

Review: Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu and Miranda Strydom (eds), *The Thabo Mbeki I Know* (2016)

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Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu and Miranda Strydom (eds) (2016), *The Thabo Mbeki I Know*, Johannesburg: Pan Macmillan South Africa, ISBN 9781770103412; ebook: ISBN 9781770103429, 576 pp.

In these dog days of the Zuma presidency, when the incumbent's patronage network seems bent on looting the state as much as it can and as quickly as possible, it is easy to look back with nostalgia on the years in power of Thabo Mbeki. Helen Zille (former leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance) has nominated vision, integrity, and courage as the most important qualities of a political leader. Zuma manifestly lacks the first two of these, even if he may lay some claim to the third (accompanied by a very large dose of stubbornness). In contrast, Thabo Mbeki, it can be argued, possessed all three qualities. This does not mean that his presidency was untarnished by significant flaws – there is a strong case for arguing that in many ways the foundations of good governance in South Africa (notably, the separation of powers and the separation of the ruling party from state institutions) were seriously undermined during his tenure of office. Nonetheless, it is fair to argue that Mbeki always had a clear idea (during the struggle years, the transition, and the early years of African National Congress [ANC] rule) of where South Africa should be headed; likewise, although many questions about the notorious 1998 arms deal remain unanswered, there is no evidence from this affair or any other that Mbeki misused his power for personal gain (even if we may speculate that he must have been aware of the growth of rent seeking within public service). Additionally, whether we agree with it or not, few can doubt the courage it took to turn a highly indebted economy around, via the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, in the face of strident opposition from many within the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

These ruminations go beyond the scope of *The Thabo Mbeki I Know*, edited by Sifiso Ndlovu and Miranda Strydom. Nonetheless, they flow easily from it, not only because of the intellectually self-confident personality which Mbeki brought to the presidency, but because of the destructive nature of Zuma's rule. Fundamentally, this collection of essays by some 46 contributors (including, rather oddly, two forewords, by Barney Afako and Mahmood Mamdani, respectively) constitutes a collective praise-song, designed to burnish the memory of a president whose term of office was so brutally, and so unnecessarily, cut short by a triumphant majority within the ANC on the basis of a highly dubious court judgement (which, we should recall, was to be overturned soon

afterwards). Overwhelmingly, the contributions render a highly favourable picture of their subject as totally committed to the liberation struggle, as highly principled while strategically pragmatic and, above all, as extraordinarily widely read and intelligent – this last quality having served to defuse the confidence of others who felt that they could not counter his arguments to stand in his way. To be fair, there are a number of contributors who comment critically upon aspects of his rule. For instance, struggle veteran and long-time ANC MP Ben Turok waxes eloquently about the brilliance of Mbeki's "I Am an African" and "Two Nations" speeches to the House of Assembly, yet simultaneously wonders why he seemed to lose interest in his New Partnership for African Development economic programme for the African continent once it was up and running, while also imposing a World Bank structural adjustment programme upon South Africa when he himself had previously been convinced that such an imposition would stall the economy of a developing country (487–489). Yet overall, the remembrances are almost all not only highly favourable, but fond. In these pages, the rather stiff, unbending, distant, and besuited president we knew from media imagery becomes a fun-loving, easy-to-get-on-with, jazz-fanatic partygoer who enjoys nothing more than rubbing shoulders with the *hoi polloi*.

The contributions are highly uneven in length and depth. Most are written by those who we may regard as in the Mbeki faction in the lead-up to the ANC's fateful Polokwane conference in 2007, many of these having known him for many years before that. So we get overlapping categories of contributors – "family friends" (Brigalia Bam, Tiksie Mabilela), "cabinet and government" members (including Essop Pahad, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Aziz Pahad, and Alec Erwin), "advisors" (notably Joel Netshitenzhe), "cadres and comrades" (including Wally Serote and Smuts Ngonyama), and "support staff" (including one of the volume's editors, journalist Miranda Strydom), as well as "acquaintances," "friends from other countries," "academics," African leaders, and South African ambassadors. Some individuals are oddly placed: Albie Sachs is relegated to a mere "acquaintance" standing, while Ben Turok – long-time ANC stalwart in exile and easily the very best back-bencher the party has ever had – is presented as an "academic." There are some notable absences: neither Zanele (Mbeki's wife) nor Moeletsi (Mbeki's brother) are represented, and Mbeki's long-time finance minister, Trevor Manuel, is also absent from the collection. Nor indeed is there any contribution from the leadership of either the COSATU or the SACP (although that is perhaps to be expected). Many contributions are actually interviews by the authors that have been written up – given that ap-

proach, many of the essays are anecdotal and highly personal. As noted, the majority sing his praises to the sky. As we might expect, there is much on how Mbeki's commitment to liberation in South Africa is central to a much broader, pan-Africanist vision (hence his major involvement in peace-making exercises from Côte d'Ivoire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Sudan/South Sudan). There are numerous affirmations of his being a convinced Marxist, albeit one who has used this to argue the need for South Africa to exist in the capitalist world, such as it may be.

Although there is very much a coffee-table quality to the book, scholars will be interested in what the contributors have to say regarding two of the major controversies which characterised his presidency: his stance on HIV/AIDS and on Zimbabwe. The context for both of these issues is provided by Mahmood Mamdani.

On HIV/AIDS, Mamdani argues strongly that Mbeki understood earlier than most that AIDS spread like wildfire in Africa because of a wider set of conditions, notably: poverty, lack of nutrition, and a widespread prevalence of other life-threatening diseases. Nor, he argues, can Mbeki be fairly accused of being an AIDS denialist. Rather, he was a crusader against the high pricing of antiretrovirals by global pharmaceutical companies, resulting in those firms eventually slashing their prices, enabling an enormous increase in the availability of the required drugs to millions of sufferers. This reviewer is not sufficiently well versed in the specifics of this debate to offer judgement on this. Even so, there can be little doubt that Mamdani skirts some of the absurdities of Mbeki's HIV/AIDS positioning – notably his tolerance of the “garlic and onions” mantras foisted upon the nation by his servile minister of health, Manto Tshabilala-Msimang, and above all his stubbornness in preventing the roll-out of antiretrovirals until, eventually, he was prevailed upon by his cabinet to keep his controversial views on HIV/AIDS to himself. Fortunately, there are some contributors who highlight this as a major blot on his record (one of these is Albie Sachs, who castigates his “imperious refusal” to acknowledge scientific evidence).

On Zimbabwe, Mamdani leads a chorus of voices in the book arguing that Mbeki's interventions in Zimbabwe were a great success: NO to regime change (as wanted by the West); YES to reform as an alternative to punishment. Whilst we can agree that Mbeki was highly influential in bringing about a compromise Government of National Unity after the 2008 election, and that this allowed the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to share power (and guide the economy to something of a recovery), in retrospect that accomplishment looks rather

tawdry. Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) hung onto the levers of power and went on to rig the 2013 election. Now the Zimbabwean economy is back to square one. Mamdani (and others, such as the otherwise sane Alec Erwin) have little time for such niceties, simply holding steadfast to equating Western support for the opposition with “regime change.” Yes, regime change may have brought disaster in “Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria” (xxii) – yet the apparent assumption here is that the West was aching to send troops into Zimbabwe, displace Mugabe, and instal the MDC’s Morgan Tsvangirai as their puppet. Frankly, this is nonsense, and what Mamdani and his like simply ignore is that the people, as expressed in elections which were systematically skewed in the ruling party’s favour, declared their support for the opposition – in successive “contests.” Fundamentally, Mamdani and company bury commitment to democracy under the rubble of liberation movement solidarity.

Overall, this book serves as a reminder of the many virtues of the president that South Africa lost. However, it will be of only limited use to scholars, who will have to cobble together an image based on bits and pieces, and worse than that, compose their own index!

- Roger Southall