

## BOOK REVIEW

**Frank Chikane**, *Eight days in September: The removal of Thabo Mbeki*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-77010-221-7, Softcover, 271 pages.

Much has been said and commented by scholars, journalists and analysts in response to Dr Frank Chikane's book, *Eight days in September: The removal of Thabo Mbeki*. Several commentators have remarked that Chikane, a former Director General in die Office of the President during the Mbeki presidency, is in no position to write objectively about his term of office and his removal from the Office of the President by the ANC's National Executive Committee on 19 September 2008. This opinion might be valid to some extent, but it does not render Chikane's book insignificant. In fact, Chikane's version of Mbeki's removal is a valuable and noteworthy contribution to the available literature and the way the relevant dynamics have played out in top government circles in recent years.

Several perspectives from Chikane's book are of great interest in searching for a better understanding of South Africa's political developments in general and developments in the ruling ANC in particular. For the sake of being to the point, six specific aspects could be highlighted. Firstly, Chikane contends that Mbeki's removal in September 2008 was the culmination of vicious and debilitating internal strife within the ANC, which was triggered by the removal of Zuma from his position as Deputy President of South Africa in May 2005. At the same time, some members of COSATU and the SACP saw Mbeki as the major obstacle to the advancement of the policies they espoused.

Secondly, some within the ANC believed that Zuma had been falsely accused and that he had become a victim of state institutions, including the National Prosecuting Authority. In the view of some ANC quarters, a "state case" against Zuma boiled down to nothing more than Mbeki's case against Zuma. Thus, "institutions of the state" was translated as "President Mbeki". Although Mbeki took action against Zuma after broad consultation with relevant role-players, aggrieved and disgruntled members of the ANC rallied around Zuma and targeted Mbeki as their "common and singular problem". As a result, the language of political discourse in the ANC became "disrespectful and vulgar". In this regard, Judge Chris Nicolson's judgement on 12 September 2008 that Mbeki and some cabinet members had interfered with the legal process pertaining to Zuma's prosecution was just what Mbeki's enemies needed to openly turn against him.

Concerning Zuma, it is clear from Chikane's writings that Zuma had rallied much of the ANC behind him after the party's Polokwane Conference in December 2007. Furthermore, much of the party membership sided with its newly elected President (Zuma) against the Head of State (Mbeki). What is also interesting about

the Mbeki and Zuma saga is Chikane's disclosure that Mbeki and Zuma held a meeting during which Zuma (apparently) assured Mbeki that, after Polokwane, he would be allowed to serve his full term.

Thirdly, Chikane is of the opinion that the ANC's decision to "recall" Mbeki was problematic, since the President was elected by Parliament and not by the party. He argues that the concept of a "revocation" would be in accordance with the "deployment" policy of the ANC, but could not be applied directly to the South African President who is elected by Parliament. Though the concept of a recall was "innovative", it did not pass the constitutional test and, according to Chikane, Mbeki could have ignored the "recall", but he opted to leave voluntarily by means of a formal resignation as Head of State. Thereby, he prevented a constitutional crisis.

Fourthly, Chikane stresses the point throughout the book that when the ANC's National Executive Committee decided on the "removal" of Mbeki, there was a strong urge from within the party that he had to be stymied as President immediately, even before his resignation. In more than one instance, Chikane utters the word *ngoko!*, meaning now. This urge for *ngoko* was most strikingly illustrated by a call from the ANC that they "want the president's [sic] resignation letter today, not tomorrow".

Fifthly, another interesting point is Chikane's views of Kgalema Motlanthe's leadership and his role as "transitional" President when he took over from Mbeki. Motlanthe's task was to ensure that there was a seamless transition and to avoid any negative impact on the government's programmes. Chikane writes that Motlanthe had a very clear understanding of his role when he took over from Mbeki and that he (Chikane) was astonished at the speed with which Motlanthe mastered his role as Chair of SADC and how he provided leadership in the regional context. Locally, he focused on delivery rather than wasting time on positioning himself as a future president. This implies a very favourable assessment of Motlanthe's period as President during a difficult transitional phase.

In writing about Motlanthe, Chikane once again brings the Zuma factor into play. Chikane does not implicate Zuma directly and explicitly in this regard, but there is a reference to Zuma supporters where he refers to the fact that some "overzealous officials" had determined that President Zuma, immediately after his inauguration as newly elected President, needed to move into *Mahlamba Ndlopfu*, the official residence of the President. Earlier after Mbeki's resignation, he was clearly pressurised to vacate not only his office but also the official presidential residence. Thus, neither Mbeki nor Motlanthe had been given an opportunity to relocate from the presidential residence within 60 days as determined by regulation. Motlanthe, for instance, was able to dress up for Zuma's inauguration, but was not even in a position to return to *Mahlamba Ndlopfu* after the inauguration.

In the sixth place, Chikane makes an interesting comparison and identifies striking similarities between Mbeki's case and that of the Pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah, whose life and successes were only celebrated many years after he was deposed as President of Ghana. For Chikane, Mbeki and Nkrumah were both dumped from the public service in an unceremonious manner without appreciation of the services they had rendered.

Chikane's book makes absorbing and important reading for those interested in understanding the political scuffles of contemporary South African politics. Unfortunately, Chikane sometimes allows himself to lapse into self-pity. Upon reading some parts of the book, the impression is left that Chikane sees himself as a clergyman who assumed the noble role of public servant in post-apartheid South Africa, but who eventually found himself in the crossfire between Mbeki and his party. Chikane sometimes experienced that he was innocently drawing unjustified attacks from within the ANC (of which he remained a member) and that he, as the Director General in Mbeki's office, became a victim of circumstances.

Furthermore, Chikane's views on the role of the intelligence services seem to lean towards questionable conspiracy theories. As much as Chikane sounds credible in his assessment of political developments during the days of Mbeki and Motlanthe's presidencies (as mentioned above), his view that corrupt old-order and corrupt new-order intelligence operatives had a political intent in working together to further mutual interest, cannot simply be accepted at face value. Although he rightly argues that corrupt intelligence services are a dangerous threat to the security and integrity of the state and its people, his suggestion that local intelligence operatives worked with foreign intelligence operators in fabricating intelligence information with the clear intent of discrediting select ANC politicians, seems to be a bit farfetched. It is questionable whether such explanations for events and developments relating to top leadership battles in the ANC of recent years hold water. Rather, his remark that "there were two ANCs at war with each heading to that city (Polokwane)" is probably closer to the mark in explaining the fierce contest between heavyweight ANC leaders (specifically Mbeki and Zuma) and their respective support bases. The said remark explains most of what underpinned the removal of Thabo Mbeki during those crucial eight days in September 2008.

Without being too critical, one could accuse Chikane of turning a blind eye to Mbeki's shortcomings. Granted, Chikane loyally served as Director General of Mbeki's office, but to state that Mbeki's HIV/Aids policy was merely a case of challenging the pharmaceutical industry and that he walked where angels fear to tread, is to discard the true state of affairs. Moreover, Mbeki's foreign relations with countries such as Zimbabwe and Sudan were much more controversial and problematic than Chikane is ready to admit.

Still, the book is strongly recommended for those with an interest in South African political dynamics and certainly helps to shed some light on the removal of former President Thabo Mbeki - a President who was often described as “complex”, “aloof”, “distant”, “intellectual”, and an “enigma”. It also sheds some light on the internal leadership struggle in the ANC and the way this has turned out in recent years for South Africa’s highest political office. After all, Frank Chikane was very close to the fire and has much to share with his fellow South Africans on his experiences as Mbeki’s right-hand man in the presidency from the beginning to the end.

**Theo Neethling**

Department of Political Studies and Governance, University of the Free State