
Professor Adekeye Adebajo has written an elegant and insightful book about the life and times of Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki, the first Deputy President and the second President of post-apartheid South Africa. Mbeki was born in 1942 to Govan and Epainette Mbeki, who were middle-class Christian parents. His father, Govan, was a peer to both Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, then foremost African nationalists and liberation warriors. Like Mandela, the older Mbeki was influenced by young Marxists at Fort Hare. Although Thabo Mbeki was ideologically influenced by these giants of African liberation, his political ideology evolved from being left-leaning to a lot more pragmatic approach.

In specific terms, Professor Adebajo disclosed that there is a chance that, if the charismatic ANC leader Chris Hani had not met his tragic death, Thabo Mbeki might have missed out becoming South Africa’s President (p. 68-9). In other words, Mbeki was not the initial choice of the rank-and-file of the ANC adherents, even though Hani himself “had great respect for his [Thabo Mbeki’s] intellect” (p. 43). Yet, one cannot ignore the facts that Mbeki’s pedigree and his own astuteness, as a leader of the ANC in exile, endeared him to the liberation movement’s core leadership, including then ANC President Oliver Tambo.

As the author notes, Thabo Mbeki served under Oliver Tambo as his political secretary when they were based in Lusaka, Zambia. In the position, Mbeki drafted Tambo’s speeches and became his major confidant. In many ways, his closeness to Tambo also gave him a chance to serve as the *de facto* custodian of ANC’s assets, especially when Tambo was travelling on his numerous international assignments. Eventually, Mbeki himself became a “globe-trotting ANC diplomat”, which provided him with extensive international networks that explain an important part of his presidential style.

Since Mbeki’s term as President of South Africa did not end on a high note, one might be inclined to think that Adebajo’s work is an attempt to resurrect
Mbeki from the dustbin of history, but that is not quite so. Instead, the author skillfully places Mbeki among Africa’s greatest leaders, a giant of sorts. Adebajo is very successful at weaving through complexities of African history and the exigencies of the global political economy to provide a truly refreshing narrative on the enduring need for freedom and dignity of African people. Stated differently, readers learn that Mbeki’s ideas and legacy are about bequeathing Africans with hope to overcome oppression and build societies that are prosperous.

Meanwhile, there is more to the significance of his formative years within the liberation movement. He was considered a foremost thinker, who Adebajo includes among the list of Africa’s philosophers – kings, to borrow from Plato’s Republic. He added that Mbeki’s political philosophy was couched in deep moralism, which the author compares to that of Africa’s political giants like Ghana’s late President Kwame Nkrumah. He notes, however, that while Nkrumah was instrumental in the formation of the Organization of African Unity, Mbeki was at the fore of the establishment of the African Union (AU). Furthermore, he recognizes that the two leaders were about the promotion of an African Renaissance as well as reclaiming of its past glory.

Professor Adebajo also depicts Mbeki as a prophetic leader and a revolutionary, explaining that the future South African President showed his prophetic tendencies through his lyrical oratory and vision of an African Renaissance. He adds adding that Mbeki had the desire for Africa’s economic development and political freedom, while he wished to see Africa would achieve rapid economic transformation and eradication of poverty through a more risk averse and pragmatic strategy. Different from the ideological doctrinaire positions of his father (Govan).

Even though Thabo Mbeki contributed to the African Communist publication, it was a fact that its influence on him waned with time. For example, the author has shown that the young Mbeki rejected Joe Slovo’s attempt to move the ANC towards a social path, as Mbeki termed it suicidal and unrealistic. Perhaps, his growing up very distant from the elder Mbeki turned out to help in cementing his pragmatic approach to economic development. Yet, several facts in the book demonstrate that he was also a student of his father, in the sense that his Govan did inspire him to excel intellectually and politically (p. 29).

Mbeki’s pragmatism is evident from both his role as Deputy President under Mandela and, later, as the President of South Africa and as a global peacemaker (p. 37). In fact, Adebajo disclosed further that Mbeki was Mandela’s de facto prime minister and a defender of ANC’s core values.