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Zuma, champion of the ordinary people

Until recently, populism had been the missing note in African political culture. Enter president-elect Jacob Zuma, who recognises the demand for material improvement in the lives of his country's tens of millions of have-nots, writes G. PASCAL ZACHARY

THE anxiety over Jacob Zuma's election as president of South Africa obscures a significant milestone: for the first time in decades, a sub-Saharan nation has at its helm a champion of ordinary people.

African politics has long been the exclusive domain of aristocrats, soldiers and technocrats. Even with the spread of democratic elections, the region's leaders tend to come from the ranks of soldiers (Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe), family dynasties (Togo, Kenya, etc), or university professors, lawyers, and economists (Ghana, Malawi, Liberia).

Now South Africa, the region's economic engine and home to its most sophisticated universities, media, and corporations, has a former goat herder at its helm, a rare African leader with the common touch.

Zuma is legendary for his ability to connect with ordinary people. He's secure enough to dance and sing in public. He speaks the language of populism, raising hopes for the vast majority of South Africans who daily endure the misery of poor housing, schools and health care.

In contrast to his two predecessors — the saintly Nelson Mandela, who emphasised racial healing, and the aristocratic Thabo Mbeki, who reassured financiers with his strong grasp of macroeconomics — Zuma recognises the pent-up demand for material improvement in the lives of his country's tens of millions of have-nots.

"We have learned from the mistakes of the past 15 years, especially the manner of which we may have, to some degree, neglected the people's movement," he said this month, before his African National Congress swept to victory.

Until now, populism has been the missing note in African political culture. Zuma, who spent his youth herding cattle and only gained formal education while in the notorious Robben Island prison with Mandela, is refreshingly aware that Africa's biggest problem is its inequalities, not its global marginalisation.



Jacob Zuma's populist appeal reflects South Africa's large differences in economic class. — AFP picture

In Africa's wealthiest nation — but also the nation where wealth is most unequally shared — a bold populist now holds ultimate power over government policy.

Yet, while Zuma's populist appeal reflects South Africa's especially large differences in economic class, the threat of imposing higher taxes and other obligations on employers and the wealthy has raised fears at home and internationally. Moreover, Zuma has been called a chameleon, accused of telling his audiences what they want to hear.

Zuma's turbulent personal life — many wives and his embarrassing contention during a rape trial that he avoided HIV infection by taking a shower — has invited ridicule. Most seriously, doubts persist about his commitment to democracy, with critics arguing he's an old-style African "big man" ready to bully opponents and ravage

the public coffers with his cronies.

Dismissive complaints, Zuma insists: "There's no cloud around me."

His defenders, meanwhile, point to two benefits that he has already delivered: an end to Mbeki's ambivalent approach to fighting HIV/AIDS, the country's major public health threat, and a refreshing willingness to move against Zimbabwe's aged dictator, Robert Mugabe, whom Mbeki coddled out of a misguided sense of loyalty for his support during the struggle against apartheid.

In an Africa bereft of successful populist politicians, Zuma's role models may come from Latin America, where income inequality is also extreme and the trade union movement, as in South Africa, is strong and militant.

With enormous pressure from ordinary people to deliver tangible gains, Zuma the pop-

ulist will quickly face a major test: will he emulate Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, who has struck an admirable balance between good economic governance and redistribution of wealth to the poor?

Or will he follow the path of Hugo Chavez, a popular autocrat who seems to prefer building a cult of personality over raising living standards for the poor?

The stakes for Africa are enormous. South Africa has the continent's largest economy and, until the global financial crisis, posted 10 years of steady economic growth. In an economic slowdown, the country's severe crime problem might only worsen; so might unemployment, which already tops 20 per cent in the formal economy.

Zuma senses the urgency of the situation. He is, after all, 67 and likely to serve only a single term in office. "We can't waste time," he says.

Yet, according to the political economist Moeletsi Mbeki, at his core, "Zuma is a conservative". In this sense, Zuma represents yesterday's South Africa. He is part of the proud generation that defeated apartheid, and then peacefully engineered a transition to durable black-majority rule. Their achievement remains one of the greatest in recent history.

At the same time, Zuma's revolutionary generation still seems uneasy leading South Africa in a post-apartheid era that is now 15 years old. In a region that reveres the elderly, Zuma's attachment to his rural traditions must be matched by an equal openness to the appetites of the country's youth.

Three in 10 South Africans are younger than 15, meaning that they did not live a day under apartheid. Somehow Zuma must find a way to honour his own generation's commitment to racial justice and national liberation, while empowering the masses who daily suffer the sting of class differences and yearn for material gain. — Project Syndicate

■ The writer is the author of *Married to Africa*, a memoir.