

## Zuma Is Off The Hook

Written by Rudi Prinsloo  
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South Africa's president-in-waiting Jacob Zuma formally became a free man on Tuesday after criminal charges against him were withdrawn at the High Court in Durban.

Zuma's big moment was videotaped by his daughter Duduzile who sat with a video camera inside court.

Judge president Vuka Tshabalala had endorsed a decision taken by the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) to have the 16 charges against Zuma, relating to an arms deal, dropped.

This comes after his lawyers provided evidence of behind-the-scenes interference, making it "unjust to continue with the prosecution". The charges against Zuma's co-accused, the two Thint companies, were also dropped.

The case related to allegations of bribery between the arms company and Zuma.

During the long-running investigation, Zuma was removed as deputy president of the country, was charged twice, and also had to face allegations of rape.

Tshabalala said when charges are withdrawn they could be reinstated again but stressed that it was unlikely in this case.

He spoke briefly on the publicity surrounding the case and maintained that all proper procedure had been followed.

After the judge's pronouncement, his supporters in court burst into applause.

Meanwhile, outside court busloads of people had converged in support of Zuma.

People, some carrying ANC flags, began arriving after 8am and said they were not deterred by the cold weather.

"We are here to support Mr Zuma," SA National Civic Organisation member Zano Shembe said.

"We believe in him and nothing will change our minds."

The celebration began long before court proceedings had started.

Supporters were dancing across Margaret Mncadi Avenue (Victoria Avenue) singing the song Zuma is associated with, Umshini Wam'.

After his big moment, Zuma headed to the city's Hilton hotel where he briefed dozens of journalists.

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He said the investigation against him had brought "untold pressure on his entire family and relatives".

He said he had become a "victim of systematic abuse of power".

"In the last eight years, I did not use my position to interfere with the due course of the law. I presented myself in court whenever needed," he said.

He also stressed that he was not above the law.

"I do not regard myself as being above the law and no public person should be above scrutiny."

He, however, was not happy that the NPA had used a media campaign to find him guilty in the "court of public opinion".

He accused some media of being directly involved in a conspiracy against him.

Zuma said he was also "stunned" by the fact that in 2005, the NPA instituted charges against him first and then raided his offices and properties.

He described it as a "desperate act".

"It's an indication ... of a desperate act that they charged first and looked for evidence later... I had to turn to the courts."

He said something clearly needed to be done to make the criminal justice system more effective to correct abuses and ensure human rights were not violated.

Zuma said there was "something seriously wrong" in the NPA and that the executives needed to take action against the former Directorate of Special Operations' (DSO) Leonard McCarthy.

Zuma also called for government to conduct a review of the DSO and the manner in which it operated.

"My conscience is clear. I have not committed any crimes against the state or people of South Africa," said Zuma.

"I sought legal remedies because I thought my rights were being violated... It was highly suspicious."

The election front-runner said he was happy that he had been vindicated.

He said the "vindictive episode" had provided lessons for everyone.

The ANC's task now, he said, was to look into the criminal justice system and the judiciary to ensure that victims were protected and human rights were not violated.

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He also spoke briefly on competition between political parties for votes ahead of the April 22 election, when he was likely to be elected president of South Africa.

Zuma said it was "worrying" that there were new trends that political parties were interfering in the legal system to secure votes.

"They are playing a mischievous game."

He said he would strive for a public service that was for the people and not for individuals.

"I wouldn't want any individuals to go through what I went through."

He said he would not pursue any civil action because he wanted to put this case behind him and focus on the ANC's five priorities, highlighted in its election manifesto.

"We have a country to run, not individuals to chase."

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