

## SA Entering Conservative Era: Haffajee

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

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With a likely Jacob Zuma presidency looming South Africa is entering a more conservative era, outgoing Mail & Guardian editor Ferial Haffajee said on Monday.

Haffajee said an overlooked issue about Zuma's visit to the Rhema Church was he said at the time that faith-based organisations should have a say in issues like abortion and gay rights.

"We are heading into a deeply conservative era balanced against a radical economic policy," said Haffajee at a debate at the University of the Witwatersrand about former president Thabo Mbeki's legacy.

She said South Africa was enacting the same "myth-making" with Zuma as they had done with Mbeki as he came into power.

"He is the new Mr Delivery."

Fellow panellist, Mbeki biographer Mark Gevisser, said just as Mbeki had experienced, Zuma had now also become "a victim of the politics of redemption".

Unlike leaders like France's Nicholas Sarkozy, Britain's Gordon Brown or even the US's Barack Obama, people did not just expect Mbeki or Zuma to raise or reduce taxes or improve a healthcare system.

"You are going to save your people" was the expectation foisted upon them, said Gevisser.

He said these kinds of expectations ultimately had a "crippling effect".

During the debate a heated exchange between Advocate George Bizos, who was sitting in the audience, and the panellists, Haffajee, Gevisser and the Treatment Action Campaign's Zackie Achmat, erupted over Mbeki's relationship to the judiciary.

Earlier, Haffajee described Mbeki's support for the rule of law by institutions as "reed slim".

Achmat said Mbeki had practised an "executive lawlessness" in which he saw himself "above the law and outside the constitution".

Bizos implored Achmat not to say Mbeki did not have respect for the judiciary as, he said, Mbeki never departed from any recommendations for judge appointments given by the Judicial Services Commission.

Gevisser said Mbeki worked with the JSC because it was full of people "who were all totally loyal to Thabo Mbeki until they weren't".

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The exchange amongst the panellists themselves also often got animated as they suggested a variety of often contradictory perspectives on Mbeki's legacy.

Gevisser said while Mbeki was often portrayed as a Machiavellian manipulator and puppet master, he wondered if Mbeki was not in fact some kind of "klutz or bumbler who presented himself as a supreme technocrat.

"I don't believe he sat in a dark room and plotted 'this is how I am going to get rid of my enemy....Things were far more complicated and messy."

Haffajee said the important aspect of Mbeki legacy was what it taught South Africa about itself.

For example when Mbeki was recalled by the African National Congress in September last year and subsequently resigned, "we [SA] had become a pack upon a dog nation" she said.

The way South African citizens yielded agency and responsibility to Mbeki was about the "unquestioned culture of the leader...the chief."

This resulted in the kind of country where the ANC and Zuma "blinded by governing bling" and afflicted with the "arrogance of the 15 car envoy" did not even pay attention to the sliding away of internal democracy and debate.

Disagreeing with Gevisser, Haffajee said Mbeki was "no klutz.

"He is a control freak who wanted to anoint his successor Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma".

She said when this did not work out, Mbeki then went to "extremes" to try retain control.

She said Mbeki was a "deeply self-righteous man", as his Aids denialism indicated.

Turning to Mbeki's legacy in relation to the arms deal, Achmat said: "He covered it up, his own deceit, his lies and his own deep role in the arms deal".

Gevisser, whom Achmat called an "apologist", said, while he considered the arms deal the "poisoned well of politics", it was not yet known whether Mbeki "poisoned the well deliberately or through misguided goodwill".

Achmat said the legacy of Mbeki that would live with South Africans for a long time was his "race-based nativism.

"Any corrupt, lazy official in the private or public sector can get away with it by saying 'I'm coloured, I'm African, You are doing this to me because you are racist'".

Achmat said: "The one good thing Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma have given is to wake us all up to claim an active citizenship and activist [stance].

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"All of us must take responsibility to stop the rot and corruption," he said.

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