

MBEKI

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Faith in structures, not people

Most elected governments suffer from a kind of mid-term crisis after enjoying a spurt of success on coming to power. It hit Bill Clinton. Tony Blair is suffering from it, as reflected by last week's local elections in the UK. F W de Klerk was struck in 1993 - 1994 after his resounding success in the March 1992 referendum. Boris Yeltsin, too, was affected after he liberating Russia from the Soviet Union. The list goes on.

The same is now happening to President Thabo Mbeki. Since assuming power in June last year, Mbeki has notched up a string of successes. His address at the opening of Parliament was widely welcomed and his Government's budget at the end of February was generally acclaimed.

Then the Aids controversy erupted. The President was roundly criticised - even by leading Africanists and in cartoons and editorials in newspapers targeting black readers. This certainly was not just "white" or "Western" criticism.

This was followed by the developments in Zimbabwe. Again the President ran into a wall of criticism from a wide range of people. As a result, his image has lost some of its sheen in the past three months.

This is normal; it happens to all elected leaders and does not negate Mbeki's considerable talents. In particular, it does not undo the sound economic policies put in place under his stewardship.

In SA, however, a stumbling by a President generates considerable anxiety and nervousness. The strength and stability of our institutions - even the likelihood of our success as a nation - is called into question.

This uncertainty is a factor of our democracy's relative youth and immaturity. We place a lot of faith in the leader, not in the strength of our institutions. People are anxious for Mbeki to be successful and widely respected, because they believe the country would then be successful and respected. Consequently, if he sneezes, the nation catches a cold.

Land reform is a case in point. The Constitution provides for the rule of law, property rights and orderly redistribution of land. Monies have been allocated in Finance Minister Trevor Manuel's fiscally responsible budgets for land redistribution.

Some redistribution has already taken place and it was conducted in a legal and, crucially, mostly non-adversarial manner.

We have the institutions and policies with which to cope with land reform in a way that does not undermine society.

The reality, however, is that these are not yet fully consolidated and there are fears that they may be overturned.

This fear generates uncertainty, which could harm SA. Therefore the President must tread warily. It is no good scoring a foreign policy success in Zimbabwe (which has not yet happened) and losing the support of business and investors in SA and internationally.

If that happens, SA will be the loser.

Investors are not asking for much. All they want to hear is that SA has a Constitution that provides for the rule of law, property rights and the orderly redistribution of land.

The Zimbabwean crisis provides an opportunity to unite the nation around the Constitution. Ministers should seize it. By promising redistribution through the rule of law, they will reach both the have-nots and the haves.

And that is important for the future of SA.

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