

**Renwick, Robin. 2018. *How to Steal a Country: State Capture and Hopes for the Future in South Africa*. London: Biteback Publishing /Auckland Park: Jacana Media. 232 pp. ISBN 9781431426652**

The years Jacob Zuma ruled and misruled South Africa have brought out a number of studies trying to describe and explain the country's decline. First in 2012 two eye-opening publications appeared about the previous period: Sampie Terreblanche published *Lost in Transformation* and Willie Esterhuysen came with *Endgame: Secret Talks and the End of Apartheid*. Terreblanche's book, along with Esterhuysen's, is essential for understanding how Nelson Mandela made a quid pro quo deal with the (white) corporate sector so that the ANC elite reaches the same life standards as the white elite.<sup>1</sup> Then appeared Hlumelo Biko's *The Great African Society: A Plan for a Nation Gone Astray* (2013) and R. W. Johnson's *How Long Will South Africa Survive* (2015).<sup>2</sup> Jacques Pauw published his revealing *The President's Keepers* in 2017. Finally in 2018, Robin Renwick's *How to Steal a Country* hit the book market in Britain and South Africa. Renwick concentrates on the post-Mandela years, especially the presidencies of Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Lord Renwick, a former British ambassador to South Africa, provides a captivating account of "the vertiginously rapid descent of political leadership in South Africa from Mandela to Zuma and its consequences" (p. ix).

Renwick relies on his intimate knowledge of South African affairs and long-term personal contact with not only Mandela, Tambo and Ramaphosa but a host of other crucial actors of South African politics, during and after apartheid. His text is enhanced by pointed cartoons drawn by Zapiro. The book is dedicated to Thuli Madonsela, former Public Protector of South Africa, and to Pravin Gordhan, former finance minister, as well as "those in the press, judiciary and civil society who combined to 'save South Africa' and its constitution under threat" (p. v).

The present review has been completed early in May 2024, a few weeks before the seventh South African general elections that most likely can be a kind of referendum about the last five years of the post-Zuma rule by the African National Congress (ANC) led by President Cyril Ramaphosa. When the review comes out the press in July 2024, the reader might

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1 These books were reviewed in an excellent article by Padayachee (2013). See also Terreblanche (2018).

2 Review by Skalnik (2018).

appreciate both the result of the election and the true value of Renwick's book.

The book ends with the election of Ramaphosa to the leadership of ANC and his assumption of presidency after Zuma's resignation on 14 February 2018. On the first 200 pages Renwick describes and analyses the essence of what happened in South Africa during the years since Mandela's tenure. In a way, he offers a case study answer to the questions (p. ix) whether there is "something in the nature of liberation movements that causes them, once power is achieved, to morph into kleptocracies...?" "Or is it a function of leadership?" The author also asks "[h]ow is it that internationally reputable companies... are so easily drawn into such a web of corruption?"

Renwick was personally instrumental for persuading the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, that without ANC there could be no solution for South Africa. However, he was also aware that leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, with whom he agreed, were opposed by many in the ANC, including Jacob Zuma, who preferred their party before the country and their personal aggrandisement to the uplifting of the masses of underdogs of apartheid. The problem that South Africa after apartheid was facing has a name: corruption as ANC's policy. While Mandela was truly colour blind, the leaders who came after him started to be race-based, blaming "white minority capital" for all ills and not seeing that "the only monopolies in fact are the state-owned enterprises" (p. xi).

Following the introduction there are 24 chapters in the book. The last three deal with the aftermath of Zuma's rule. The introduction concentrates on the role of the Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, who in 2014 published a report called *Secure in Comfort*, which concluded that President Zuma abused state funds in upgrading his homestead in Nkandla and must pay back the overspent money.<sup>3</sup> On the informal end of the social spectrum, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Nobel Prize winner, declared that he was not going to vote for the ANC in the general election of 2014. Two years later Tutu went further by saying that "the Zuma government was worse than that under apartheid" (p. xiv). Even before he had criticised the Mbeki government that it had failed to condemn the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe and had not issued a visa to the Dalai Lama who was invited

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3 For the importance of homestead in South African political culture, see Robin Palmer, *The Nkandla Controversy: Insights from African Political Systems*. In Bošković, A and G. Schlee (eds.) 2022. *African Political Systems Revisited: Changing Perspectives on Statehood and Power*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 180-205.

to Tutu's eightieth birthday. It took South African parliament, under ANC dominance, two years of non-action before finally the Constitutional Court ruled that "the President had acted in violation of the constitution in failing to comply with the Public Protector's judgment" (p. xvii). Zuma then promised to pay but the idea of his resignation was rejected because "Jacob Zuma is an embodiment of the ANC today" (p. xviii). Only the former Robben Island prisoners Ahmed Kathrada and Trevor Manuel called for Zuma's resignation. But all 243 ANC members of parliament asserted that "the President had done nothing wrong" (ibid.). Madonsela intrepidly continued with her analyses by publishing her final report *State of Capture* in October 2016, in which she revealed the mechanism of stealing from the state by Zuma, his family, the Gupta family as well as their role in removing the finance minister and people in the South African treasury who had acted against illicit deeds.

Robin Renwick characterises Nelson Mandela as "the craftiest political operator I ever encountered" (p. 3). Mandela managed to persuade his opponents to believe that he understood their point of view. But his faith in colleagues in the ANC was a main shortcoming. His brief membership in the South African Communist Party (SACP) was pegged to his leadership of the Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the ANC. Renwick stresses that Mandela was a nationalist who disagreed with his fellow prisoner Govan Mbeki (the father of Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor) who stood for "hardline communist views" (p. 5). As a result of his meetings with opponents, including Margaret Thatcher, during the years after his release, Mandela understood that a nationalisation of banks and mines was not to be ANC's policy under his leadership. Although Mandela preferred Cyril Ramaphosa as his successor, it was Thabo Mbeki, the candidate of the ANC exile wing, who as deputy president and later as president (1999-2008) proved to be an astute leader who did not broach into economic radicalism but instead introduced the market-friendly policy GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) in 1996. Paradoxically, the highly intelligent Mbeki "convinced himself that HIV did not cause Aids. He declared that no one actually died of Aids" (p. 17). He "was appearing to see virtually everything in racial terms" (ibid.). Mbeki ignored "many tens of thousands of avoidable deaths" (p. 18). He went so far that he allowed Mandela to be "hecked and jeered" at the National Executive Committee in March 2002. At that time, Mandela declared that one of his sons had died of Aids.

Mbeki also came up with his wishful thinking about an African Renaissance, while tolerating Mugabe's misrule in Zimbabwe. During Mbeki's term of office Eskom, the state electricity utility, was neglected and since 2007

the country was plunged into “several years of ‘load shedding,’ otherwise known as power cuts” (p. 23). Corruption and crime started under Mbeki. Johannesburg became the “murder capital of the world” (p. 13). Under Mbeki South Africa purchased the Swedish Gripen fighters and the British trainer aircraft Hawk. This trade was connected with corruption that involved Jacob Zuma. After Zuma was “released” from deputy presidentship in July 2005, he used the time while remaining ANC deputy president to prepare Mbeki’s downfall. When Mbeki announced that he would like to continue as ANC President, Zuma managed to collect those in the ANC leadership who disliked Mbeki’s economic policies and orchestrated “a populist revolt” at the ANC National Conference at Polokwane in December 2007. Mbeki “suffered the humiliation of being jeered on the podium ... [and] was decisively defeated” (p. 19). Kgalema Motlanthe, the ANC Secretary, was elected deputy president and after Mbeki was “recalled” from his position as President on 19 September 2008, Motlanthe temporarily succeeded Mbeki until the regular national 2009 election, when Zuma became President of the Republic of South Africa.

Jacob Zuma’s ten years in the presidential palace in Pretoria were marked by “extreme financial recklessness” but Mandela earlier generously “loaned him 1 million rand” because he “always liked Zuma” but “became very disillusioned by him” (p. 34). Renwick “never found Jacob Zuma lacking intelligence” who “generally turned out to be a good deal shrewder than many of his more sophisticated colleagues” (p. 35). According to Renwick, Zuma was a socialist and a populist who withdrew, along with Mbeki, from the SACP. His foreign policy was “firmly pro-Russian and pro-Chinese” (p. 37). He appointed loyalists as ministers but was mainly concerned with supervision through security, intelligence, police, and the army.

The Marikana massacre took place in the middle of Zuma’s first term, on 16 August 2012. One of the directors and a major shareholder of the Lonmin mine was Ramaphosa. Eventually Riah Phiyega, police commissioner, was suspended. Nonetheless, Ramaphosa was nominated by Zuma to the ANC deputy presidency and also as deputy president of the country. By then Ramaphosa was in charge of “a very successful business empire” (p. 42). He “made valiant efforts to help contain the fallout from the disastrous management and corruption of the state-owned companies” (p. 43). The former keen supporter of Zuma, Julius Malema, was expelled from the ANC for criticising Zuma and other radicalisms, including a call for nationalisation. Malema then proceeded to launch the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), now an influential political party on the left of the South African political spectrum.

Renwick describes in detail how three Indian Gupta brothers, Ajay, Atul and Rajesh, first started computer businesses in South Africa, and soon became involved in various state projects that evolved into a virtual state in the state. Zuma's son Duduzane joined the Guptas in their mafia-like enterprises. The General Secretary of Cosatu (South African Conference of Trade Unions), Zwelinzima Vavi, was the first who recognised in August 2010 that “[W]e are headed for a predator state where a powerful, corrupt and demagogic elite of political hyenas are increasingly using the state to get rich” (p. 51). The Guptas were helped by various ministers and high officials in their quench for acquiring various profitable businesses including uranium mining, television and the press. The Gupta capture of the state continued by acquiring a decisive influence in the transport parastatal Transnet and Eskom, the monopolistic electricity generation parastatal. Irrespective of all that, Zuma was re-elected in 2014.

Renwick's book reads like a criminal novel. He managed to collect a host of information that keeps the reader thrilled by descriptions of intrigues, manipulations, defamations and denials. The Gupta brothers, with the help of Mosebenzi Zwane, minister of mineral resources, managed to “steal” the Optimum coal mine, essential for the generation of electricity for Eskom. Machinations, erratic nominations to high positions of economy, caused the South African currency, the rand, to lose value rapidly. Pravin Gordhan was reinstated as finance minister. Gwede Mantashe, ANC secretary general, started to play a vigorous, though ambiguous, role. The Gupta-owned companies transferred “huge” sums abroad. Gordhan intercepted around seventy “suspicious” transactions totalling 6,8 billion rand (!). Nevertheless, despite a defeat in the municipal elections, Zuma supporters in the ANC aimed at holding on until the general elections of 2019. A hurdle was the ANC party conference in December 2017, where a contest for the post of president was to take place between Zuma's ex-wife Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa. Meanwhile, Zuma supporters tried to unseat the finance minister Gordhan. Ramaphosa, the deputy president, defended Gordhan. Zuma then tried to “take over the committee on the state-owned enterprises which Ramaphosa had been chairing”(p. 94). This plot did not succeed. When SACP members of the government declared that they would not remain silent, and the ANC old guard rallied to Gordhan's support, Zuma's securocrats led by General Ntlemeza had to drop the charges against Gordhan. The Guptas, however, continued with their looting of Eskom.

At the last moment, on 15 October 2016, Thuli Madonsela managed to publish her 335-page report, the *State of Capture* already mentioned, in

which she documented the misdeeds by the Guptas. When confronted by Madonsela, Zuma pretended he did not know what was the matter. Actually, Zuma counterattacked by removing the incorruptible Pravin Gordhan from his post as the minister of finance. Zuma further tried to push his ex-wife Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma towards the ANC presidency, against Ramaphosa. There were demonstrations against Zuma and in favour of his stepping down. Eventually, newspapers not owned by the Guptas started to publish “huge batches of internal Gupta emails showing in explicit detail how billions of rand had been syphoned out of the state-owned enterprises and the extent of the state capture in which they were involved” (p. 116).

Renwick skillfully unravels the inordinate manipulations of the Guptas one by one. To make this voluminous drama shorter, let us mention that the South African parliament voted on the no-confidence motion introduced by Malema’s EFF and some other smaller parties. But this vote on 8 August 2017 failed because only 26 ANC members of parliament voted against the President. The overall result was 198 votes for to 177 votes against. Meanwhile, the Zuma supporters tried to continue in their murky machinations until the ANC voting conference in December 2017. The Zuma camp was confident in its victory. But thanks to shrewd canvassing, the Ramaphosa camp was eventually able to win by a very narrow majority. Zuma tried to save his skin but finally had to resign as President of the country. The net around the Gupta brothers and Duduzane Zuma was closing but they were able to escape justice by fleeing from the country. The British weekly *Economist* commented that “what is unusual about South Africa is not that corruption thrived, but that it did so in plain sight” (p. 217). Indeed, no criminal prosecution took place against the Guptas and other major *tenderpreneurs*.

The present president Cyril Ramaphosa is described by Renwick as “a person of great charm and also of great ability, gregarious, with an attractive personality ... proud of and committed to the constitution he helped to negotiate” (p. 193). He also claims that “there has never been any hint of corruption around Ramaphosa” (p. 194). In the early 2020s Ramaphosa was involved in what was dubbed “Farmgate” but was cleared. It should be underlined that the 2019 elections ended in a victory for the ANC and Ramaphosa was confident that the 2024 elections will be victorious too, however narrowly.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The 2024 elections were the first since 1994 in which the ANC lost the majority.

This remarkable book by Robin Renwick, based on meticulous research, personal experience and acquaintances, written in a smooth style and with scientific integrity, has been an indispensable key to understanding the logic of the decline and the possible revival of that great country which South Africa remains despite all the hiccups.

Petr Skalník<sup>a</sup>

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