

The Times view on the jailing of Jacob Zuma: Hard Graft

Written by Administrator
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The former South African president's imprisonment is a step forward in his country's battle with corruption

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As Jacob Zuma was driven to prison, he joked that he hoped to be given back his old overalls from Robben Island. The former South African president may claim he is once again a prisoner of conscience but the circumstances could scarcely be further from those that saw him imprisoned alongside Nelson Mandela.

Once an apartheid hero, Zuma oversaw the ransacking of state coffers for the enrichment of a few but to the impoverishment of the vast majority of black South Africans. After years of impunity, his imprisonment for refusing to testify in a corruption investigation sends a powerful message that no one is above the law.

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When his long-delayed bribery trial begins later this month, the former president will travel to court direct from a prison cell. That is a victory for the courts and the constitution that Zuma sought to undermine, claiming them secondary in importance to the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party. Yet it is still only a start. Zuma's successor, President Ramaphosa, has made only a timid start on [cleaning up the party](#) and purging the state of corruption. It is vital he now draws a line under the Zuma era and accelerates those efforts.

The scale of lasting damage Zuma wrought on his country is hard to overstate. During his nine-year presidency, [South Africa](#)'s state-owned enterprises were looted on a grand scale, with an estimated 1 trillion rand (£50 billion) or 20 per cent of GDP, siphoned off from state coffers in corrupt deals cut with business cronies. Parts of the state built to prevent such corruption were systematically demolished.

The corresponding damage to national infrastructure, from decaying roads to persistent power cuts and sluggish ports, slashed South Africa's annual growth by a whole percentage point a year. Under Zuma, per capita income shrank while unemployment surged, crippling the future prospects of the country's youth. Zuma's rule hindered not only the economic development but the necessary social reforms for South Africa to move on from its painful apartheid past.

There is irony that it was Zuma's own effort to evade justice that landed him in jail before his first corruption trial has even begun. His refusal to give evidence to a corruption commission was just the latest effort to undermine his successor's early attempts to clean up what he and his cronies left behind. In sentencing the former president, the chief justice [cited Mandela's plea](#) at the 1995 inauguration of the constitutional court for the country's highest bench to "stand guard not only against direct assault on the principles of the constitution but against insidious corrosion".

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Ramaphosa could do worse than to pin those words to the wall for inspiration about what is required to clean up both his country and his party. While he had little to do with Zuma's imprisonment, the fact of it should strengthen his hand against his predecessor's supporters and reinforce his grip on the ANC. Corruption and malfeasance did not start with Zuma's reign and will not end with his imprisonment which, authorities admitted yesterday, could be over in just four months.

By then, Zuma will be on trial for far more serious charges. At 79, he may yet face the rest of his life behind bars, going, not like Mandela from prison to the presidency but the reverse. His fall from grace underlines both the distance South Africa has strayed from its founding ideals and the challenge it faces on the road back to them. The jailing of Zuma is an important step along the way.