



Seminar Summary Report “Mbeki’s Dramatic Departure from the Union Buildings – What Implications for South Africa”

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The seminar aimed to analyze the decision made by the African National Congress (ANC) party to recall former President Thabo Mbeki from his presidency and the implication it has on the ANC, the country at large and the continent. In this regard, the presenter tried to point out the events and developments that induced the recent resignation of Mbeki. He mentioned that though the official reasons provided for the decision of the ANC to recall Mbeki was the fact that he was implicated in the high court case prosecuting current ANC president Jacob Zuma, the real reason behind it lays on the need to ensure a strong and united ruling party.

Many observers speculated that members of the ANC who are in disagreement to the recall of Mbeki will leave the ANC to form their own party and this will in turn lead to the fragmentation of the ANC. However, the presenter dismissed the aforementioned concern as an unlikely scenario since it would be in complete contrary to Mbeki's interest. He noted that Mbeki's acceptance of the decision made by the National Executive Committee of the ANC without resistance or attempts to embarrass the party, to which he has been a loyal member to since teenager, would show that he favors his party's cohesion and unity more than anything.

The presenter further discussed the implications of the resignation of President Mbeki both in terms of the economic and foreign policy of the country. He noted that there are concerns with in and outside of South Africa with regards to changes in the country's

policy following the coming of the new administration. However, the actions and statements of the new administration of President Motlanthe have sought to reassure South Africans and the international partners that there will be no changes to policies pursued by the previous administration. According to the presenter this is illustrated with the retention of many members of former President Mbeki's cabinet in key positions, like the Ministry of Finance and Trade and Industry. Moreover, Motlanthe's address to the nation on 28 September 2008 reassuring that his administration will continue to support policies pursued by Mbeki, shows his commitment to maintain the status quo.

It was also argued that the current change in leadership within a party is not limited to the case of ANC only. It is seen in many cases; like in the case of UK with the Labor Party, in Israel with the Liquid Party, or like in the case of Japan with the Liberal Democratic Party. Though it is to be noted that the way this transitions are being handled will impact on how parties will move forward in their future.

The speaker finally concluded his presentation by pointing out three points that needed to be underscored about the recent development in South Africa. First, South Africa as a country and the ANC as a ruling party need to ensure that the current political dynamics is motivated in order to promote the democratic process and keep the interest of majority South African. Secondly, the new administration needs to consolidate the achievements made during the time of Mbeki's administration, while taking lessons from its shortcomings. Lastly, the speaker emphasized his concern that like in many other cases in the continent, the current dynamics in South Africa should not mark the beginnings of retribution, recriminations and promotion of interests of the few.

During the discussion time, the issue of constitutionality with regard to ANC's decision in recalling Mbeki has been discussed thoroughly. It has been noted that the South African Constitution clearly states about the scenarios in which the president should be removed from his post. A President will be removed from office when there is a serious violation of the Constitution or law; serious misconduct; or inability to perform duties in office. However, in the case of Mbeki, none of the above three scenarios applies for

him. But the fact that the ANC used the term “*recall*” rather than “*dismiss*” or “*remove*” keeps the party’s action within the constitutional practice. On top of this, Mbeki’s response in going along with ANC’s decision and giving his resignation to the Parliament (the proper government body to address such issues) shows that there is no breach of the Constitution. Furthermore, since the people get to elect political parties and it is party’s duty to assign whoever they think will suit the office, it is justified that the party can recall its appointee. However, it has been mentioned that once a person is elected as president, he/she would become the leader of the nation rather than the party. Therefore, recalling or dismissing the President would have a serious impact on the country.

Further, the issue of Mbeki’s mediation role in the continent has also been discussed. It has been argued that the fact that Mbeki is no more the president of South Africa will give him the chance to dedicate all his personal skills to successfully mediate conflicting parties. Though there are also concerns with the fact that since Mbeki is no more the president, he might lose his influence in the continuation of mediations like before. This could especially happen in cases where the ANC thinks differently from what Mbeki has accomplished so far through his quite diplomacy.

Finally, all being said about Mbeki’s gracious departure from the office, which emphasized the primacy of institutions over individual interests, there is a need to focus on the message it gives to other political parties, especially in Africa.