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Is it just Jacob Zuma?

Shawn Hattingh

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Various columnists and opposition politicians, whether from the Democratic Alliance or the Economic Freedom Fighters, have repeatedly called for President Jacob Zuma's head. They want him out and it is often insinuated that if he were gone, things would be better in South Africa. The latest round in this saga has been the vote of no confidence recently tabled by the opposition in parliament.

Certainly Zuma's Presidency has been defined by nonstop scandal. There have been clear instances of him using his position for personal gain. News headlines repeatedly highlight how members of his family, along with his allies, have benefitted from state tenders or have been drawn into partnerships with shady businesspeople like the Guptas.

Patronage and growing repression have become features of Zuma's tenure. Marikana, the militarisation of the police as well as the police being deployed in parliament offer stark examples. Zuma has also been accused of intervening, via his

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ministers and appointees, to remove people in institutions such as the Hawks and the South African Revenue Services (SARS) that have allegedly threatened to investigate the financial scandals surrounding him and his allies.

The danger though of focusing solely on Zuma, and seeing all of the scandals as simply being linked to his clearly flawed personality, is that it runs the risk of missing the point that the events surrounding him are symptoms of much deeper problems that exist in our society.

In this regard, the elite transition that took place in South Africa is a key problem that is often overlooked. The year 1994 did not bring liberation for the working class, especially its black sections. Rather, it ushered in a deal between black and white elites. White capitalists were assured that their wealth would not be touched. In return, the ANC was allowed to take over the state. In other words, capitalism was maintained, including the harsh exploitation of the black working class, but the faces in the state changed.

ACCUMULATING WEALTH THROUGH THE STATE

In this context and given the fact that apartheid stunted the rise of black capitalists, the state became the key site through which an ANC elite could build itself into a prosperous black section of the ruling class. Sections of the ANC elite have been using the state, since 1994, to accumulate wealth in various ways including large salaries and perks for top positions in the executive, parliament, government departments and in parastatals.

This is possible under neoliberal capitalism because the state, as a structure, not only protects and furthers the interests of sections of capital, ensuring minority class rule, it also generates a section of the ruling class in the form of top politicians and top officials that head it. Those that join the state enter into positions of power and privilege. They can and do rule over others. They can and do use their positions to accumulate wealth. In fact, there's a long history of state-based elites

throughout the world, including former liberation heroes, using their positions for self-enrichment.

At times self-enrichment has also taken the form of corruption. Links to the state and/or top politicians guarantees access to black economic empowerment (BEE) opportunities via tenders, key deals related to public-private partnerships and directorships in established private corporations. This has been vital to building up the wealth of sections of the ANC leadership since 1994.

Like Zuma, both Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki (and those close to them) became rich through the state. The tendency to use the state for self-enrichment, therefore, did not just begin with Zuma and it won't end with him either.

Of course, the ANC also had its predecessors. In all of this too there are echoes of how an almost exclusively white-based ruling class, along with a 'homeland' elite, used the state to leverage opportunities for self-enrichment under apartheid.

HEAD THE STATE AT ALL COSTS

The fact that the state has been key to accumulating wealth for sections of an ANC-aligned elite has meant that competition for access to top state positions has been intense. Many factions in the ANC have wanted to and continue to seek opportunities for entry into the state and/or to have access to its resources.

Many of those who backed Zuma against Mbeki were individuals, including Julius Malema, who wanted access to top state positions, power and tender opportunities. Those who were purposefully excluded by the Mbeki faction were instrumental in backing Zuma in order to gain access to the top of the state and the wealth it would bring.

Once they had thrust their man into the presidency, the remnants of this faction – some have been excluded again like Malema – began brazenly using their connection to the president to accumulate wealth. Some received positions in the executive and in parastatals, others received tenders, and many

also used their connection to the office of the president to leverage business opportunities.

It is not an accident that the number of ministers and deputy-ministers has mushroomed under President Zuma.

With regard to Zuma himself, the benefits of heading up the state have been obvious. By one estimate, if Zuma's salary and perks such as security, vehicles and expenses for his wives, for the first term of his Presidency were added together, the cost would come to over R500 million. In fact, a recent survey revealed that Jacob Zuma is the fourth highest paid head of state in the world, surpassed only by America's Barack Obama, Canada's Stephen Harper and Germany's Angela Merkel, in that order respectively.

PROTECTING AT ALL COSTS

Using the state to accumulate wealth, however, also means that those who do so try and protect themselves and their allies from any consequences. This is the case especially if it is being done brazenly.

Interference in public institutions and the suspension of officials that have allegedly threatened to investigate the president and his allies have been about protecting Jacob Zuma along with others in the faction that promoted him.

In reality, a tendency towards protecting allies already existed during the Mandela and Mbeki administrations. In the early 2000s Mbeki, for instance, ensured that investigations into the arms deal were stalled. Mandela, too, protected ministers who were involved in scandals such as Sarafina II. Nelson Mandela, at times, used his power to push through unpopular policies such as the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic policy programme. Such actions, in all likelihood, emboldened and set a precedent that apparently enabled Zuma to intervene in institutions, such as SARS, so freely.

The reality though is that the use of power by those that head the state to try and silence potential whistle-blowers or

detractors is by no means limited to South Africa. Take the United States, for example. During Bush and Cheney's terms they openly lied in order to start a war in Iraq that proved very profitable for companies they were close to. They also granted permission to the National Security Agency to unlawfully wire-tap citizens, including critics. Yet because they headed the state, they were never brought to account – not unlike Zuma.

Meanwhile here in South Africa, many within the working class can see how white capitalists have held onto their ill-gotten wealth and how a black ruling class has joined them in a massive drive for self-enrichment. With massive unemployment, low wages and mass poverty, large sections of the working class are growing impatient and angry at the situation and are facing heavy repression for expressing their grievances, as we witnessed in Marikana and as we can see with the growing militarisation of the police.

It is evident that the scandals surrounding the Zuma regime are symptoms of much deeper problems in our society. Opposition parties can continue to believe that simply removing the president will solve our nation's problems. This is a false solution. What South Africa really needs is a proper challenge to the system that privileges wealth accumulation for the few.