Introduction

On 24 April 1994, I was approached by a delegation from my neighbours. I was stunned by their request. They asked if they could stay in our home on Election Day. They expressed their fear and concern that the election was going to be very violent. But more to the point, they were afraid that black voters would attack white homes: ‘They will do to us what we have been doing to them for years.’ They told me that they had stored canned goods and water on the slopes of Table Mountain in case shops were burned down. These were professional people who saw only a dangerous future should the ANC win the election.

I assured them that the ANC was not seeking revenge. Nevertheless, I could understand some of their apprehension. Like so many whites, they were hopelessly out of touch and did not accept Mandela’s repeated assurances that the election would be peaceful. After all, wide-scale violence had taken place throughout the negotiations and even as we spoke blood was running in the streets of Johannesburg and Germiston. The right wing was determined that there would be no peaceful election. Despite this, I told them they would be safe in their homes, and I urged them to cast their votes on 27 April.

I am not sure what happened to the canned goods and water stored on the mountainside; hopefully they were snapped up by the homeless!

Many years later, in 2012, I was with a group of friends talking about books. When we broke for a glass of wine, they began very forcibly to express their disappointment and disquiet at the current state of politics in South Africa. According to them, there was something rotten, not in the state of Denmark, but very much closer to home. Several referred to the incidence of attempted bribery by traffic police and by officials in the
car licensing department. Others complained of corruption on a massive scale in the public service, in local government and even in the leadership of the ANC. ‘The courts are in a shambles, dockets are conveniently lost, witnesses are threatened and money changes hands,’ they protested. Another mentioned the inefficiencies in government departments because of the deployment of inexperienced persons, particularly at local government level.

As I listened to them spilling out a litany of woes, I wondered if Alan Paton’s cry had come back to haunt us. What has gone wrong in the beloved country?

After all, South Africa had experienced highly successful negotiations after years of oppression and resistance. Despite the attendant violence, we won through and the birth of a new South Africa was celebrated with a brilliant Interim Constitution which emerged from the discussions and was consolidated two years later; the first democratic election in our history was a resounding success. Who will ever forget the laughing and the tears as millions of voters voted for the very first time. Amongst those who voted for the first time in their lives were Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Once the polecat of the world, we had become the darling of the international community. We had suffered a period of isolation because of apartheid policies, but this was now behind us. People of all races rejoiced that we could now participate in the Olympic Games and in international sports, music and drama.

At first, things went so smoothly. Racist laws were repealed; schools, colleges and universities were open to all races; cinemas, parks, housing, likewise. There was a mood of relief, of confidence. Millions gained access to clean water; many township residents who used to read by candlelight now had access to electricity; there was free access to hospitals for the sick and grant-in-aid for the very poor. Our economy grew, and peace broke out throughout the land. Above all, we had in Nelson Mandela a leader of world-class proportions. He was essentially Mr Reconciler, winning the admiration of even the fiercest opponents of the ANC. He was the quintessence of humanity. He embraced former enemies, visited synagogues, mosques and churches, while remaining true to his own secular
beliefs. He seemed to love all humanity and we loved him in return. So what went wrong?

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Mandela’s presidency was essentially the honeymoon period in the new dispensation. The negotiations had succeeded – but they were negotiations conducted by the elite. What of the past horrors of apartheid and its many thousands of victims? Mandela strongly supported the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was a time of truth-telling, of healing and a challenge to those in the apartheid government who were in denial. I have written at length about the genesis and proceedings of the TRC, but it can never be over-emphasised how different things would have been if its scores of recommendations – including an urgent and strong plea for economic justice and equality for all South Africans – had been followed.

The commission received consistent and warm support from Mandela, even when it came under severe attack from the then National Party and its leader, former president FW de Klerk. Ironically, he also had to defend the Final Report of the commission against his deputy president, Thabo Mbeki, who tried unsuccessfully to prevent its publication because he believed there was not sufficient distinction between the violence of the state and the human rights violations committed by the liberation forces. In this regard he was dead wrong. The commission could not be any clearer than it is when it states in its report,

Any analysis of human rights violations which occurred during the conflicts of the past and any attempt to prevent a recurrence of such violations must take cognisance of the fact that at the heart of the conflict stood an illegal, oppressive and inhuman system imposed on the majority of South Africans without their consent.

Despite Mandela’s full support I think the majority of the cabinet followed Mbeki’s line and thus the recommendations made by the commission were not given the priority they deserved. It was the justice department’s
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responsibility to follow up on the report but because the report covered a wide range of departments we suggested to government that it should appoint a joint committee which would include Finance, Justice, Health, Housing and Social Welfare. This was never done. The new government, it is true, had many calls on its time and treasury in the early years of rule, but it is shameful that it took so long to respond and when it did, responded so inadequately. The pleas of Desmond Tutu and myself by letter, by e-mail, by public statements, fell on deaf ears.

It is difficult to quantify how the government’s intransigence affected the life and work of the TRC. Suffice to say the victims were disillusioned and the momentum towards healing of the nation and reconciliation was lost. With over R1 billion still lying unused in the President’s Fund – intended in terms of the TRC Act to compensate apartheid victims – President Mbeki’s stalling of the process appears to have blighted the commitment of the department of justice to distribute the money. Failure of political will, it would seem.

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After an outstanding period as president, Mandela kept his promise to serve only one term. Thabo Mbeki was elected president in his stead, although Mandela’s choice was Cyril Ramaphosa, who had played such a key role in the negotiations – Mbeki was the ANC’s chosen successor, trained for the job over years in exile in which he was totally immersed in the party. Mbeki was essentially Mr Manager, a trained economist who focused on sound economic principles. This enabled his administration to provide clean water for millions of poverty-stricken South Africans, to build houses and clinics and schools. The treasury made sufficient money available, but Mbeki started the rot of deploying people into jobs for which they had no experience; as a result service delivery never matched the needs of the poorest of the poor.

Much has been made of the major mistakes and bad judgement we witnessed during Mbeki’s presidency. In particular, he will never be allowed to forget, nor will South Africa, his stance on HIV/AIDS. It is no exaggeration
to claim that thousands of lives would have been spared if he and his government had come to their senses earlier.

Despite Mark Gevisser’s brilliant and exhaustive biography, Mbeki remains, for me at least, an enigma. I cannot comprehend his remoteness, the bad calls, his lack of wisdom and judgement in so many different ways. Even less can I grasp his coldness and aloofness. This was not the Mbeki that some of us knew well before 1994.

According to Gevisser, Mbeki argued that as long as he talked about reconciliation whites were happy. However, when he argued for transformation, those same whites were upset and accused him of playing them for useful idiots. This is sheer nonsense. Those of us who were with Mbeki in Dakar acknowledged then the absolute necessity for transformation, and in the TRC recommendations, the commission declared that without economic justice reconciliation would wither on the vine.

Mbeki’s downfall came not so much because of his favouritism, his lengthy absences from South Africa, his coldness, his authoritarianism, but because of his sacking of Jacob Zuma as deputy president. In strictly legal and moral terms it was the right decision, but, seen as a way of dealing with someone who was a strong political rival, it also apparently broke a deeply rooted tenet of ANC culture – never set yourself above the party. This action united forces within the ANC who resented Mbeki’s dictatorial approach – a useful glimpse, perhaps, into the kind of forces that may some day dislodge Zuma.

Mbeki was resoundingly beaten in the election for president of the ANC at Polokwane, which set off a bitter personal attack and, a few months later, his recall as president of South Africa. This action by the national executive of the ANC was unconstitutional. Mbeki was elected by parliament and only parliament could fire him. But the party trumped parliament and Mbeki accepted his fate, possibly because of his commitment to the ANC – or to secure his pension and status as ex-president. If he had not accepted the action by his own party, it would have unleashed consequences which could have threatened the stability of the country, so perhaps he was wise in bowing to the pressure to resign. Whatever else is true, it demonstrated a spirit of revenge in the ANC, and its contempt for parliament; the party had supreme authority.
Jacob Zuma became president not only of the ANC but also of South Africa, despite a sordid rape trial (at the end of which he was found not guilty) and charges of corruption which were withdrawn but may yet come back to haunt him. Thus far he has shown remarkable agility in avoiding the consequences of his alleged actions, assisted by the disarray in law enforcement procedures and his friends in court who are hell-bent on protecting him.

Ever since Zuma’s election to the highest office in the land things have gone badly wrong. Wherever we look – education, health, safety and security, unemployment, lack of housing and basic facilities, police brutality, inefficiency, mismanagement, jobs for pals, the right of entitlement of the ruling party, corruption in the public service and at every level of government – we see signs of a failing state. The greed and maladministration displayed by government officials can only be described as obscene. Terence Nombembe, the outgoing Auditor-General, stated recently that public officials at local, provincial and national level simply ignore adverse audit reports, and repeat offenders are the order of the day.

A culture of impunity has set in and has become entrenched in the public service over the past five years. The ANC leadership either denies the gravity of the situation or ignores the warning signals. Even when they do acknowledge malpractices and corruption, it is as if they are talking about someone else, and they take no responsibility for ongoing failures. Certainly action very rarely follows even these observations. It is tempting to come to the conclusion that the leadership is part and parcel of the problem and is therefore unable or unwilling to act against the culprits.

Zuma and his team have persisted in their policy of redeployment of party faithful, including those who fail in a given position, which appears to be based not on merit but on loyalty to the party – so once again the party comes above all else. It is hardly surprising therefore to see the decay in so many areas of government.

Coupled with corruption and inefficiency, there is a growing climate of intolerance within the ANC. Its statements often show hostility to
any criticism, whether from opposition parties, civil society or the media. Despite assurances of its commitment to constitutional democracy, there are signs that the ANC is growing impatient with some of the decisions taken by the Constitutional Court – and some of its leaders, including the minister of justice and Zuma himself, hint very strongly that the Constitution may have to be amended. A view often expressed is, ‘We won the election and we should be able to determine our own political programme without interference from the Constitutional Court.’

Under ANC rule parliament has become in the minds of many a virtual lame duck. I will return to this in more detail in a later chapter. Suffice it to say that there are numerous incidents which indicate the ANC’s contempt for the parliamentary process.

It has become increasingly difficult to determine who is governing South Africa. Is it the executive (the president and his cabinet) or Luthuli House (the ANC secretary-general and his staff)? The government or the party? What is the role of the tripartite alliance? How strong is the influence of the South African Communist Party and/or Cosatu? The meetings of the tripartite alliance are held in secret, so it is not possible to assess who has the last word.

While the ANC can rightfully claim that it has made progress in providing services such as housing, clean water, electricity, infrastructure, and so on, there are still many towns and villages and schools which lack basic services. This, together with poor management and often corrupt leadership at local level, has led to an increase in delivery protests. Hardly a day goes by when protests and demonstrations do not take place somewhere in South Africa. Strike action has increased – and what is more worrying is that both delivery protests and strike action are almost always accompanied by violence. Property is destroyed, shops are looted, crops are burned and often someone is injured or even killed.

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What has gone wrong? This is the question on many people’s lips. What accounts for the general unease, the lack of confidence, the growing
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criticism from within and without the party? What accounts for the disillusionment amongst a growing number of the very poor who were promised ‘a better life for all’? Is it as simple as party chauvinism, poor leadership, a climate of entitlement by the ruling party, jettisoning of moral compass, bad judgement, incompetence? Certainly responsibility must be laid at the door of successive administrations under the presidencies of Mbeki and Zuma. But is that a good enough answer to the question of how South Africa has slipped so far from the early months and years of apparent unity and prosperity?

Could it be that it all started way back, before the negotiations in 1990? The ANC was in exile for 30 years. During that period the conditions under which its people lived and worked, and the challenges they faced, cultivated a certain climate which was not abandoned on their return to South Africa in 1990. Plagued as the ANC was with informers and differences of opinions regarding strategy, loyalty to the party was paramount. Even in the 1980s, when it became a government-in-waiting, the only government it knew was the party. Is this slavish allegiance to the party which threatens to take South Africa down the road to a one-party state a possible explanation for the dysfunctionality of present-day South Africa? Can we go further and inquire whether ‘seizure of power’, the popular slogan during the period of exile, is still the aim of at least some of the key leaders in the ANC and possibly in the SACP and Cosatu?

In order to answer this question we need to interrogate the ANC in exile, how it sought to survive the conditions which prevailed then and to meet the challenges which beset it at every turn. What did ‘seizure of power’ mean then – and is this still the aim of the current ANC leadership?