

MBEKI VS ZUMA: who is winning the pr battle?

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If you are in a conflict situation with someone and they go on the offensive, all you need to do is give that person a piece of rope and eventually they will hang themselves with it. Or so the saying goes.

Whether this is in fact President Mbeki's strategy in dealing with Jacob Zuma remains to be seen, but it is certainly looking like it.

An analysis of the media presents evidence of a superb PR chess game between the two. President Mbeki has arguably kept an especially low profile in the very public spat between the two, and he is playing a clever waiting game. Zuma, in contrast, is undertaking his own form of "shuttle diplomacy" by seizing almost any opportunity to address large numbers of willing listeners at various events across South Africa and utilising various opportunities presented by radio.

His "hearts and minds" campaign has as its core objective the winning of the hearts and minds of the people of South Africa. He faces two challenges: on the one hand he must win his battle against President Mbeki; on the other, he has to start positioning himself as potentially the next president of South Africa and to defend his dented image.

Interestingly enough his strategy has been well calculated in that he has only been addressing target groups whom he knows are sympathetic to him, in particular students and labourers. His PR minders would never allow him to be seen on TV being booed and heckled by a pro-Mbeki crowd. Watch carefully as his advisors potentially increase his appearances closer to the start of his corruption trial.

Zuma's allies - Cosatu, the South African Communist Party and the ANC Youth League - have also been very vocal in their support of him. These allies have used many public speaking opportunities to address the issues at hand on his behalf.

One of the oldest tricks in a PR crisis is to use the intensification versus downplay strategy, where you downplay the issues against you and intensify those that stand in your favour. In a crisis, this is a dangerous strategy and can backfire. In this case, Zuma has tried to downplay the allegations of corruption and, more lately, the allegation of rape against him. Both he and his supporters have intensified their comments claiming that there is a conspiracy against him led by the President. This strategy may have worked in the long term had the ANC national executive not come out and rejected the allegations by Zuma's supporters. In doing so they have dealt a powerful blow against Zuma and his faction, sending him into a tailspin and making his followers question whether they want to stand by him should he be formally charged with rape.

One must not forget that Zuma is head of the moral regeneration movement. Based on the allegations he is facing, that initiative can only lie in tatters.

The President, on the other hand, is playing a waiting game. His PR strategy has quite rightly been one of personal non-engagement. A classic mistake in crisis management made by some companies or individuals is that they become confrontational and defensive. Closer to the start of Zuma's trial the President could start communicating indirectly, using carefully selected government ministers from various portfolios whom he knows are loyal to him, to publicly address key issues related to the Zuma trial. This is doubtful, however, and in any case, the rhetoric that these ministers use should not be expected to be confrontational.

Another reason the President is holding back is because he is giving Zuma the space and time for his campaign to exhaust itself and fizzle out. We are starting to see this happen with the acknowledgement that a recent fundraising event for Zuma delivered substantially less than expected. The frequency of his "hearts and minds" speaking engagements is also starting to decrease as Zuma tries to defend himself and right his tarnished reputation which has been further affected by the rape allegations. The result is that Zuma will be increasingly bogged down as he undertakes damage control.

This factor must be watched very carefully. While Zuma started off with his three core allies in tow, he is now beginning to see them loosen their bonds of support. The analogy is this: in business when a company starts to sink most people jump ship, as they do not want to be associated with damaged goods. This is evident in Business Day's 29 November article, in which Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi said, "At no stage did we say we want Zuma to be ANC leader." The article also claims

that the labour organisation is looking for a way out of the Zuma controversy. So far the President's strategy is paying off and it is still early days.

Further media information:

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