

Zulu impis will cling to power in 2019

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RW Johnson predicts tough times – but all may not be lost.

The really big difference arising from South Africa's recent local government elections is that they considerably weakened President Jacob Zuma's ability to control the succession race – and dispense patronage.

Zuma's hopes for his ex-wife Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma to succeed him could well have been dashed – leaving Zweli Mkhize (ANC Treasurer and former KwaZulu-Natal premier) as his most likely successor.

This is the view of political scientist and author RW Johnson, interviewed by Noseweek in his office at his home in Constantia, Cape Town.

“Many people feel that Zuma cost the ANC a lot of votes – which he did,” said Johnson. “The ANC lost something like 1,000 council seats around the country in the election. And those are not the only losses. Many ANC people working in the administrations of Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Pretoria will now lose their jobs because they are ANC cadres whose positions were based only on tenders and contracts. They were damn useless at their jobs.

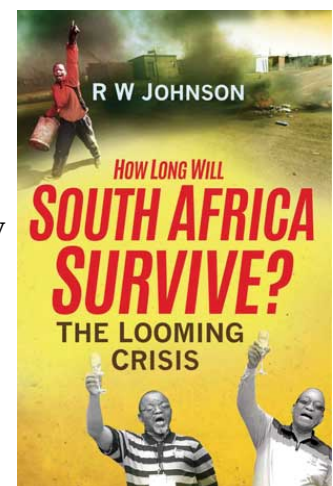
“Add all that up and thousands of people in the ANC will lose their jobs and salaries as a direct result of these elections.

“In other words, Zuma's decline has now cost them enormous amounts in patronage.”

The reason for the turnaround on Dlamini-Zuma, Johnson explained, is that people will see her as “a continuation of Zuma by other means”. While his ability to control the succession will be a lot weaker than it was, “this doesn't mean he will be chucked out,” says Johnson, “but it does mean other possibilities are now much stronger and that Zweli Mkhize is the most likely successor to Jacob Zuma as president.”

In his most recent book, *How Long Will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis* (2015), Johnson concluded that South Africa was on its way to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout, followed by regime change. And that while Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa “clearly wants” the position of president, “I don't see how he can possibly get it, unless there's a sudden change or if Mkhize wants him to get it”.

“Mkhize is in the pound seats here. It's a very interesting situation,” Johnson said. He explains: “A key reason for Mkhize's rise is simply because he has his base in KwaZulu-Natal, which is the critical



province.”

An Emeritus Fellow of Magdalen College, Johnson, 73, has published 12 books, numerous academic papers and many articles for the international press. He recently completed an analysis of the local election results.

His book on Oxford, *Look Back in Laughter – Oxford’s Post-War Golden Age*, came out at the same time last year as *How Long Will SA Survive?* The Oxford book was described by *The Times Literary Supplement* as “a marvelous memoir about his three decades in Oxford”.

Behind his desk is a photograph of an Oxford group taught by Johnson: his former students include Britain’s Health Minister, Jeremy Hunt, former Foreign Secretary William Hague, former Minister of Energy, Chris Huhne, as well as Gareth Evans, Chancellor of Australian National University.

In 1977, Johnson’s then top-selling book (also titled *How Long Will SA Survive?*) gave a compelling analysis of the survival prospects of the apartheid government. He looked at how long it would be before the ruling white establishment encountered a regime crisis. The second book of the same title takes the position that the situation in South Africa after 20 years of ANC rule is so bad that we need to ask the same question again.

Considered by some to be a man of controversial views – he doesn’t hesitate to use words like “tribalism” and “buffoonery” – Johnson remains an internationally recognised commentator on South African affairs, known for his frank analysis and lack of political correctness.

Christine Qunta, one-time ANC lawyer and former SABC board member, denounced him for his references to tribalism.

Reviewing Johnson’s book, former US diplomat Brooks Spector calls the author “a kind of a contemporary South African Cassandra, telling all who will listen or read his predictions, repeatedly, that South Africa as it is presently constituted and governed is headed down a seriously steep, nearly inevitable downward trajectory to a very bad end, ever-accelerating as it heads ever downward...”

Rian Malan, an old friend of Johnson’s, noted in *The Spectator* last year that, despite Johnson’s publishing and academic record, he has been “shunned by local book fairs and banished from our op-ed pages”.

Johnson’s latest book, said Malan, had been “greeted by an ominous

silence here in South Africa, making its way on to local best-seller lists without any review attention, not even attacks from Johnson’s enemies”.

“It seems even they are reconciled to the fact that Johnson is right again. South Africa is in crisis,” wrote Malan.

Johnson, who labels himself a social democrat, is bemused by his reputation as a reactionary and controversial commentator.

Having, through the years, seen developments in South Africa from an economic perspective, he believes the country can either choose to have an ANC government or a modern industrial economy. “It can’t have both.”

He believes South Africa has “a complete misfit government. “We are being ruled by an elite and a party that is completely inappropriate to run a country of this type.

“They’re not sufficiently experienced, skilled or educated to be able to do it and, in a way, it’s not their fault. But... if they continue to be in charge, it is inevitable that things will get worse... As you can see, the political situation is changing.”

He scoffs when asked if South Africa has reached its darkest hour? “Good heavens, no... there is much leeway for things to get a lot worse.”

Johnson has long voiced concern that, while manufacturing and mining

industries are decreasing, the public sector – which pays big salaries to a bloated civil service – is the one sector that continues to grow.

“I have been saying these things since the middle of the 90s – and everyone said how reactionary and right-wing I was. I have found it strange... as throughout my life I have had friends around the world, but somehow I have got this purely local reputation as a right-winger. I am certainly not seen that way in Britain, but... you put up with that.

“As things go by, I find that more and more of the people who were attacking me have either emigrated or gone very quiet. And when I bump into them, I find that they agree with me entirely. It is not clear where we disagree,” he told *Noseweek*.

Johnson has long maintained that Durban is the core of the battle being fought in the ANC at national level. No matter how controversial it may sound, he says, it is highly significant that ANC membership is higher in KwaZulu-Natal than anywhere else. He also says the effects of a large tribal vote – ie the “Zulu bloc” – should not be underestimated.

In a recent address to the Cape Town Press Club, Johnson said one possible scenario that could play out was that the faction forming around Mkhize would work in alliance with Ramaphosa – with Mkhize bringing the Zulu vote behind Ramaphosa as president. Mkhize would then support Ramaphosa as interim president of the ANC from 2017, and then of the country from 2019, with Mkhize becoming deputy president and, ultimately president.

But, in our interview, Johnson downplayed the “happy assumption” that Ramaphosa will step into

the position as president. “It depends how

it happens. If Zuma had a heart attack, or something like that and he suddenly had to go, then obviously the deputy president would succeed and Ramaphosa would come in, but if it is done in the usual way by a conference and a long build-up, with martialling of votes in the provinces etc, I don’t think Ramaphosa has a hope. That’s because he is a Venda. He doesn’t even have his own province, Limpopo, behind him and Vendas are not very popular elsewhere.

“I laid it out in the book... If you look at it, once the ANC became a serious party... by about 1952, they chose Luthuli, after which they chose Mandela, then Tambo, then Mbeki, then Zuma as leaders. Every single one of them is Nguni. They are all either Zulus or Xhosas.

“That group has it sewn up. They’ve had the leadership now for over 50 years. It takes a bold person to bet that a Venda will break that line. The betting has to be on a Zulu.”

One wonders what the relatively low-profile Mkhize – believed to have fallen out with Zuma in recent times – would be thinking at the moment.

“Mkhize must be in a difficult situation because he knows if he decides to run – the minute that becomes visible – Zuma will try everything to stop him. Zuma wants his ex-wife to succeed him, because he wants someone who will do for him what Ford did for Nixon, to give him immediate amnesties etc.

“He strongly believes his ex-wife will not let her children’s father be put in jail, or be humiliated. That is why she’s his safest bet... He can trust her and she’s a Zulu so that keeps her on the inside track.

“I think Zweli Mkhize, who is no doubt ambitious, can see the situation. Remember, he was not just head of the party in KZN, he was premier as well. So he really was the key man. Mkhize was also one of the key people behind Zuma’s accession to the presidency and could have had any ministry he wanted when Zuma came to power in 2009.

“But what did he want? He wanted to stay and be boss in KZN because that is the base. That’s what really matters. If you’re a Zulu, that’s the key thing. He has that going for him, in a big way, but he also knows that, at the moment, there are tremendous factional fights going on in KZN. Yet no matter which faction... they will all say they support Zuma... because, for KZN ANC politicians, whatever their faction, he is ‘our boy’... it means ‘us’ in power.

“It means Durban is the capital of the country. It means we get all sorts of pork barrel that others don’t, we get the Commonwealth Games, the new airport... he who controls Durban will control much of the province and, in turn, the ANC, and the country.

“They understand all that. This is the basic reason why it’s difficult to get rid of Zuma. [ANC Secretary-General] Gwede Mantashe literally gave the game away when he said the split (into

Cope) that took place when the ANC got rid of Mbeki, would be nothing compared to what would happen with Zuma.

“What he meant is, if they chucked out the first Zulu leader in 50 years, there would be holy hell from KZN. They would not stand for that... and Zulus are much more cohesive than Xhosas. Zulus have one king and see themselves as one group. They would not take that lying down.

“Think back to when Vorster was president and Buthelezi was the most outspoken African leader... who would continually say, ‘we demand universal suffrage’, ‘release Mandela’ and ‘unban the ANC’ etc. Vorster was furious... but he knew what half a million angry Zulus could do... knew that was a force to be reckoned with. I think now the ANC government feels just the same.”

In the book, Johnson details how the “Zuma system” actually works and succeeds in making the reader breathless with the realisation that things in South Africa are much worse than ever. For example: key Zuma appointments included the confirmation of Ace Magashule – legendary for corruption – as premier of the Free State.

“It was pure Tammany politics: Magashule was allowed to turn the Free State into his own private kingdom, making him immensely rich – in return for which he gave Zuma total loyalty. The result was the formation of a political alliance between KZN and the neighbouring provinces of Mpumalanga (where Premier David Mabuza ran a similarly corrupt fiefdom) and the Free State, creating a pro-Zuma bloc which controlled some 40% of the votes at any ANC conference. In effect Zuma had thus already insured himself against any possibility of the sort of insurrection that had deposed (his predecessor, Thabo) Mbeki.

“A similar deal was done in Limpopo province, where Cassel Mathale became premier. In the Northern Cape, the ANC provincial chairman, John Block, became the pivotal figure in a similar web of corruption, revolving – as such things generally did – around tenders and procurement. The same applied exactly to the MK veterans. Thus the Zuma system. In effect, provincial premiers and party bosses were given a licence to plunder, provided they stayed loyal to the chief at the centre. Since the chief and his family were themselves getting rich at a great rate, everyone understood the game.”

The ANC, said Johnson, is currently dissolved into factions and into “regional warlords” who control different parts of the country. “It’s a bit like a medieval kingdom. You have a king who has to sign off on who is going to become a premier. The premiership is a licence to loot. Then the premier, in, say, Free State or Mpumalanga, makes damn sure he controls who becomes mayor – and being mayor is a licence to loot in the towns. That is basically how it works and so on down.

“The medieval king would do this with his barons and he would allow them to loot... but there would always be a limit. The understanding is that they must not go too far. The king does not want a peasant revolt.

“The main thing is, if there’s a war, you have to get troops to fight for me,



you owe me your loyalty and you must make sure taxes get paid from there into my national treasury. That was the deal.”

In his book, Johnson cites the figures for what happened at the last ANC conference in Mangaung.

“Then there were three in the premier league, KZN, the Free State and Mpumalanga. When they got to voting for Zuma or (Kgalema) Motlanthe, the Free State voted, for Zuma 324, Motlanthe nil. KZN voted 858 to nil for Zuma and Mpumalanga voted 427 to 17. Once those three provinces have voted, the game is over. That’s already 40% of the whole conference rounded up for Zuma. He only needed another ten from the remaining six provinces. If you look at it, you find that in the other six provinces, he did no better than even-stevens with Motlanthe. He lost a number of them but of course it didn’t matter.

“That is the basis of Zuma’s power – why, despite all the talk and prophesying for six or nine months now, saying that the ANC must surely now get rid of Zuma, it ain’t happening.

“Also, if you look at the NEC, 85% of the membership hold public sector jobs of one kind or another, which ultimately are under Zuma’s control. They are either in Parliament or in provincial legislatures or the civil service in one way or another... so all of those jobs are potentially within Zuma’s gift. It’s all about patronage.

“Of course, the heart of the matter is KZN... and what we have now is the premier league people saying, ‘Oh please won’t you stay for another term’ and if he can’t or won’t then of course they’ll go for Nkosazana. That is why she is a possible.

“But the recent local elections have most definitely weakened Jacob Zuma’s ability to control the succession.”

Asked for his predictions for the months ahead, Johnson said: “Firstly, I think the downgrade is very likely by the end of the year, but the details will make a lot of difference. The question is, will we be downgraded by one, two or three of the credit ratings agencies? One is bearable; three is very bad.”

Johnson does not think an IMF bailout will follow easily. “If there was a downgrade, the logical thing to do would be to say, ‘crikey we’re in a hell of a mess,’ and say to the IMF, ‘We don’t want Africa’s greatest non-racial democracy to go down the tubes, we need a big loan, please, and with that we will deal with all our problems.’

“That would be rational, but the politics is that the ANC and the SACP can’t bear the conditionalities that would come with it, and would resist that for all they are worth.

“So, what I fear is that there will be a downgrade and that, instead of going to the IMF, we will drag along the bottom like a ship dragging an anchor and not get out of the mess. Because, frankly, on their own, without that sort of external help, they will not get out of the mess – if anything, they will compound it. And all those patronage seekers... are as hungry as ever and a lot of them have now

lost positions in cities, so the patronage won't stop and those pressures are inimical to good governance."

Johnson believes that if and when an IMF bailout with conditionalities takes place, "that will be almost the end of the ANC, as they will be bound to split at that point".

"The Communist party can't survive that and nor can Cosatu. That would be a rubicon...

"That is why they will resist having it, as they know it is the Rubicon they don't want to cross." But such a scenario will take a while to develop. "I doubt whether it will happen in a year."

Johnson believes South Africa is in for a tough 2017. "In fact, we're in for a tough time until the next elections. Only then will we get a new president in charge.

"Nkosazana Zuma would be bad news. She is dreadful – authoritarian and very ideological. She was a terrible Minister of Health and has not been good at anything, really. Also, she will be well over 70, which is a ridiculous age to take on the presidency. I don't even think she is that keen.

"I think we will be carrying the can for the downgrade, and of course there will be all sorts of politicking going on in advance of the ANC conference and elections so a lot of important realities won't be treated as realities."

What is it about Jacob Zuma that enables him to sustain an attitude of blatant denial about what is happening in South Africa?

"I doubt very much that Jacob Zuma is in denial about what is happening in South Africa. He is a shrewd and practical man, not given to Thabo's grand visions and flights of fancy.

"I think one should take deadly seriously Mamphela Ramphele's observation that we are governed by thieves. I doubt if there is a single member of the cabinet or even the deputy ministers, who are not thieves. Probably only a few of the white Communists like Cronin and Davies are clean. Perhaps not even all of them.

"One person well in the know suggested to me last week that it really would be best if, on appointment to a minister/deputy-minister job, one was immediately given R100 million, since everyone steals at least that much and then it would be out of the way and they could just get on with their jobs. This is the world Zuma inhabits and presides over and I am sure he is conscious of every detail."

Who are the "up-and-comings" in the ANC?

"We are generally told that the Young Turks of the ANC are Fikile Mbalula and Malusi Gigaba. Mbalula is simply a buffoon, a figure of fun. It is completely ludicrous that he had the ambition of displacing Mantashe as ANC Secretary General. It suggests he has a very large and unrealistic ego,

so one may be sure the buffoonery will continue, contributing to the general gaiety.

“Gigaba is the genius who ordered that there be no maintenance work done at Eskom during the World Cup season, thus creating a disastrous maintenance backlog. He then followed that up by introducing the visa regulations that did billions of rands of damage to the country’s tourist industry. It is all rather like the ANC having had a disinvestment campaign under apartheid – but in power, it is even better at achieving disinvestment.”

What are your predictions for the 2019 elections?

“There are lots of silly predictions being made about 2019. In 2016 the DA managed to get exactly half the percentage vote that the ANC got. The ANC will also do far better in a general election and with a new leader. The imponderable is the economic fallout from our probable credit downgrade before then.”

Black and white South Africans alike are deeply concerned about the country, Johnson said.

“They are used to this being a country that works and can see that large parts of it aren’t.

“Things could get worse... but I’m an optimist, in the sense that we’ve come through so many bad things as a country: just think of the Anglo Boer War, the Depression, the Second World War and apartheid. These were all terrible experiences, and we’ve come through all of them and the country has grown more prosperous throughout and things have basically improved over the century. I do think that, in the end, one should be optimistic that the longer term trajectory will resume. It’s what everybody wants.”

The making of a keen observer

RW Johnson, the eldest boy of six children, was born in 1943 into a working class family on Merseyside “opposite Liverpool, overlooking the docks”. His father, Stanley, was an engineer on tankers. His mother, Elsie, left school at 14 but instilled in her children a passion for books. When RW was 13, the family moved to Durban when his father was asked to set up a refuelling base.

As a “fair-skinned, red-headed” teen, Johnson found it difficult to adjust to Durban’s beach culture. He attended Northlands High School, “a blackboard jungle school, with drunken teachers and no discipline” where, “we had to teach ourselves as the teachers were AWOL.” Nevertheless, he grew to love Durban.

Johnson grew up with strong egalitarian, “leftward” ideas and was fascinated by politics and “very challenged” by apartheid, which was “full of moral issues”.

After school he completed a BA at the (then) University of Natal, where he was on the SRC, did “a bit of sport” and worked on the student newspaper, *The Dome*. He was elected to the SRC on the liberal slate but took part in a number of leftist activities, like trying to integrate social functions between race groups on campus.

“At the University of Natal, they kept a black medical school... and there was a whole campus of black students known as the University of Natal Non-European Section.

“Myself and other students wanted to integrate functions like rag and graduation boards etc.”

Johnson, the first member of his family to go to university, got nine firsts and an upper second, and was a 1964 Rhodes Scholar.

He completed a M.Phil. MA at Oxford and was a fellow and tutor in Politics at Magdalen College, Oxford, for 26 years, from 1969 to 1995. During this period he was a visiting lecturer and professor at the University of Natal, UCT, the Sorbonne and Stanford.

He decided to return to South Africa and became director of the Helen Suzman Foundation from 1995 until 2001.

Johnson was Southern Africa correspondent for the *Sunday Times* in London for years and wrote for the *London Review of Books* and others.

In 2009, Johnson's left foot was injured while he was swimming and became infected with necrotising fasciitis. The leg had to be amputated above the knee.

Johnson is married to Professor Irina Filatova, an author who has dual Russian-South African citizenship and who was previously head of the African Studies Department at Moscow State University and an Emeritus Professor of UKZN.

“Amazingly, Irina has never been invited to any book festival in South Africa even though she is probably this country's most distinguished Africanist. She puts this down to having such a politically incorrect husband.”

Johnson's plans include, “a further memoir, a book about the future of Africa, and maybe a book about the future of social democracy” which, he says is in a bad way everywhere.

When not writing about politics, he listens to music, particularly early rock and roll. “But my chief enjoyment is going out to restaurants and talking.”

“From all those years in Oxford, I got used to having extremely interesting friends... Tories, Trotskyites and Liberals. It doesn't matter to me. They're all interesting. In this country, there's this assumption that, if people disagree with you, they're your enemy.”

He also swims in the pool – which he finds much more difficult with one leg. “I can't do the long walks I used to love, or run into the waves. Those things are gone from me.”

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- See more at: <http://www.noseweek.co.za/article/3761/Zulu-impis-will-cling-to-power-in-2019#sthash.gBbXgazp.dpuf>