

The Star's Mbeki legacy debate: Shilowa, Phosa let it loose

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Emotions ran high last night, Tuesday, 14 October 2008, at the Atlas Studios in Milpark, Johannesburg, where ANC treasurer-general Matthews Phosa and former Gauteng Premier Mbhazima Shilowa exchanged heated words over the legacy of Thabo Mbeki. The hall was packed to capacity of people of all walks of life attending the debate on Mbeki's legacy hosted by *The Star* newspaper. Panelists included Mo Shaik, Dr Barney Pityana, JJ Tabane and Dr Essop Pahad.

Shilowa, who resigned in show of support over Mbeki's unceremonious dumping by the ANC, said Mbeki will always be remembered for providing SA with functioning institutions of government, empowering women, and his sound economic policies that partly helped SA survive the global financial storm and his internationalism's negotiating skills.

But Phosa slashed Mbeki's credentials, saying the former president was an absentee leader who was well-disconnected with the ANC and the masses. "He washed his hands and looked away while his fellow leaders were bleeding and the nation was being embarrassed over the arms deal, was too soft on Zimbabwe, and wasted precious time to address the issue of HIV/Aids while millions of people were dying of Aids.

"During the xenophobic violence that ashamed the nation, he let us down badly by failing to act speedily and visit even one hotspot of violence. We need a leader that is close to its people if we are to achieve a better life of all. And as a result of that, we are now suffering from a crisis of expectations," he said.

Sparred vehemently

The two politicians then sparred vehemently, with Phosa defending JZ in all angles and reminding Shilowa that he [Phosa], Cyril Ramaphosa and Tokyo Sexwale were unfairly accused on national TV of plotting to overthrow Mbeki.

Shilowa lashed at ANC and Jacob Zuma over the lack of consistency in dealing with the issue of political conspiracy and other matters. He said: "We all agreed at a meeting and a document was signed officially stating that there was no political conspiracy against JZ, but still he went to court and said that there was conspiracy against him."

Before leaving to attend to other commitments, Shilowa walked over to Phosa and said: "The guilty are afraid." He then left hastily amid the crowd's joy and ovation.

Many delegates said that the heated argument between the two political heavyweights and comrades - both defending their 'masters' - clearly demonstrated that the ANC was highly divided and was on the brink of inevitably splitting.

UNISA vice-chancellor Dr Pityana said South Africans need to appreciate Mbeki's presidency because of his intellectualism, his clear leadership and his consultative manner to lead government.

"Mbeki took very seriously the responsibilities of government and epitomised the values of government founded on law and the Constitution.

"But he was of a very complex character. It is a pity journalists spoke of him in simplistic terms without understanding the true meaning of his message."

Under-communicator

Political commentator and businessman Tabane called Mbeki an under-communicator who never seemed to explain himself well and who left a party highly divided and a weak alliance.

"But it is not fair to define Mbeki's presidency and legacy on Aids, JZ and Zimbabwe. The impact of his presidency will go a long way and his legacy will be judged by history. Mbeki was a midwife of SA's economic stability on a mandate of the ANC and steered a solid economic growth never experienced in this country's history," Tabane said.

Shaik, a former SA ambassador to Algeria and brother of convicted fraudster and jailed businessman Shabir Shaik, said there was no doubt Mbeki was a leader armed with an incredible amount of internationalism and intellectualism credentials. He also said praised him for the country's economic boom.

But he said, "He was a sophisticated man who had an excessive amount of policies and attempted to do everything for everyone in 10 years. As a result, we now lack a sustainable capacity within the public service to deal with critical issues we are grappling with. This led to a deterioration of public services and service delivery."

The proceedings were coordinated by Xolani Gwala of the SABC.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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