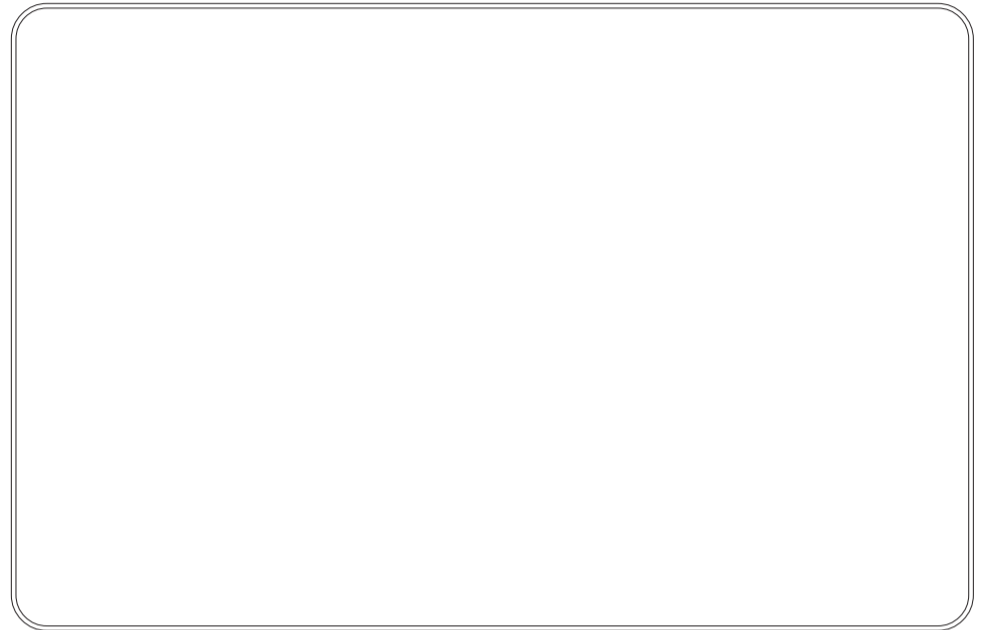


South Africa's president since 1999, Thabo Mbeki, remains an enigma to many. Following the saintly footsteps of founding president Nelson Mandela was never going to be easy. Mandela used his incredible charisma to provide political stability to the "new" South Africa's fledgling institutions. Even as deputy president, Mbeki sought to overcome this deficiency through visionary leadership. He called for an African *Renaissance* as a doctrine for Africa's political and socio-economic renewal and the reintegration of the continent into the global economy. The African *Renaissance* does not naively assume that this renewal is already underway: it merely seeks to set out an inspiring vision and prescribe the policy actions that could create the conditions for Africa's rebirth. With Mbeki as chief architect, the drafting of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001 and the birth of the African Union (AU) in 2002 were clearly attempts to add policy flesh to the skeletal bones of the *Renaissance* vision.

South African journalist William Gumede's interesting book is among a handful of studies to assess Thabo Mbeki's leadership. He focuses on Mbeki's control of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and its difficult though critical tripartite alliance with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). The book is based on extensive interviews with many

of the key actors of South Africa's epic historical drama, and assesses Mbeki's leadership style, his "neo-liberal" economic policies, visionary foreign policy, and controversial HIV/AIDS policy.

Mbeki studied economics at Sussex University between 1962 and 1965. Gumede notes how this prophet of Africa's *Renaissance* in fact cuts the picture of an English intellectual with his stiff and formal demeanour, sports jackets, designer suits, Bay Rum tobacco and pipe (perhaps inspired by former Labour leader Harold Wilson, whom Mbeki admired as a student), and his constant quoting of William Shakespeare. Mbeki's mentor was the ANC leader in exile, Oliver Tambo, from whom he learned the political skills of compromise, winning over enemies, stitching together disparate coalitions, and the avoidance of direct confrontation. Mbeki was the leading ANC figure in the secret meetings with white politicians, businessmen and intellectuals in the 1980s. During negotiations with FW de Klerk's National Party (NP) in 1991, the ANC replaced Mbeki as chief negotiator, with the tougher trade unionist Cyril



Africa's Renaissance Man

Adekeye Adebajo

Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC*

by William Mervin Gumede

Zebra Press, 2005, ISBN 1-77007-092-3, Rand 199.95 (\$30)

Ramaphosa, a rival for the leadership and Mandela's preferred successor.

Mbeki is considered by many of his critics to be aloof and arrogant. With his father, Govan Mbeki, having been jailed with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, Mbeki was born into the liberation struggle. Though he spent a year in the Soviet Union undergoing military training in 1969, this ultimate pragmatist let his membership of the SACP lapse just as the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Gumede paints a picture of Mbeki as a scheming, manipulative Machiavellian figure, who brooks no dissent, surrounds himself with mediocre allies who will not challenge him, and ruthlessly co-opts or eliminates political rivals through smear campaigns. The announcement of an alleged "plot" against Mbeki in 2001 by three rivals – Ramaphosa, Mathews Phosa and Tokyo Sexwale – was seen by many as a paranoid carry-over of liberation-style tactics into a democratic order. Mbeki's supporters have, however, noted that his "imperial presidency" is no different from French leaders of the Fifth Republic - from Charles de Gaulle to Jacques Chirac - or

Tony Blair's thirteen-year leadership of the Labour Party. Though seen as a good manager and technocrat, the workaholic Mbeki is considered a micro-manager who insists on appointing provincial premiers and top civil servants.

The intensely private Mbeki is a self-styled philosopher-king whose tough exterior probably masks a vulnerability born of having effectively grown up without his parents in exile and having had a son as well as a brother "disappear" in 1981 and 1983, respectively. He has been criticised for being too thin-skinned to media criticism. In 1998, he denounced South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report for its condemnation of alleged ANC torture and execution of dissidents in its camps in Angola, which appeared to him to equate ANC misdeeds with apartheid crimes. In 2004, Mbeki harshly criticised Archbishop Desmond Tutu's observations that South Africa was sitting on "a powder keg of poverty" and that sycophancy had replaced robust debate among the ruling elite.

Post-apartheid South Africa inherited a struggling economy that had been badly affected by international trade sanctions and saddled with a \$16.7 billion external debt. Mbeki himself talked of "two nations": a white population of about 7 million with a living standard of Spain; and 37 million blacks with a living standard of Congo-Brazzaville. He was the chief architect of South Africa's move from a state-led Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in 1994 to a market-led

Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy in 1996, as the country's currency – the rand – plummeted dangerously. Mandela's popularity was skillfully deployed to counter leftist critics of these "neo-liberal" policies within COSATU and the SACP. Gumede notes how the ANC, its parliamentarians and its coalition partners were effectively bypassed on one of the most radical policy shifts in the post-apartheid era. He links this to Mbeki's top-down, technocratic approach of a vanguard party led by policy intellectuals. The ANC was also determined to prove its competence in managing the economy, and saw maintaining the confidence of the white domestic business community and foreign investors as critical to promoting the socio-economic transformation of the black majority. Taxes were cut by R72 billion (about £7.2 billion) between 1994 and 2004, even as unemployment reached an estimated 40 percent. Fearing white capital flight, Mandela soon abandoned the party's long-standing ambiguous commitment to the nationalisation of the "commanding heights" of the economy, amid much protest from his trade union and communist allies.

With an \$850 million loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1993, the influence of the Bretton Woods institutions grew in crafting the country's macro-economic strategy, and an official of the World Bank, Richard Ketley, was seconded to help draft GEAR. Both institutions reportedly insisted that Mandela retain apartheid-era Reserve Bank governor Chris Stals in his post. The ANC government spent much time placating the country's white business community, raising questions among critics about whether the party was really in power or merely in office. Mbeki appeared to be

relying on the "magic of the market" to distribute wealth to the country's black masses, and seems to have belatedly – with the promotion of a "developmental state" in 2005 – recognised that the market distributes its rewards unevenly. Half a million jobs were shed in five years and the expected flood of foreign investment turned out to be a mirage. Mbeki has often been portrayed by his critics as a King Canute that sought, in a courageous but ultimately futile effort, to roll back the waves of globalisation and their pernicious effects on his economy. The one policy that Mbeki has consistently championed in a bid to build a black entrepreneurial class is Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), to ensure that black managers occupy corporate positions and to help black entrepreneurs benefit from government contracts. These "affirmative action" policies have been criticised for benefiting a parasitic, tiny elite of ANC-connected individuals, but there have been recent attempts to extend the policy so that it is more "broad-based".

Under Mbeki's foreign policy, South Africa has established solid credentials to become Africa's leading power. Mbeki has consistently sought multilateral solutions to resolving regional conflicts. This explains his much-criticised policy of "quiet diplomacy" towards Zimbabwe, which Gumede ably dissects. Mbeki has been more prepared than Mandela to send peacekeepers abroad, increasing South Africa's credibility as a major geo-strategic player in Africa. He has used his consensus-building skills to serve as chief mediator in Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Mbeki was the first chair of the African Union (AU). He also served as chair of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). He was the intellectual architect of NEPAD, and, under his

leadership, South Africa hosted two high-profile United Nations (UN) conferences on racism and sustainable development. The country was elected president of the influential Group of 77 developing countries at the UN, while South Africa won a two-year seat on the UN Security Council from January 2007. Assistance to NEPAD has, however, failed to deliver the \$64 billion a year that African leaders had hoped for, leading to a widespread questioning of the initiative by civil society groups on the continent.

Undoubtedly, the most controversial policy of Mbeki's presidency has been what Gumede describes as his "AIDS denial". Standing at around five million at the most recent count, South Africa is estimated to have the largest number of people infected with HIV/AIDS, yet its president said in 2003 that he did not know anyone who had died of the disease. Mbeki set up a presidential AIDS advisory council in 2000, half of whose members belonged to a "dissident camp" of scholars who did not believe that HIV necessarily causes AIDS. Though Mbeki has denied holding this view himself, his advisory panel and his own utterances sent mixed messages on this critical issue. The government started to roll out anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) in earnest in 2004, only after South Africa's Constitutional Court had ordered it to do so. Mbeki also faced pressure from the medical community, as well as civic groups like the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), trade unions, and churches. According to Gumede, the decisive intervention came from Mbeki's international investment council which complained to him about the deleterious effect that South Africa's AIDS policies were having on foreign investment. The explanation most often

offered for Mbeki's mysterious stance is a strong abhorrence to claims that AIDS originated in Africa and is spread by what is sometimes stereotypically depicted as uncontrolled black sexuality.

Gumede reports that Mbeki and his former deputy, Jacob Zuma, fell out in 2001 when Zuma was being touted as a possible successor. By June 2005, Mbeki was facing more open challenges to his leadership from within the ANC after ousting Zuma as his deputy in June 2005, following corruption allegations. With Zuma avoiding conviction on both rape and corruption charges in 2006, Mbeki looked increasingly isolated. Several analysts view opposition to Mbeki's leadership style, rather than pro-Zuma enthusiasm *per se*, as the main reason for populist opposition to Mbeki's rule. New social movements like the Concerned Citizens Forum and the Landless People's Movement have also sprung up to challenge the slow pace of socio-economic transformation, in which only three percent of a target of 30 percent of land in a decade was distributed to the poor. The ANC has, however, built over one million homes, supplied electricity and water, and provided R70 billion annually (about £7 billion) in social grants to the poor. In the end, the AIDS debacle will undoubtedly do more harm to Mbeki's legacy than any other issue. This modern-day plague will be the *Renaissance* man's Achilles heel when future historians chronicle his political tenure and admirable peacemaking role on the continent.

Note

* Selected for special commendation by Noma Award for Publishing in Africa 2006.

