

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard Calland, *The Zuma years: South Africa's changing face of power*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-77022-088-1 (Soft cover). 505 pages.

Richard Calland is an associate professor in public law at the University of Cape Town and one of South Africa's top political analysts. His column "Contretemps" has appeared in the *Mail and Guardian* since 2001, and he authored three notable book publications on South African political dynamics, namely *Thabo Mbeki's world: The politics and ideology of the South African President* (2003), *Anatomy of South Africa: Who holds the power* (2006), and *The Vuvuzela Revolution: Anatomy of South Africa's World Cup* (2010).

The Zuma Years, is the sequel to Calland's earlier work, *Anatomy of South Africa: Who Holds the power*. As expected, he (once again) addresses the question of power and its anatomy and zooms in on the key political actors in South Africa, particularly the Presidency, the Cabinet, the ANC, the labour unions, the opposition and the judiciary. At the same time, this book goes far beyond his previous work as it extends to several areas of current importance in South Africa such as money and politics, the corporate boardrooms, the professions, the universities and traditional leadership. In this regard he addresses – and uncovers – several important sites of power, social advancement and change because the boardrooms, the professions and the universities are always significant players in defining and/or shaping the character, paradigms and leadership of both the public and private sectors.

President Jacob Zuma is obviously a key figure in the book. Although the book is not about Zuma *per se*, Calland simply had to focus on Zuma, since he is so unlike his predecessors (former Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki). Zuma took over the presidency as a man of the people, but as Ferial Haffajee observes in the foreword, he became a "laughing assassin" and a man who wields power "with a scalpel of self interest". The book raises a number of interesting points about Zuma. He underscores the point that there has been a changing of the guard under Zuma, not just at the top, but also throughout the entire Zuma administration, evidenced by a clear desire to distinguish itself from the Mbeki administration. At the centre is the President whose personal interests are essentially about retaining power in order to avoid the grim prospect of imprisonment.

As much as the views and actions of the President are apposite, his relationship with the institutions he inhabits is as relevant and the important question that Calland attempts to answer is: Who advises Zuma and whom does he listen to? Moreover, how does he deal with the various interest groups, organisations and factions around the presidency who jostle for political space and domination? As Calland shows in this absorbing section of the book, Zuma,

through all the factional shoving for rank, retains his position of power on the basis of his adaptability and flexibility around issues and contending perspectives. In Calland's words: "As soon as he (Zuma) walks out of the room he forgets what he has said or promised" (p. 50). This also extends to the Cabinet where Zuma takes the position of a good mediator between the actors (ideological adversaries) and their contending ideas. He has little interest in policy detail, and he knows how "... to give someone something, something that makes everyone a bit unhappy, but not too unhappy, because they know the other side is also a bit unhappy" (p. 67).

Compared to Mbeki, who studied cabinet documents and briefs carefully, Zuma does not, and gives his cabinet ministers longer leashes. As a result, there is a relative weakness of the Zuma kitchen cabinet and ministers under Zuma actually have more power individually and collectively than under Mbeki. This tends to be an advantage to confident and brave ministers, although the high number of cabinet reshuffles under Zuma has been unprecedented. As a result, there is a great deal of discontinuity in portfolios with ministers never knowing whether their place is secure.

More broadly, the book also deals specifically with and makes a serious attempt at exploring questions often asked in contemporary South Africa. These include questions such as: How did Lindiwe Mazibuko become the parliamentary leader of the DA?; How did Mogoeng Mogoeng become a member of the Constitutional Court, let alone chief justice?; Can Cyril Ramaphosa make it to the highest political office in South Africa?; How are the forces balanced in cabinet and government at present?

Readers with an interest in the above-mentioned questions and issues pertaining to the ANC ("a very busy, very messy and very noisy roundabout" (p. 169)), the SACP ("no more leftist or radical now than a bog-standard social democratic party of the great northern European/Scandinavian tradition" (p. 170)), and COSATU, as well as the opposition parties, will certainly find this a thoughtful and insightful book. Moreover, the functioning of several other institutions of power is explored in a perceptive manner, such as the judiciary, focusing on changes in the face of its own leadership, the office of the chief justice, and the body that appoints the judges, the Judicial Services Commission.

The Zuma Years is not a scholarly work written for an academic audience, but for a broad readership. It does not read like a typical scholarly article in an academic journal, but is nonetheless based on solid research and data, and complemented by anecdotal evidence from which the author argues and reflects on the changing landscape of power in the present-day South Africa. This being said, Calland makes it clear that there is no attempt to be comprehensive in a scholarly fashion; examples and data are used and applied "to illustrate a trend" and in his own account, the book's purpose is to provide "an accessible keyhole into the working life of politics

and the politicians". The latter being those who operate South Africa's instruments of power. Obviously the author has his own preoccupations and political views (clearly leaning towards social democracy), but he presents his research and related insights and perspectives in a balanced and objective manner, so that the reader is not sidetracked or unappreciative of his personal preoccupations.

Calland is highly articulate and the book is well written. In short, Calland's latest work provides a thought-provoking insight into the below-the-surface issues and scenes with regard to the exercising of power and the relating political architecture in South Africa. These range from political and constitutional institutions to corporate and commercial life (and the nexus between politics and money), to the impact of education on the transformation of power. Moreover, the foibles of political life as well as his personal, rich experiences, interviews, vivid anecdotes and reflections on politics and governance in South Africa make interesting reading material. It is strongly recommended for scholars and students of the social sciences, politics, the media, business or academia, who are keen to follow or seriously attempt to understand the constantly changing face of present-day politics and power in South Africa as well as their enormous implications for the country and its future prosperity.

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