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## Survivor Is Poised to Lead South Africa

By [MICHAEL WINES](#)

Corrections Appended

POLOKWANE, [South Africa](#) — When Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, the man who is likely to be South Africa's next president, was 21 years old, South Africa's apartheid government condemned him to 10 years imprisonment on Robben Island, in a cell not far from that of [Nelson Mandela](#).

It was 1963, the nadir of the liberation movement: the jail was overcrowded, conditions were execrable, and freedom, much less national liberation, was a distant dream.

Mr. Zuma set up a prison choral group to sing liberation songs, and organized weekend traditional dances. He told Zulu stories at night and delivered political lectures each week. Mr. Zuma received few if any visitors during a decade in jail, said Ebrahim Ebrahim, his cellmate, yet he was the self-appointed morale officer for his block. "The prison conditions were such that they wanted to break our morale and spirit," said Mr. Ebrahim, who later followed Mr. Zuma into politics. "He wouldn't be broken."

It could be his epitaph. Mr. Zuma, 65, has faced a hardscrabble childhood, illiteracy, war, a decade in jail and, most recently, a string of government prosecutions on charges of corruption and rape. Lazarus-like, he has surmounted them all.

On Tuesday, more than 3,900 delegates of South Africa's governing party, the [African National Congress](#), chose him as their president, ousting [Thabo Mbeki](#), who is

also the leader of the country. In this democracy dominated by one party, Mr. Zuma's win means he very likely will succeed Mr. Mbeki in early 2009 as president of South Africa, when a new Parliament will choose the next president.

Mr. Zuma, a Zulu, was born in 1942 in a rural area, KwaZulu Natal, then called Natal. His father died when Mr. Zuma was an infant, and his mother moved the family to Durban to work as a maid.

He grew up impoverished and without formal education. He joined the then-banned African National Congress at 17 and its military wing at 18. Apartheid forces arrested him in 1963 as he tried to leave the country and put him in prison, where he learned to read and write English.

After his release from prison in 1973, Mr. Zuma left the country and returned when a ban on the A.N.C. was lifted in 1990. He became a close ally of Mr. Mbeki, and worked under him to end a bloody war between supporters of the A.N.C. and the rival Inkatha Freedom Party.

"He had incredible patience," said Blade Nzimande, who worked on the conflict with Mr. Zuma and now leads the Communist Party in South Africa. "If Zuma disagrees with you, he will not jump into the middle of your sentence and correct you. He's a very persuasive character."

Others say Mr. Zuma's crucial role was to make [Mangosuthu Buthelezi](#), the Zulu chief who led the Freedom Party, feel that he was being taken seriously.

In 1999, Mr. Mbeki appointed him deputy president. But early this decade, Mr. Mbeki suspected a political plot against him and confronted Mr. Zuma. Mr. Zuma denied any role, but the succeeding rift never healed.

In 2005, Mr. Mbeki forced Mr. Zuma to resign after Mr. Zuma's financial adviser was convicted of bribing Mr. Zuma in exchange for help with a contract for a French manufacturer. Mr. Zuma fended off a related corruption charge on procedural grounds, but the charges are likely to be refiled next year.

Mr. Zuma's fortunes dipped again in late 2005, when the H.I.V.-positive daughter of a family friend accused him of rape. Mr. Zuma, who is married, was acquitted, but his reputation was muddied after he suggested that the woman had seduced him by wearing a short skirt and sitting in a provocative manner. AIDS activists were scandalized when Mr. Zuma, who once headed South Africa's AIDS-prevention efforts, said he had tried to avoid H.I.V. infection by showering after having sex with the woman.

Curiously, the spectacle of the corruption and sex allegations proved a boon to Mr. Zuma's political career. His vigorous denials of guilt drew broad support from ethnic Zulus, and his broad hints that Mr. Mbeki's prosecutors had plotted to end his political career drew more support from leftists and poor people.

Analysts say that Mr. Zuma became a magnet for a spectrum of groups unhappy with Mr. Mbeki's aloof leadership, and that he deftly marshaled their discontent into a powerful movement.

There is much discussion about what he will do with his mandate. Mr. Mbeki's technocratic rule has produced a humming economy and approval from foreign investors, but fewer visible benefits for the poor. A widespread fear among both Mr. Mbeki's supporters and many foreigners is that Mr. Zuma will heed his poor, leftist supporters and undo the economic policies of the last decade.

But most people interviewed for this article, including political analysts, said that Mr. Zuma was no revolutionary and that South Africa was unlikely to swerve dramatically from the course that Mr. Mbeki has set. Nor do most of them fear that Mr. Zuma's own legal problems presage a relaxed attitude toward corruption.

Jeremy Gordin, a South African journalist and author, is writing a biography of Mr. Zuma. He said that outsiders may have inflated the importance of Mr. Zuma's scandals beyond that felt by ordinary South Africans. Indeed, he said, Mr. Zuma's political strength is that he is an ordinary South African.

"He's not an angel," he said. "He's just very human." For South Africans who have lived under Mr. Mandela's saintly rule and Mr. Mbeki's antiseptic one, he said, Mr. Zuma's fallibility is proving a powerful attraction.

Correction: December 21, 2007

An article on Thursday about the selection of Jacob Zuma as the new leader of South Africa's governing party, the African National Congress, gave the incorrect age in some copies in describing when he was sent to prison by the former apartheid government. He was 21, not 24.

Correction: December 25, 2007

An article on Thursday about Jacob Zuma, the man who is considered likely to be South Africa's next president, described the country's political system incorrectly in some editions. It is a democracy dominated by one party, not a "one-party democracy."