

One year ago

12 June 2018

Winston Churchill famously said 'the farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.' Let's take a break from all the political noise around us, look back over the last year and see what we can learn about the country.

June 2017

It was in June 2017 that the Gupta emails began to seep into the public domain. First they were ridiculed, vigorously denied and aspersions cast on them.... eventually they were unchallenged.

A year later there is a judicial commission of enquiry into state capture. The infamous Bell Pottinger is no more, having met its Waterloo here in SA – it was the fierce reaction from SA civil society that sank them in the UK. Parliament found its backbone and commenced with hearings into state capture, holding ministers and senior officials to account. The nation sat glued to tv screens watching this new spectacle of senior people squirming and stuttering in Parliament. Hat tip to the person who leaked the Gupta emails.

These emails would probably have passed us by if it was not for the small group of dedicated investigative journalists, at AmaBhungane and elsewhere, who systematically trolled through it all, connecting the dots and exposing the underlying narratives of corruption. Hat tip to them.

May 2017

Ironically, the Gupta emails actually took the spotlight away from two remarkable reports, which were published a month earlier during May 2017.

The SA Council of Churches published the "unburdening report" in which church members revealed to a panel of pastors (the unburdening panel) to what extent they had witnessed state capture activities. The churches warned SA was "on the brink of becoming a Mafia state".

A week later a group of academics from various universities published "Betrayal of a promise: how SA is being stolen". It catalogued, from publicly available information, how much corruption had been taking place right under our noses.

It is worth remembering that three very different organs of SA civil society, journalists, university academics and church leaders, put the pieces together before the Gupta emails confirmed it all. Hat tip to them.

Also, it was an institution of the SA constitution, the Public Protector (then Thuli Madonsela), who got the ball rolling with her October 2016 report on state capture. Hat tip to her.

October 2017

All these revelations were a wonderful scene setter for Jacques Pauw's book, *The President's Keepers*. Extracts first appeared in October 2017. Within days, literally, it was a best seller; free electronic copies also circulated. South Africans wanted to know.

The same pattern as with the Gupta emails played out: vigorous denials and casting of aspersions. A new element was added: threats from the state security agency and SARS about criminal action against Pauw. In the end the bullying and threatening came to naught. The sales figures kept rising.

Now spy boss Arthur Fraser is spy boss no more. Both the former number one and two at SARS are gone and (another) judicial commission of enquiry is investigating state capture at SARS. We may very well see more fall out from Pauw's book. Hat tip to him.

ANC elections, Dec 2017

We will never know, simply because the counterfactual is not available, but it is likely that Cyril Ramaphosa would not have been president if it was not for the Gupta emails, Jacques Pauw's book, the churches' and academics' reports, the investigative journalists weaving all the threads together and giving air time to developments; and the

threat of big losses in 2019 elections. In short, open society forces converged to, at the very least help, put Ramaphosa in charge.

2018 – Can Ramaphosa hold it?

Developments in the North West province as well as this weekend's aborted ANC conference in KZN indicate that the Zuma faction is fighting back furiously against the Ramaphosa takeover. The stakes are very high for them. One Zuma-ite was quoted as saying that if Ramaphosa could get rid of Supra Mahumapelo "nobody is safe". These are state capture politicians and if that punch bowl is taken away (jobs, SOEs, tenders, contracts) what else remains? Hence their allegation that the cleaning up of SOE boards is a Ramaphosa "purge of Zuma supporters"; and Supra Mahumapelo's allegation that the Ramaphosa people are "power drunk". Apparently, the thought does not arise that "the purge" and "power drunkenness" have to do with the immense looting that has been going on at these SOEs and need to be cleaned up.

At the same time Zuma is appearing in court on criminal charges – a development that he almost certainly did not anticipate a year ago. His public comments indicate he is not happy.

So the Zuma-ites are both angry and desperate. One scenario is that they can capture 1/3 of all ANC branches countrywide and insist on a National General Council (NGC) of the ANC convening. There they can try and recall Ramaphosa or drive radical policy positions to embarrass him. That will require support from 50% of branches.

Realising this scenario is a tall order. Ramaphosa is standing stronger than in December when he was elected. Then two-thirds of voters felt the country was going in the wrong direction, now 63% approve of the direction. The ANC will undermine its own electoral chances if they undermine that; and the 2019 election is now a mere ten months away. Also, Zuma is not the most attractive leader to be associated with – even in KZN.

Of the 30 by-elections that have been held in the country so far this year the DA retained 15, the ANC 11 and the IFP 1; whilst the ANC lost 3 by-elections – 2 to the IFP in KZN and 1 to the EFF in North West. In Zuma's backyard of Nkandla the IFP retained a ward with an increased majority after Zuma personally campaigned for the ANC. Perhaps that is why the current ANC leader in KZN, Sihle Zikalala, a known Zuma supporter, has said nothing to alienate Ramaphosa; and has been willing to support a slate of provincial leaders in which Ramaphosa supporters would also serve.

Steinhoff

The same pattern played out with the other big story of 2017 Steinhoff. Investigative journalists published a report in a German magazine which was first denied and dismissed as "drivel" but turned out to have substance. Since that article Steinhoff has lost R295 billion of its market cap (that is not even from the highpoint of the share price). The R295 billion competes comfortably with the R100 billion Pravin Gordhan reckoned was lost from state capture.

It is some consolation that even in more advanced jurisdictions arrest warrants have not been issued yet. It is not just the SA authorities that has been slow.

So what?

- The one thing we learn from looking back over the year is that SA is not merely a democracy, it is also very much an open society that enables self-correction.
- That self-correction came with the election of Cyril Ramaphosa. The state capture revelations set the country on a new political trajectory.
- There is a fierce fightback against this new trajectory and consequently a lot of turbulence inside the ANC.
- In an open democracy it is the voters who have the last say. There is little indication that the majority support the fightback Zuma-ites or even an anti-Ramaphosa camp; on the contrary, the indications are support for Ramaphosa.
- These important shifts are welcome, but the fact remains the country is in many ways in a hole after the Zuma years and it will take considerable time and effort to rebuild.