

**An obscure struggle stalwart brought to light**

**Colin Bundy, Govan Mbeki: A Jacana Pocket Biography**

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It is an unfortunate truth that the writing of history, with all its injustices done to past events, is more often than not left to those who triumph at the caucus, the ballot box or on the battlefield, rather than to those who are a little more obscure. What societies tend to forget tells as much a story as what they choose to remember. This is as true today as it has been throughout the course of history. Govan Mbeki can be said to be one of the more obscure characters of South Africa's liberation struggle. His life today is not celebrated in the same manner as those of numbers of his contemporaries. However, Colin Bundy's biography, in a very condensed yet effective way, does challenge this state of affairs.

In many ways, Govan Mbeki's political career represents a microcosm of the development of an organisation to which he was very committed: the African National Congress (ANC). A common misconception about the ANC among many analysts today, is that it is a party torn by division in a manner unknown in its glorious past. In fact, this has never been the case. The ANC, both historically and currently, is better understood as being described as a "broad church" of political pressure groups and it remains for them, as well as for the state of South Africa as a whole, both a blessing and a curse.

Ideologically speaking, one of the biggest divisions that has for many decades haunted the ANC, and which continues to do so today, is that of the nationalistic school of thought vis à vis the socialistic and communistic schools of thought. The formation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) under the leadership of the former president of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, is testament to this; as is the ongoing influence of the Freedom Charter as opposed to other economic development plans. As South Africans celebrate twenty years of political freedom, it is only natural that questions arise such as: "Has the political freedom acquired in 1994 brought with it economic freedom, such as is suggested in the Freedom Charter?" For some, this question becomes all the more pulsing when it is kept in mind that South Africa's political transition was a negotiated one, with no clear winners or losers.

It is against this backdrop that the life and political career of Govan Mbeki, with his lifelong affiliation to the South African Communist Party (SACP), must be examined. In classical Marxist tradition, Mbeki relied to a large extent on the interpretation of economics to analyse political developments. He graduated in 1941 from the University of South Africa with a degree in economics. In an article written by Mbeki during that time, commenting on the 1936 land legislation, he noted that "... so long as the Native Reserves are regarded as a reservoir of cheap labour, so long will overstocking continue" (p 57). This chain of thought continued throughout his life. If, Mbeki noted, the ANC were "to set up a bourgeois democracy after freedom it would be to entrench capitalism to the detriment of the oppressed" (p 157). However, as noted by Bundy, by the "early 1990s, these views were out of step with what was happening in the committee rooms of CODESA" (pp 157 158).

However, Mbeki's legacy is not only overshadowed by ruling ideologies within the ANC. According to Bundy, "there is a sceptical, even hostile, view of Govan Mbeki surfacing in scholarly treatments of South Africa's political history"; these are fittingly addressed by Bundy, casting Mbeki in a different perspective (p 147). Leaving his ideological preferences aside, there can be little room for discussion when describing Mbeki as a struggle stalwart. He was a co author of "Operation Mayibuye", and, as a member of the SACP, he played a key role in the development of the armed struggle. Mbeki spent 25 years (more than a quarter of his entire life) on Robben Island, where he served his fellow inmates through educational programmes. In the words of Ahmed "Kathy" Kathrada, Mbeki "was a teacher, not only in his choice of profession, but in essence and soul" (p 153).

Another aspect of Mbeki's career that is explored by Bundy is that of authorship. Although Mbeki is unlikely to be remembered as an author, he did make significant contributions in the various capacities that he served. "In almost everything he wrote", notes Bundy, "the written word was deployed as part of a broader social and political project" (p 149). He was more devoted to the struggle for liberation than to scholarship, in the process, using the written word as a tool to further political viewpoints. Bundy criticises "excessive claims" made in reference to Mbeki's writings, summarising him chiefly as "a pamphleteer, polemicist and reporter; when he had the time to devote himself to the task, he was a commentator, essayist, analyst and author" (p 148).

*Govan Mbeki: A Jacana Pocket Biography* is an important historiographical contribution. It is a critical and above all, a balanced reflection on the life of Govan Mbeki. Its greatest attribute is perhaps that it succeeds in painting a nuanced picture of Govan Mbeki without losing sight of historical context and perspective, as biographies often tend to do.

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