

A photograph of Jacob Zuma, the former President of South Africa, speaking at a podium. He is wearing a dark suit, a red tie, and glasses. He has his hands raised in a gesture of emphasis. The background is a solid blue color.

# The Language of Liberation and Perpetual Eternity:

An Analysis of Jacob Zuma's Rhetoric

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## Abstract

The incarceration of the former South African President Jacob Zuma on charges of contempt of court sparked mass looting, destruction, and damage to a staggering economy attempting to navigate through Covid-19-related repercussions. Early estimates reveal that the initial damage report bill is a R50 billion knock on the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The level of orchestration behind the attacks alludes to state-sponsored violence, given Mr Zuma's loyal sympathisers

within the intelligence community and in the African National Congress. This research postulates that Mr Zuma's political rhetoric served as the main inciting factor behind the destruction. Indeed, comparative analysis shows how many post-independence/liberation leaders have invoked a language of debt by virtue of their role as independence/liberation heroes to justify dismal governance records. What are the key features of this language of debt?

## Introduction

The incarceration of former South African President Jacob Zuma on charges of contempt of court sparked widespread looting and destruction of the South African economy to the tune of R50 billion (Cele & Wilson, 2021). Initial estimates reveal that the chaos put 150,000 jobs at risk in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, and severely affected some 40,000 businesses (Cotterill, 2021; Harper 2021). The orchestrated attacks allegedly supported by Zuma's formidable faction within the ruling African National Congress (ANC), and instigated by Zuma's intelligence operatives and sympathisers, severely impacted an economy badly hit by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. With 113 communications infrastructures destroyed, R120 million rand stolen from some 1440 ATMs, and the disappearance of a protective police force, the plot thickens to suggest state-sponsored violence (McLeod, 2021; Stoddard, 2021).

One contributing factor behind the anarchy was the rhetoric or political language of Mr Jacob Zuma. As a struggle icon, anti-apartheid figure, and Robben Island prisoner, Mr Zuma is the archetypical 'liberation hero'. The term 'liberation hero' commands a lot of respect and affords one political power and prestige. In deploying what this research terms 'the language of liberation', Zuma was able to move the country to the brink of civil war. This powerful language requires analysis not only because of its destructive power, but because there is a need to examine how long the language of liberation should continue to play a role in post-apartheid South Africa. That is, how long is society expected to be grateful for the achievement of political liberation and does our collective gratitude for political freedom give those who govern the reign to do so dismally?

On the notion of dismal governance, Mr Zuma's record speaks for itself, having normalised and instilled a culture of mismanagement in government, para-statal, state-owned enterprises, and institutions of law and order. In the year 2018/2019, national and provincial government wasted R62 billion to wasteful and irregular expenditure (Gerber, 2019). Informed estimates reveal that during Mr Zuma's presidential tenure, R1.5 trillion was wasted through corruption, graft, state owned company bailouts, and corrupt BEE deals (Bisseker, 2018; Merten, 2019;

Basson, 2021). Zuma's clientele state was exposed by over 300 witnesses in the Zondo Commission set up to investigate allegations of state capture, corruption, fraud, and other allegations in the public sector including organs of state. The popular political commentator Justice Malala in 2018 described Zuma's legacy as 'exploding inequality, booming unemployment, and grinding poverty'.

Yet, Zuma and his sympathisers remain oblivious to these facts, instead perpetuating a vision of victimisation in part due to his status as a liberation hero. The juxtaposition of liberation hero and poor governing President follows a pattern in Africa where a growing disillusionment with the achievements of political liberation is becoming more prominent (Carrier and Nyamweru, 2016). As noted by Alexander et al. (2020), the liberation hero's struggle is constantly revealed in and remade in attempts to centre the past in today's present political configurations. What are the key elements in Zuma's language of liberation?

## The language of liberation

As the preserve of the elites, heroic narratives of past events are reiterated and developed to create an unquestionable legacy which allows for prestige, legitimacy, and ultimately tribute (Werbner, 1998: 99). In South Africa, heroic narratives have been the source of much contestation over the years with accusations of appropriating history being levelled against the ruling ANC by others who fought against apartheid. To the Pan-African Congress (PAC) who organised the 1960 demonstration which would turn into the Sharpeville Massacre, the ANC hijacked the memory of this event. In the run-up to the ANC's centennial celebrations in 2012, veteran journalist Alistair Sparks remarked how the ANC were airbrushing history, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu also claimed the ANC were side-lining other parties' contributions to fighting apartheid (Smith, 2011; Munusamy, 2015).

In creating an unquestionable history, certain historic events are led at the state level and memorialised annually while other events are forgotten – for example, the Marikana massacre is dubbed by the government as a *tragedy*. In some cases, liberation heroes who did not fit the description or had no ties

with the ANC are erased from history, as is the case of Hendrik Verwoerd's assassin Dimitri Tsafendas. Driven by political reasons in his murder of the 'architect of apartheid', no streets, monuments, or statues of Tsafendas exist (Dousemetzis, 2018).

Essentially, the selection and interpretation of history is constructed around a language of liberation which emphasises that society owes a debt for political freedom. The debt owed cements a party's and their icons' uncontested power. In continuously emphasising the contribution of liberation heroes, society is expected to overlook present conundrums in favour of the past. This effectively allows the personal interests of a handful of liberation heroes to override the interests of an entire nation.

Mr Zuma's ability to override the national interest is due to his mastering of the language of liberation. With his political foundations rooted in intelligence, it is reasonable to argue that Zuma – like any other formidable intelligence agent – was trained in the art of propaganda, persuasion, and manipulation. Former opposition leader Helen Zille once remarked on Zuma's outright charisma, noting how when they met, Zuma could make her blush with his ability to genuinely make out as if she was a long-lost friend (Hamlyn, 2009). After Zuma's release from Robben Island, he was tasked with setting up the ANC and MK underground structures in Kwa-Zulu Natal. During this time Mr Zuma joined the ANC's Department of Intelligence, eventually rising as Head of Intelligence. His excellence in this field allowed him to set up networks in Swaziland, Mozambique, and eventually Zambia, where he was made Chief of the Intelligence Department in 1988.

A shadow in the Mandela administration and early years of the Mbeki presidency, as Zuma grew in stature within the ANC, he began to militarise his political language (Maritz and Van Rooy, 2021). Professor Van Rooy, who has studied Mr Zuma's political rhetoric, has characterised his language as built on warfare; a war against Zuma and a war against his fight against the remnants of apartheid (Van Rooy, 2018). Over the years, we see this language in statements like 'the ANC will rule till the return of Jesus', allegedly code for the ANC not willing to transfer power. As the contest for the ANC presidency heated up around 2007, his followers declared their willingness to die for Zuma.

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ANC Youth League (ANCYL) President at the time, the flip-flop Julius Malema, vowed at a rally: 'we are prepared to take up arms and kill for Zuma.' According to one hardcore Zuma fan, Sdu Mdululi: 'people were prepared to die for the liberation struggle. Why can't they be prepared to die for Zuma?' (Russel 2011). Indeed, Mr Zuma is a master of politesse, and when in difficult situations, frames them with jokes or songs, such as the struggle song 'Umshini Wami' (Bring me my machine gun), a MK song.

As President between 2009–2018, the Umkhonto we Sizwe Military Veterans' Association (MKMVA), who were relatively outcast during the Mandela and Mbeki years, rose to power. In many ways, they came to resemble the Sturmabteilung (SA). The SA were the Nazi party's original para-military wing who played a significant role in Adolf Hitler's rise to power. The SA were routinely called upon to disrupt opposition meetings, fight opponents, and generally intimidate and bully. Similarly, the MKMVA came to resemble Zuma's bodyguard, always present at his court hearings, media briefings, and the Zondo Commission when a notable opponent was to testify. In February 2021, MKMVA President Kebby Maphatsoe announced 'we will support Zuma until death do us part' (Khoza, 2021). After the announcement that Zuma was to report to police custody, the MKMVA were mobilised to protect Zuma's Nkandla homestead.

While surrounded by a MK guard, and as their spokesperson Carl Niehaus emphasised the debt of liberation, Zuma remarked: 'I'm not scared of jail. I've

been to jail during the struggle.' Zuma would state that South Africa was fast sliding back to apartheid rule and that there are signs that the country is already under apartheid-like conditions. Comparing the current government to the apartheid government, he noted how both were imposing very similar laws. 'Things like detention without trial should never again see the light of day in South Africa. The struggle for a free South Africa was a struggle for justice that everyone was treated equally before the law', he would state (McKenzie, 2021).

Zuma's rent-seekers and sympathisers extraordinaire followed suit in the rhetoric. Phrases like 'prisoner of conscience', 'dedicated liberation fighter' and 'fighter of white monopoly capitalism' were invoked by Zuma's supporters. Zuma's daughter and spokesperson, Dudu Zuma-Sambudla, used the terms 'Father of Free Education', 'Mayibuye iAfrika!', and 'Radical Economic Transformation' to define Zuma as a progressive leader whose revolutionary tasks remain incomplete. Similarly, the Zuma Foundation referred to their patron as a freedom fighter for peace and someone who struggled for justice. Radio personality and Zuma loyalist Ngizwe Mchunu, later arrested for incitement, spoke of *ayi-khale*, a reference to machine gun fire.

One way the language of liberation enhances its agenda is through paltering. Paltering refers to making statements that are technically true, but are purposely skewed to mislead the other side. Zuma's accusation that he was jailed without trial, incarcerated without criminal proceedings, and jailed unfairly on par with his apartheid-era jailing, are examples of this. Zuma was jailed for contempt of court, a fact not acknowledged by him or his supporters. Indeed, Zuma and his supporters are masters of Orwellian dystopia, for example turning a swimming pool into a fire pool. The outright lying in public platforms and disguising it as truth was brilliantly captured by Wits Professor William Gumede in 2020. Gumede remarked how systemic corruption has infiltrated South Africa's public discourse, discussions, and debates – to the point where they are increasingly irrational, without integrity, or honesty. The manipulation of truths is captured in struggle slogans, rhetoric, and beliefs, appropriated by the dishonest, corrupt, and

incompetent to mobilise the masses.

A further element of the language of liberation is viewing the world from a pre-liberation binary perspective of black vs white, freedom vs apartheid, African vs racist, or good vs evil. According to Basson and Du Toit (2017), Zuma has positioned himself as unfairly targeted by a system that is rigged against the common poor black man. In his 2020 open letter to President Ramaphosa, Zuma remarked how African people have limited civil and political rights and there is a need to 'free the African people from the bondage of colonial and white minority rule.' As Zuma's corrupt relationship with the Gupta family became more prominent during his tenure, he and his allies began a narrative of 'White monopoly capital' (WMC). Anyone who criticised Zuma would then be considered in cahoots with WMC. Zuma has on many occasions accused President Ramaphosa as 'seeking white validation' and turning the ANC into a tool for white monopoly capital. Zuma and his language effectively create 'enemies' out of anybody who disagrees with him. Former minister Derek Hanekom, after giving a statement at the Zondo Commission, was identified by Mr Zuma as a 'known enemy agent' (Van Rooy, 2018).

This binarism is extremely vitriolic. Critics of Zuma risk the label of 'uncle tom', 'clever-black', 'counter-revolutionary', or 'apartheid beneficiary'. Bongi Khanyile, a Zuma fanatic later arrested for inciting violence on his bail release, justified the economic destruction and defence of Zuma as a tool to counter racism and the oppression of the elderly and youth. Indeed, all of Zuma's critics face the same fate: Pravin Gordhan, Karima Brown, Ferial Haffajee, Lindiwe Mazibuko, Herman Mashaba, General Johan Booysen, Ivan Pillay, or Dianne Kohler Barnard have all been accused of racism. Institutions also face this label. Before their disbanding, the elite crime fighting unit, the Scorpions, were accused of having a racist agenda. The investigative journalist Jacques Pauw, author of *The President's Keepers: Those Keeping Zuma in Power and Out of Prison* (2017), similarly was accused of being an 'apartheid era operative' following publication of his book. More recently, Zuma and his followers declared the Zondo Commission to be an apartheid-era plot and that the commissioners were aligned with the apartheid government in their

prosecution of Robert Sobukwe.

### A perpetual eternity?

African Liberation has been a *cul-de-sac* for the liberators with no future reference to the nature of post-liberation society (Ackah, 1999). This created a dangerous precedent whereby rhetoric and agitation were more important than content and substance in domestic politics. Sixty years after the era of African independence in the 1960s, African states continue to be the poorest in the world; for example, seven of the ten most unequal countries in the world are African. Bankrupt of ideas and lacking strategic vision and direction, it is easier for leaders to continue with the ideology of liberation than to construct new ideals to take their societies forward. Perhaps it is the simplicity of the binarism of liberation, but whatever the case, the suspicions and negativity previously directed towards colonialists have been now re-directed towards the 'other' ethnic groups, tribes, nations, and religions. Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* notes how this is 'one of the most serious problems the revolution must confront when it reaches power' (1970: 158). To Freire, this stage demands maximum political wisdom, decision, and courage from the leaders, who for this very reason must have sufficient judgement not to fall into irrationally sectarian positions.

Zuma's language of liberation is not novel; throughout the continent there are many similar patterns where independence/liberation movements have clung to power and/or refused to transfer power due to liberation exploits. Since 1975, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) has ruled in Angola. In Mozambique, FRELIMO has taken all the elections since 1994. In Tanzania, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), later called the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), has dominated politics since 1977. Dynasty politics on the basis of liberation are apparent too: the Kenyattas in Kenya, the Mutharikas in Malawi, the Bongos in Gabon, the Obiangs in Equatorial Guinea, the Debys in Chad, and the Nguessos in Brazzaville, to name a few.

In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has heavily revised history so as to re-invent its liberation heroes. Masiya and Maringira found that the party's reference to liberation hero status cannot be relied upon as a measure of

one's past participation in the liberation struggle but as a measure of an individual's circumstances within factions. They state that ZANU-PF and former President Mugabe's view of heroes has always been driven by the zeal to fulfil their own political agenda and to remain in power. As such, they have never been tolerant of other liberation war figures who did not belong to ZANU-PF. The same rationale applies to their own party, as seen in the case of Joyce Mujuru. A dedicated liberation hero for three decades, she was recently accused of 'collaborating with white people' and of plotting the assassination of Mugabe. On a separate note but worthy of mentioning here, the ZANU-PF on numerous occasions noted that they would welcome a coup by the country's military if they were to ever lose power in an election.

Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, in power since 1986, flaunts his liberation credentials as reason for his stranglehold on power. Referring to his role in ousting the dictator Idi Amin and later on Milton Obote, Museveni frames much of his image as a guerrilla fighter for East and Southern Africa. His time spent as President has turned him into an 'expert in governance'. In 2021, he reminded the world that Uganda 'doesn't need lectures in democracy' and that '[w]e designed this system not from the air-conditioned rooms but from the jungles of our country where we lived with the people in their huts for much of the 16 years of the resistance (1971 to 1986).' As the architect of Ugandan democracy, he thus is incapable of destroying it. When faced with opposition that his government is ethnic based, he reminds the nation of

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his rebel army's role in ending the ethnic massacres in the Luwero Triangle. Nigerian novelist and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka described Museveni's mockery of democracy as 'the very thing he fought against.'

Gratitude to the liberator is not solely an African phenomenon. In Cuba, the state is instrumental in determining history and how it's told. In Venezuela, political leaders have for nearly 200 years evoked the legacy of their liberator, Simon Bolivar, to stir popular support in what Norman (2017) calls a 'vicious cycle of liberation'. The idea of perpetual gratitude is what Snyder (2018) dubbed 'the politics of eternity'. 'Time is no longer a line into the future, but a circle that endlessly returns the same threats from the past,' Snyder writes. In their analysis of this concept, Madubedube and Fakie claim that South Africa's politics of eternity might be:

'collective resignation to a status quo of oppressions, a state of being of pessimism where enemies lurk in every corner, for South Africa has always been thus — whether for the white minority during apartheid or xenophobia now. Here there is no real future, just a denial that the future exists because of the very real and legitimate critique that we aren't getting the benefits of the fruits of liberation... Eternity places South Africa in a cyclical story of perpetual victimhood.'

In order to move beyond the language of liberation, it is necessary to move away from a history defined by the ruling party. It is not to deny in totality the liberation heroes, but to identify new ones in order to inform a country's prestige and trajectory. Going further back in time could allow for new figures, events, and characters to emerge and be given attention to. This is key to African states still tackling disunity and fragmentation. Freire claims that post-liberation societies require a cultural revolution in order to reconstruct society. As the cultural revolution deepens, a level of consciousness and creativity will emerge and people will begin to perceive why mythical remnants of the old society survive in the new (Freire, 1970: 159).

## Conclusion

In an interview, the former Minister of Intelligence Ronnie Kasrils stated that his own status as a liberation

hero is simply not enough to earn one respect. He said: 'I can't say I'm Ronnie Kasrils, from 1960 I joined the MK and I did this and I did that.' He cautioned the ANC against hero worship, living in the past, and continued ties to those who once fought for democracy but had now become anti-revolutionary. South Africa's fixation on yesteryears' liberation heroes is proving divisive. There is a need for the new generation to reassess and reinterpret new state heroes and heroines, in order to produce a common ownership of history which is the basis of nation-building. In doing so, a language of possibility can override the now-defunct language of liberation.

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