



Response

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The Centre Holds

When he wrote it almost 100 years ago, William Butler Yeats could never have guessed that his poem *The Second Coming* would become a hackneyed metaphor for South Africa's early 21st century political condition. The third, seventh and eighth lines, in particular, have been quoted *ad nauseam* by politicians, commentators, authors and – at Ahmed Kathrada's memorial last Saturday – by at least one contemporary poet.

In the early period of the Zuma presidency, as it stumbled from one scandal to another, and as it became ever more obvious that his accountability was owed not to the South African electorate, or to Parliament, or even to the ANC, but to the businesspeople and political protégés that form his patronage network, the third line was deployed:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”

Surely the fabric of the state, the civil service, the myriad public institutions, could not indefinitely survive such wilful misgovernance? Although the ANC presented a united public front, the wisest heads in the party made no secret of their discomfort – how long could the centre of the ANC, and of the country, hold against the waxing kleptocracy?

As things became more urgent, especially when the extent of state capture was laid bare by the Public Protector, and as one revelation after another showed just how deeply corruption had entered the soul of government, the seventh and eighth lines were trotted out:

*“The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”*

No one could be under any illusion about who the ‘worst’ were – the ones doing the deals, facilitating the tenders, consorting with dodgy entrepreneurs, directing more and more public money away from public purposes. The ‘best’ were equally obvious – the clean politicians, the ones who did things by the book, who avoided compromising situations. But who couldn't seem to find their voices.

Then, late last Thursday night, Mr Zuma made his boldest move yet, reshuffling his cabinet and undoing, as it were, the combination lock that had kept the national treasury safe – Minister Pravin Gordhan and Deputy-Minister Mcebisi Jonas. Suddenly, some of the ‘best’ recovered their convictions. For the first

time since it came to power in 1994, a clear gulf appeared between the ANC's leader and his most senior party colleagues – the deputy president, the secretary general and the treasurer general all repudiated the firing of Gordhan and Jonas. And soon enough both the Communist Party and COSATU joined in the criticism. The veterans and stalwarts, calling on the shade of Mr Kathrada, were even more scathing in their condemnation of Mr Zuma and his works.

For a few days it seemed that the country might be at a crossroads. Deputy-President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke of a “moment of great renewal”, a moment to get rid of “greedy and corrupt” people. Yeats's ‘*passionate intensity*’ seemed to emanate from the ‘best’, for a change.

But by Wednesday morning, less than a week after Mr Zuma's calculated exercise of raw power, his *fiat*, it was all over. There had been, in effect, a misunderstanding. Mr Ramaphosa, Mr Mantashe and Mr Mkhize accepted that they had “made a mistake”; it had been wrong to criticise Mr Zuma publicly. There would be no question of a no-confidence vote in the President succeeding.

So now we know that Yeats was right: the ‘best’ have confirmed that they “*lack all conviction*”; they have been stared down.

But in a way Yeats was also wrong: the centre has held. The problem is that the centre is not where we want it to be. The centre is no longer a place of good governance, probity, legality. It is no longer located in the developmental state, the caring state, the welfare state. The centre has shifted alarmingly. It has settled in the lap of the greedy, the grasping, the thieving, and the looting. It is a place of corruption, nepotism, crony capitalism, ‘state-for-sale’ and the diversion of public resources into private pockets.

Eventually, we will come through this crisis (we are, after all, an Easter people). The crooked cannot have the upper hand forever. But for now at least, we must come to terms with the fact that the great promise of 1994, ‘A Better Life for All’, has been thoroughly betrayed. If the treasury is looted it will be the poor, not the rich – and certainly not ‘white minority capital’, whatever that may be – that will suffer. Our national naïveté has caught up with us and, as Yeats put in in the sixth line of his poem:

“The ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

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