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23 May 2008
POPULARITY STAKES
Waning star

By Matebello Motloung

Three years ago, President Thabo Mbeki was regarded as the most powerful man in Africa, voted among *Time* magazine's top 100 most influential leaders and revolutionaries.

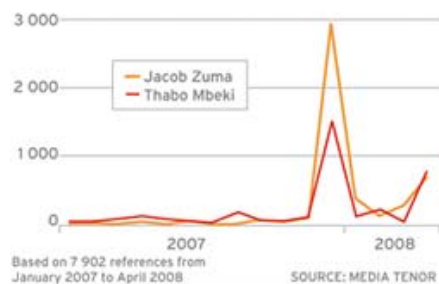
To say he was the darling of the West would be putting it mildly. Through his African renaissance vision - meant to inspire a sense of pride, patronage and self-determination among millions of Africans - Mbeki was seen as the man who would finally lead the continent into a new chapter of its history after colonisation and independence.

Ironically, Mbeki's star power began to diminish in that same year, 2005. Until then, his coverage in the international media had been positive around issues of foreign and economic policy, according to research by data-gathering and analysis body Media Tenor.

MD Wadim Schreiner says while the issue of Mbeki's position on HIV/Aids emerged early and continued to be mentioned in the media, it was overshadowed to some extent by the success story of SA's economic developments and improved living conditions.

MEDIA COVERAGE: ZUMA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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But Mbeki's dismissal of deputy health minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge proved to be his demise. Says Schreiner: "Media Tenor's database shows that the negative coverage started first in the national media, before it spilled over to the international platforms."

"In the past two years, the first significant blow to Mbeki's image was the handling of Madlala-Routledge's dismissal. While health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's attendance of the Toronto Aids conference was worth a number of disbelieving jokes, the reaction to the reasons for the dismissal of her deputy drew harsh criticism."

Schreiner says the awarding of the 2010 soccer World Cup to SA meant closer international media scrutiny on the country, the same way Greece was treated when it hosted the Olympic Games in Athens.

"In that light, crime became a major issue in international media in relation to SA. Added to this was [Jacob] Zuma's court case and the chances of him becoming ANC president and possibly, later, the country's president. Then followed Jackie Selebi and Vusi Pikoli."

In January 2007, international coverage around Mbeki was neutral. Then, in October, it fell to minus 50% after he suspended Scorpions boss Pikoli, allegedly because Pikoli wanted to arrest national police commissioner Selebi.

At the same time, Zuma's coverage was at a record low, with 80% more negative than positive coverage.

"Zuma's problem was the perception created during the rape trial, and the pending corruption trial. Essentially, these were the only negative issues attributed to him," Schreiner explains.

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In December 2007, during Polokwane, Mbeki and Zuma enjoyed equally critical coverage. Mbeki's humiliating defeat in Limpopo was the final nail in the coffin. However, Zuma's popularity has since risen. In the latest standings, Zuma enjoyed a positive 15% coverage in international media in April compared with a negative 50% coverage of Mbeki (see graph).

Mbeki's fallout with the media started with his dissident stance on Aids and soon extended to his denialist attitude on crime, Zimbabwe, Tshabalala-Msimang, Selebi, Pikoli and Eskom.

"The difference in reporting was largely that Mbeki had to deal with policy issues, and the response looked like spin. Zuma, on the other hand, was only lately forced to deal with policy issues," says Schreiner.

The Eskom electricity crisis and Mbeki's support of Robert Mugabe during the Zimbabwe elections has further played to the president's unpopularity.

The tables have turned: this year it is Zuma who has been selected by *Time* as one of its 100 most influential leaders.



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