

Behind charisma and smiles was tainted man

KAILENE PILLAY

THESE were obvious lessons to be gleaned from former president Jacob Zuma's tenure as it has been, in the most part, clouded with controversy. At rallies, events and in media briefings his jollity, light-heartedness and charisma made him likeable.

But behind the smiles, laughs, jokes and indelible charm, he was a tainted man. It wasn't long before South Africans looked past the face, wrinkled with smile lines, and realised things should not be taken at face value.

He faced allegations of rape and corruption, he was forced to pay back millions of rand for using public funds to upgrade his home, he was linked to wealthy but dodgy business people who further tainted his image, and his midnight decisions that affected the country did not sit well with the nation.

All in all, he came across as a man above the law, above his party and above the people he served.

Political analyst Thabani Khumalo helps look at the lessons learnt from the Zuma reign.

Lesson 1:
Nkandlagate and how to properly house a president.

The controversy about the use of public funds to make improvements to Zuma's family homestead has been raging for some time. What were meant to be security upgrades resulted in an amphitheatre, a helipad, a "firepool" and a chicken run being built in addition to the general security upgrades.

This cost taxpayers more than R246 million.

He was forced to pay back a portion after it was found by the Public Protector that he unduly benefited from the upgrades.

Khumalo said it was unfortunate that Nkandla became a controversial topic as Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki enjoyed the privileges of upgrading their homes.

But, she says, the problem was when Zuma surrounded himself with incompetent staff – a trend seen in almost all departments.

"The Department of Public Works handled the security upgrades at Nkandla incorrectly. They were overseeing the project but in the minister's absence, officials did what they wanted.

It was soon realised that the project was used to benefit individuals and, unfortunately, Zuma had to take the responsibility and blame. He surrounded himself with incompetent staff and in the end it was chaos, Khumalo said.

Lesson 2:
How a president ought to work with the public protector.

It is no secret Zuma had a rocky relationship with the office of the Public Protector. His distaste for the office and for Thuli Madonsela herself, was confirmed when he challenged her recommendations in court.

Madonsela was looking into allegations of an improper relation-



CONTROVERSIAL: President Jacob Zuma was given a blank cheque and allowed to do with it what he wanted. The ANC failed to rein him in.

PICTURE: ARMAND HOUGH

ship between the president and the influential Gupta family, in relation to key appointments to Zuma's cabinet and the awarding of contracts to state-owned enterprises.

Zuma's legal team argued that Madonsela did not wield the power to call for a commission of inquiry into her State of Capture report and, in essence, argued that the public protector had no power to dictate to Zuma.

The report uncovered worrying levels of corruption and Judge President Dunstan Mlambo told the president he had no justifiable basis to ignore the impact of state capture.

"The president had no justifiable basis to launch the review application in the circumstances. In doing so, he was reckless and acted unreasonably," Mlambo said in his judgment.

Khumalo said the South African constitution was clear in that the office of the public protector served as an advisory body to ensure that everything was conducted within the law.

"Zuma decided not to embrace the PP. He treated her as the enemy and as a result did not take her advice," Khumalo said.

He advised that future presidents needed to embrace the public protector's office as if it was part of the team, in order to uphold and protect the constitution.

Lesson 3:
The friends a president should (or should not) keep.

The Guptas are a wealthy Indian-born South African family

whose most notable members are the brothers Ajay, Atul and Rajesh "Tony" Gupta. They own a business empire spanning computer equipment, media and mining, and have been the focus of widespread scrutiny because of its close ties to Zuma during his presidency.

In 2016, Atul Gupta became the seventh-wealthiest person in South Africa, with an estimated net worth of R10.7 billion based on JSE-listed holdings.

The family has been called the "shadow government" after numerous MPs and ministers stated that they were offered government positions by, or on behalf of, the Gupta family, in return for beneficial commercial decisions once appointed.

Another close friend of Zuma's is Durban businessman and racehorse mogul, Roy Moodley. Moodley was, most recently, accused of paying Zuma a salary of R1m a month from his Royal Security company after Zuma was inaugurated as president.

Remember the words of your mother, "Don't join those people because you will be painted with the same brush" – and that was exactly what happened to Zuma.

His close ties with these, and other, controversial business people led to Zuma's reputation being further damaged.

Khumalo said that holding the highest office in the land meant there would be many people trying to cosy up to the president.

"Many would come with their own hidden agendas and it is right at the very beginning of that relationship that a president would need to be cautious.

"Be selective in who you choose to associate with when it comes to business people. Zuma was not careful and in the end he was tainted.

"Now that he is down and out, I am sure he realises that it was those same people who contributed to his great downfall," Khumalo said.

Lesson 4:
Is the president a law unto himself?

Many describe him as defiant, undisciplined and above the law and the constitution.

But, Khumalo says, the lesson to be learnt here is not for the people of South Africa but for the ANC as a ruling party.

Prominent businessman Tokyo Sexwale once said that the biggest problem with the ANC was that it protected individuals at the expense of the party.

The ANC often found itself in a compromised position because it elevated individuals, such as Zuma, above the party and this was soon translated into government.

"He was given a blank cheque to do with as he pleased. The ANC gave him that rope.

"Look at how they struggled to recall him and it was because he wanted reasons for his recall.

"The ANC could not give him those reasons because it was those very same reasons that they defended him on," Khumalo said.

He added that the ANC should learn the lesson that it is a party led by a collective. That every decision must not be made in the interests of only one person.

"The ANC created this monster."