

WebMemo



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Mbeki's Ouster Opens the Door for Enhanced U.S.–South Africa Cooperation

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South African President Thabo Mbeki has finally been ousted by his political rivals in the ruling African National Congress (ANC), and for many the move comes none too soon. Mbeki leaves a less than stellar legacy: He is perceived broadly as an arrogant pseudo-intellectual who endangered the country's fight against HIV/AIDS, disingenuously promoted black economic empowerment that merely helped widen the gap between South Africa's rich and poor, and propped up Robert Mugabe as one of Africa's remaining dictators while millions of Zimbabweans fled violence and hunger. Mbeki also never missed an opportunity to embarrass the U.S and relished his self-appointed position as a leader within the developing world and purveyor of anti-Western Marxist theology. The U.S loses little with Mbeki's departure and stands to gain in its strategically important relationship with South Africa.

Three years after Mbeki fired his deputy president, Jacob Zuma, the shoe is on the other foot. Mbeki's forced resignation, effective September 25, followed a contentious meeting of the senior ANC leadership and cleared the path for ANC President Zuma to assume South Africa's presidency through national elections in six months. Along with Mbeki, 10 cabinet ministers and three deputy ministers jumped before they were pushed out of government. The only minister among the group of real consequence to South Africa's stability and future is Finance Minister Trevor Manuel, who has already let it be known that he would serve under new leadership if asked.

The crisis between Mbeki and Zuma has been building for years and came to a head when Judge Chris Nicholson threw out a corruption case against Zuma on technical grounds and indicated that Zuma's prosecution was politically motivated, a charge Mbeki vigorously denied in his resignation speech. With Mbeki gone, ANC deputy leader Kgalema Motlanthe will serve as the placeholder president until next year's elections.

Mbeki, Your Shoes Are Too Big. Mbeki took over the presidency from Nelson Mandela at a time of great hope within South Africa, as democracy and stability had led many to expect transformational social change. Instead, Mbeki used the international stage to promote lofty pan-African goals while leaving many basic domestic challenges unsolved. His notions of an "African Renaissance" were juxtaposed to South Africa's growing crime rate, dramatic income disparities, and growing HIV/AIDS burden. Perhaps most ironic was Mbeki's promotion of the New Economic Partnership for Africa and its largely smoke-and-mirrors "peer review" mechanism to measure progress and reform among African states.

Mbeki's inconceivable stance on the causes of HIV/AIDS, his resistance to the introduction of life-

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saving antiretroviral drug treatments, and his willingness to keep an incompetent health minister far too long endangered the lives of millions of people in one of the world's highest HIV/AIDS prevalent countries. The South Africa passed on by Mbeki resembles two countries in one, and the instituted Black Economic Empowerment programs merely catapulted a small number of South Africa's political black elite into the ranks of the privileged while leaving the masses without such basic needs as clean water, electricity, and housing—let alone jobs.

Mbeki's legacy will forever bear the stigma of his "quiet diplomacy" approach toward Zimbabwe's anything-but-quiet economic implosion and political crisis. To his shame, Mbeki continually threw a lifeline to the dictator Mugabe while confounding efforts by civil society to promote democracy. His bias in favor of the Mugabe regime became so abundantly clear that the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) lost complete faith in his ability to mediate. Now that Mbeki is out of power, the door should be shut firmly behind him as broker in the Zimbabwe power-sharing deal.

The U.S. and South Africa: A New Beginning. Mbeki supporters and South Africa's opposition parties portray a country in crisis and an ANC at war with itself, yet there is little evidence that South Africa's transfer of power shows cause for immediate alarm. Zuma, South Africa's president-in-waiting, has confidently pointed toward policy continuity, and it seems clear that the much relied upon Trevor Manuel will continue to steer the country's economic ship.

With Mbeki gone, the U.S. should move quickly to recast its relationship with South Africa by doing the following:

- The U.S. government, including Members of Congress, should prioritize contact with South Africa's new leadership, whether at the U.N. General Assembly this month or by sending a senior delegation to South Africa, to show eagerness to work with the new administration on shared interests.
- The U.S. should focus early collaboration with South African President Motlanthe and ANC President Zuma on pushing the power-sharing deal forward in Zimbabwe and working jointly to identify the country's humanitarian assistance needs.
- The U.S. should strongly encourage South Africa to reject Mbeki as regional mediator for the Zimbabwe crisis and throw its weight behind AU and Tanzanian President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete as Africa's guarantor of the agreement.
- Within 12 months, the U.S. should work with South Africa's new leadership to reinvigorate bilateral and/or regional trade talks with a view toward a U.S.–South Africa free trade agreement.
- The U.S. should offer substantial new HIV/AIDS technical and financial assistance to reinvigorate South Africa's fight against the epidemic.
- The U.S. should engage South Africa's new leaders immediately on military cooperation, especially in support of regional peacekeeping and the development of the U.S. Africa Command.

An Investment in the Future. South Africa is strategically important to Africa's future and should be a key ally for the U.S. Mbeki was no friend of America, and his departure opens the door for a new era of U.S.–South African cooperation. The partnership should start by tackling the gravest threat to regional peace and stability—Zimbabwe. South Africa must relieve Mbeki of his mediator's role in Zimbabwe, and the U.S. should immediately deploy its technical and planning capabilities to help South Africa and the African Union provide much needed humanitarian assistance. The U.S. and South Africa share a broad range of interests in Africa and beyond, and outreach now to strengthen the relationship will pay dividends for years to come.

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