

From Transformational Leadership To Mafia State? Observations From South Africa's Two Decades of Democracy

LSE's Connor Vasey uses the *recent LSE Ideas lecture delivered by Dr Mzukisi Qobo* as a springboard to discuss ways in which South Africa's democracy exhibits features of a so-called "mafia state".

For all interested in continuous critical analysis of South Africa's political situation, following the work and upcoming enterprises of **Dr Qobo** (of the University of Pretoria) would prove fruitful – back in his home country he is a renowned academic and critic of the incumbent government. Having attended his recent Ideas lecture entitled '*From Transformational Leadership To Mafia State?*' his verdict is clear: South Africa's leadership, politically, culturally and socially, is defunct. This is news to nobody, but when one introduces the term *mafia state* a justification is required and the lecture will provide a useful platform for the foregoing discussion.

First things first, what exactly is a mafia state? Moises Naim has defined the concept as follows: "a state system where the government is tied with organised crime, including government officials, police and military taking part in illicit enterprises". Although, as with all social concepts, the definition is up for debate we will use this as a working account. In this post I will provide **three case studies** to exemplify mafia state activity at the government, police and military level in South Africa.

Case One: Government Officials and the Infamous Mr Zuma

When we talk about the President of South Africa, we are referring to a man with over 700 legal cases against him. We are talking about a man accused of flagrant mismanagement of state funds for the benefit of himself and those close to him. These days, Zuma's name is synonymous with **Nkandla**, the presidential residence which has, to date, swallowed US\$23 million of taxpayers' money (spiking up from previous estimates of roughly US\$2.5 million) and boasts a "fire pool", chicken coup and cattle kraal under the guise of "security features". Compare this to spending on the private residences of previous Presidents (adjusted for contemporary economic conditions and prices): Mbeki = US\$1.1 million, Mandela = US\$2.9 million, de Klerk = US\$22,000 and Botha = US\$16,100.



The construction of the home of South Africa President Jacob Zuma has proved to be a source of embarrassment Photo Credit:livemag.co.za

With financial scandals such as this comes the collapse of the democratic process at the hands of the incumbent ANC. After a recent impromptu bill was passed by an ANC-majority parliament **absolving Zuma of any wrongdoing** regarding mismanagement of state funds, a brawl between parliamentarians broke out – this was met by the summoning of riot police into the parliament building for the first time since the assassination of Apartheid architect President Verwoerd in 1966. Further, Zuma and his cronies are presently seeking to establish alternative political processes in parliament by appointing their own Baleka Mbete as speaker of the National Assembly which, in effect, allows them to act as they please in parliament while silencing the opposition's response. As Dr Qobo remarked, tactics such as these place Zuma as more of a monarch than a President; indeed, Zuma seeks to also undermine the true tribal monarchies of South Africa (for example, **the case against Thembu king Dalindyebo**). This kind of *transactional leadership* – one which seeks to maintain the corrupt status quo – is endemic to Zuma and his inner circles.

There is no doubt, however, that the climate of South Africa is freer than under the apartheid regime. Regardless, it seems alarming that the incumbent government appeals to making comparisons of this kind – that is, between a “democracy” and a structure of racial fascism.

Case Two: Police and the Marikana Mine ‘Massacre’

On 16 August 2012 there was a global outcry at the gunning down of 34 miners at the Lonmin Marikana mine outside of Rustenburg. Prior to this there were **reports** of a flurry of communication between the Deputy President, Cyril Ramaphosa and the minister of police, Nathi Mthethwa. The significance of this being that Ramaphosa sits on the board of Lonmin. Reports indicate that police were told to take any measures necessary to put an end to this “wildcat strike”. Alongside this comes the fact the officers were unusually well-armed; they were equipped with military equipment ordinarily unavailable to riot police. What the reports indicate, and what the people of South Africa seem to believe, is that the Marikana massacre represents a blatant manipulation of the police force to further business interests (presumably to the benefit of some members of the police department). Indeed, there is an increasing tactic of violence adopted by police when dealing with members of the public: immigrants have been dragged behind police cars and more recently a Nigerian man was stripped naked and beaten on the street by police for parking illegally.

This theme of brutality is clearly an alarming feature of the current justice system which, when combined with governmental abuses of the system, represents a huge challenge to South Africa's democratic image.

Case Three: the Military, Waterkloof and the Guptas

Finally, we consider where the military comes into play in our analysis. On 30 April 2013, military personnel of the Waterkloof Air Base **allowed a private plane carrying wedding guests to a function of the Gupta family** to land on-base (a privilege typically reserved for diplomatic personnel). The decision to allow Indian guests to land to attend the wedding of Vega Gupta raised alarm bells for many South Africans. Why is this? Well, the Guptas have long been a very prosperous business family after their immigration to South Africa during the 90s and their subsequent establishment of Sahara Computers and other enterprises. **Their ties with various political figures and parties have long been scrutinised** and this event appeared to be yet another grand example of the Zuma-Gupta collusion. Echoing Luke Harding's summary of Russian politics: “*For my friends, everything! For my enemies, the law!*” Given that one of President Zuma's wives, Bongki Ngema-Zuma, had **her R3.8million mansion paid for by the Guptas**, that his son, Duduzane, is a director of several Gupta companies and that his daughter, Duduzile, formerly acted as director of the Gupta's flagship enterprise, Sahara Computers, there is clearly a genuine cause for concern. On top of all of this comes the fact that members of the Gupta family directly requested diplomatic passports

which, although they were declined, implies a sense of entitlement ordinarily-situated businessmen ought not to have toward a government and less so its military.

Conclusion

What I have suggested in this post is that according to a particular definition of a *mafia state* there are three key scandals in South Africa's recent political history which carry all the qualifying hallmarks. Nkandla demonstrates a very poorly hidden but very cleverly executed abuse of public funds. Marikana exemplifies a growing congruence of business and police interests which is mirrored by what transpired at Waterkloof. As such, Dr Qobo appears to have a wealth of evidence to support his claims of the existence of a mafia state governing South Africa. A government which, to quote Dr Qobo, is "*made up of men and women who are very dangerous if their position is not challenged soon*".

Follow this link to listen to Dr Qobo's recent lecture at LSE.

Connor Vasey is Head of Media and Communications for the 2015 LSE Africa Summit.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

December 10th, 2014 | [International Affairs](#) | [0 Comments](#)

☺