

## **A chastened president fights back**

*Jacob Zuma is facing a barrage of criticism. But he won't give up without a battle.*

IN HIS new year's address to the nation, President Jacob Zuma hailed 2010 as "the most important year in our country since 1994". Even at the time, it seemed like hyperbole to compare the year of South Africa's first post-apartheid elections to hosting the football World Cup. But little did Mr Zuma know how tough, at least for him, the first few months of 2010 would be. Less than a year into his presidency, he is facing calls from within his own party to step down after just one term. Some in his ruling African National Congress (ANC) say he should go by the end of the year.

Yet 2009 had ended on a high note. According to an Ipsos poll in November, 77% of South Africans said Mr Zuma was doing a good job, up from 50% seven months before, and 70% felt the government was doing well, despite a lack of progress in reducing crime, tackling corruption or creating jobs, nearly 1m of which were lost last year. But fully 71% said they would still vote for the ANC, up from an impressive 66% in the general election a year ago.

A few months ago Mr Zuma was being widely praised, even by former critics. Instead of veering to the left, as many predicted, he was proving pragmatic. Most of his appointments seemed shrewd. The independence of the press and the courts was generally being respected. Past ANC failures were being candidly admitted, debate on formerly taboo subjects encouraged. There would be no more jobs for the boys. Rampant corruption, incompetence and sheer laziness in the public sector would be rooted out. Wherever he went, he charmed people with his ebullience and flashing smile, so different from his dourly aloof predecessor, Thabo Mbeki.

But as the end of the president's first year draws near, his soothing words have begun to pall. Discontent and disillusionment are rising. The president, it seems to many, has been listening too much and failing to make enough hard choices. Too few promises are being kept. His vaunted skills in conciliation are beginning to look like vacillation. In particular, his trade-union and communist allies are upset. After helping to elevate Mr Zuma to the presidency, they expected a greater say. Instead, their views are being ignored, as the government pursues the same market-friendly economic policies that prevailed under Mr Mbeki.

But it was a relatively minor event in Mr Zuma's private life that opened the floodgates to pent-up frustration and anger. At the end of January it was revealed that the 67-year-old president, who had just married his third (concurrent) wife, was not only engaged to a fourth woman, by whom he had a three-year-old son, but had also fathered a child, believed to be his 20th, with yet another mistress just three months before his wedding. Even his closest colleagues appeared not to have known about it.

Many South Africans were appalled. Polygamy, accepted in Zulu custom and South African law, is deemed to be one thing, but rampant promiscuity, particularly in a country with the world's highest incidence of HIV/AIDs, quite another. The president, many of his compatriots think, should set an example. A niece of Tokyo Sexwale, Mr Zuma's housing minister, summed up such feelings in a Facebook posting: "Why does our president display such stereotypical bad behaviour of a randy black womaniser? I am ashamed."

Suddenly Mr Zuma found himself assailed on all sides not just for his private life but, more importantly, for his alleged lack of vision and leadership. His allies hoped he would redeem himself in his address to the nation. But his speech was lacklustre and banal. Even Mr Zuma seemed bored. A state visit to Britain earlier this month afforded another chance to regain some lost stature. But it was spoilt, in many South African eyes, by a British tabloid newspaper

describing him as a "sex-obsessed bigot" and a "vile buffoon". Mr Zuma's angry riposte, accusing his hosts of having always regarded blacks as "inferior" and "barbaric", hardly helped.

Before coming to power, he said he would prefer to serve only one five-year term. Soon after he took office, supporters began calling on him to serve two terms. Now some of the same people are quietly suggesting he should step down after just one term after all. "He's damaged goods," an official has been quoted as saying. "We think it's time for a new, more decisive leader." Divisions in the ANC are deep. Mr Zuma could be further weakened as rival factions jostle for position ahead of the party's five-yearly congress in 2012.

Even now the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), an old ally, says it has discovered a plot to unseat Mr Zuma by means of a vote of no confidence at the ANC's national general council, another five-yearly event, in September. It was at the last such meeting, in 2005, that the foundation was laid for Mr Mbeki's humiliating "recall" as president.

Mr Zuma is a wily politician who has bounced back from worse scandals in the past, including charges of corruption (dropped on a technicality) and of rape (he was acquitted). A chastened Mr Zuma is already fighting back, giving newspaper interviews, going on walkabouts in poor townships and flying to Zimbabwe to try to end a deadlock in its power-sharing government. Everywhere he goes, crowds apparently adore him, keen to forgive his flaws. Asked about his future, Mr Zuma says he has "never defied the ANC". If it wanted him to remain as leader, he would do so, he says self-defensively. He cannot be written off in a hurry.

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