

Thabo Mbeki

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Introduction

Thabo Mbeki is the most important African political figure of his generation. From June 1999 until September 2008 he was leader of Africa's most industrialised state, having succeeded the revered Nelson Mandela as president of post-apartheid South Africa. Even before then, Mbeki ran the country as *de facto* prime minister under President Mandela, who for the most part handed over the reins of power to his heir apparent shortly after assuming the presidency in May 1994. As a key leader of the African National Congress (ANC) in exile, Mbeki had, from the 1960s, played a significant role in the anti-apartheid struggle, under the mentorship of the ANC president Oliver Tambo, and then led secret talks to end apartheid with the white South African corporate sector, Afrikaner intellectuals and National Party officials in the late 1980s. Between 1990 and 1994, during the negotiations

for a political settlement, Mbeki played an important part in laying the foundations for a post-apartheid state and establishing what would become one of the most respected constitutional democracies in the world. He had thus dedicated 52 years of his life to the ANC and to the politics of his country by the time of his sudden ousting from power by his own party in September 2008.

As a historical figure, it is important to place Mbeki within an African context. As this book explains, his sense of belonging to the wider African continent and his later vision of an African Renaissance were inspired by his upbringing, education and career in exile. He was critically shaped by the two decades he spent in exile in Swaziland, Botswana, Nigeria and Zambia between 1971 and 1990. His time in Nigeria as head of the ANC office there, between December 1976 and early 1978, was particularly significant. Not only did Africa's largest country provide him with an example of black self-assertion and cultural authenticity, but he also forged an enduring relationship with the military head of state, Olusegun Obasanjo (1976–9), which would later enable him to promote peacemaking in Africa and build pan-African institutions like the African Union (AU), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) when both men were in power as elected heads of state between 1999 and 2007.

In understanding the importance of Mbeki as a

political figure, I have sought to compare him with Ghana's legendary first president, Kwame Nkrumah, who was in power between 1957 and 1966. Both were philosopher-kings who articulated bold pan-African visions and generated ideas to which other leaders were forced to respond. Both were, however, political prophets whose compelling visions were ultimately unfulfilled. Both also ruled in a monarchical fashion, imperiously dominating decision-making within their respective parties, though Mbeki – unlike Nkrumah – adhered strictly to constitutional rules. Both men are likely to be remembered more for their pan-African achievements in foreign policy than for their domestic policies.

Mbeki was a complex figure, full of contradictions and paradoxes: a rural child who became an urban sophisticate; a prophet of Africa's Renaissance who was also an anglophile; a committed young Marxist who, while in power, embraced conservative economic policies and protected white corporate interests; a rational and dispassionate thinker who was particularly sensitive to criticism and dissent; a champion of African self-reliance who relied excessively on foreign capital and promoted a continental economic plan – NEPAD – that was disproportionately dependent on foreign aid; and a thoughtful intellectual who supported policies on HIV/AIDS that withheld antiretroviral drugs from infected people, resulting in hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths.

Some may object to the approach of the ‘Great Man’ view of history pioneered by Thomas Carlyle, in his famous book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841). Carlyle argued that history can be analysed through the actions, ideas, charisma and political skills of great historical figures. My own study does not wish to deny that our subject has been shaped by his social environment and that other individuals and institutions – the ANC, its alliance partners, the business sector, civil society, and African and external actors – played more than an instrumental role in the events described here. A biography of Mbeki, though, helps us to understand events through the actions and ideas of a powerful individual who was the dominant figure in South African politics for 14 years. Mbeki’s was an ‘imperial presidency’, and his monarchical style of rule saw him dominate decision-making within his party and government. It is thus legitimate to focus attention on his actions and ideas in interacting with other key players to explain the epoch in which he held power. The book also touches on Mbeki’s relationship with six key figures who helped shape his political beliefs and achievements: his father Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Joe Slovo, Chris Hani, Nelson Mandela and Olusegun Obasanjo.

I lived in South Africa through the last five years of Mbeki’s presidency, and thus witnessed at first hand the optimism unleashed by his vision of an African Renaissance as well as the tragic downfall of a flawed

but intellectually brilliant leader. It seems foolhardy to attempt – even in a short biography – an assessment of the most important African political figure of his generation. Three key reasons have motivated me to embark on this brief intellectual journey. First, I felt a need to place Mbeki in a pan-African as much as a South African context. This book highlights his intellectual and lived experiences that shaped his pan-Africanism and African Renaissance vision, as well as the perspectives of diverse African scholars. Second, the crucial point that Mbeki's biographies – even the finest and most definitive one by Mark Gevisser¹ – have hitherto missed is that his legacy lies in the area of foreign policy: mainly his peacemaking efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as his initiatives to build African institutions to promote regional integration, democratic governance, and peace. These policies were not always successful, but they were often pursued with vigour and vision. Finally, I was inspired, as a Nigerian author living in South Africa, not only to present a pan-African analysis, but to try to help correct the glaring absence of black authors as biographers of African political figures.