South Africa

National Affairs

THE YEAR WAS DOMINATED politically by a power struggle between President Thabo Mbeki and the controversial Jacob Zuma, a former deputy president and likely contender for the presidency in the 2009 election.

Early in the year Mbeki made it clear that although the constitution precluded his running for a third term, he was willing to continue serving as president of the country's predominant party, the African National Congress (ANC). Many observers saw this as an attempt to hold on to real power. Zuma emerged as Mbeki's key challenger. A populist with an impressive record in the struggle for a democratic South Africa, Zuma appealed in particular to the disaffected: those concerned with the growing gap between rich and poor, the state's inability to deliver public goods, and Mbeki's style and policies — his centralization of power, his alleged use of state agencies for political purposes, and his business-friendly agenda.

The battle between Mbeki and Zuma for the party leadership was decided at the ANC's national conference, which was held at Polokwane, a town in the Limpopo Province, in December. Zuma won by a wide margin, and in a "night of the long knives" his supporters more or less replaced the old order on the ANC's National Executive Committee, which was responsible for policy formulation. Some interpreted Zuma's triumph as a demonstration of grassroots democracy, others as a harbinger of radical populist innovation. In particular, the business establishment looked askance at the prospect of two uncoordinated centers of power operating until the 2009 general election: the ANC led by Zuma in Luthuli House, its Johannesburg headquarters, and the government led by Mbeki.

To add further uncertainty, the National Prosecuting Authority announced it was going ahead with the prosecution of Zuma, who was accused of accepting bribes related to a multimillion-rand arms deal, tax evasion, and money laundering. The charges emerged from the trial and conviction in 2005 of Schabir Shaik, a one-time financial advisor to Zuma (see AJYB 2006, p. 544).
The newly elected national chairman of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBOD), Zev Krengel, was a guest observer at the Polokwane conference, and afterward he urged the Jewish community not to panic. Krengel praised the transparent manner in which the proceedings were conducted and congratulated the winners. “No matter which side one might have supported, it could not be denied that what one saw at all times was a vibrant democracy in action,” noted Krengel. He wanted South African Jewry to maintain perspective and give the new leadership “a chance to find its feet and prove itself.”

There were indications that the new leadership would focus on strengthening what was called the “developmental state,” a term meaning more direct government intervention and coordination of economic policy in an attempt to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and, as part of that, to deal with a massive skills shortage. To be sure, such ideas had been spoken about for years, but would now be treated with greater urgency. At the same time the government indicated that it would not alter its prudent fiscal policies, which were bearing fruit. Growth reached 5 percent, spurred by massive infrastructure projects, and the currency remained strong. But unemployment stayed at well over 20 percent, and labor showed signs of restiveness amid rising inflation, which was estimated at about 7 percent.

Crime remained a major problem. There were 19,000 murders in 2007, 52,000 rapes or attempted rapes, 218,000 serious assaults, and 126,000 robberies with aggravating circumstances. The population was galvanized by the murder of a celebrity, the well-known popular historian David Rattray, whose death provoked an outburst of concern across the country. The fight against crime suffered a setback when the national police commissioner, Jackie Selebi, was served with criminal charges at the end of the year for allegedly maintaining a corrupt relationship with the underworld.

HIV/AIDS continued to wreak havoc. Although the government had finally moved to promote an antiretroviral program, the task was daunting. Over five million people were infected with the virus, and there was little confidence in Minister of Health Manto Tsabalalo-Msimang, who had long insisted that HIV did not cause AIDS and that the disease could be cured by dietary means. She herself underwent a liver transplant during the year that was reportedly the result of heavy drinking.

In May, Tony Leon stepped down as leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance. He was the longest-serving Jewish MP and South Africa's first Jewish opposition leader. At a retirement party hosted by the Cape
Committee of the SAJBOD, Leon spoke of always being conscious “of what it is to be a Jew in public life.”

Israel and the Middle East

South Africa’s maintained friendly relations with nondemocratic regimes. Its courting of Iran and a number of Arab oil-producing countries, its continued inability to deal effectively with Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, and its refusal to support a UN resolution against the military junta in Burma indicated a non-Western foreign policy orientation that included sympathy for the Palestinians in their conflict with Israel.

According to the Islamic Republic News Agency, South Africa’s minister of intelligence, Ronnie Kasrils (who was Jewish), praised Iran’s nuclear program while on a visit to the country, indicating that Iran should “make use of all the existing potentials to develop peaceful nuclear technology.” Kasrils subsequently claimed he was misquoted. Approached for comment on the matter, Michael Bagraim, national chairman of the SAJBOD, said that the Jewish community “strongly supports the international call for the condemnation of Iran building up nuclear capability and believes that any support by our government for its rogue development is both wrong and out of place.”

South Africa’s voting record in the UN came in for strong criticism from the SA Jewish Report, which editorialized (May 4), “When the Security Council discussed sanctions against Iran—a country threatening world stability which has called for Israel’s annihilation—South Africa opposed it; during the UN vote condemning Holocaust denial after Iran’s infamous ‘conference’ denying the Holocaust, South Africa’s ambassador was absent from the chamber; the Minister of Intelligence Ronnie Kasrils’ recent visit to Iran served further to alienate Israel from this country.”

In May it was reported that Kasrils had issued an invitation to Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader, to visit South Africa. Jewish leaders expressed grave concern, Michael Bagraim describing the invitation as a sign of South African solidarity with an organization holding a “racist ideology” and “an openly genocidal agenda against the Jewish people.” He said, “We condemn in the strongest possible terms Kasrils’s invitation to the Hamas movement to visit South Africa, and we call on the government to rethink its position.” Bagraim nonetheless praised the South African ambassador to Israel, Major-General Fumanekile Gqiba, for his strong condemnation of terrorism.
Writing in the *SA Jewish Report* (Aug. 8), Joel Pollak, a former speechwriter for Tony Leon, suggested that quiet diplomacy on the part of Jewish leaders had failed and the time had come to “take a stand against the foreign policies of the African National Congress government—not just on Israel, but Zimbabwe, Darfur, and other issues.” Pollak was particularly concerned about South Africa’s alliance with Iran and the trade contacts between the two countries. He expressed his perplexity about South Africa’s voting patterns at the UN Security Council, “where it had opposed or abstained from action against Myanmar, North Korea, Zimbabwe, Sudan and other such regimes.”

The *SA Jewish Report*, however, was not quite as sure. In an editorial (May 3), it reflected upon past Jewish political behavior—always clouded by ambivalence during the apartheid years—and considered current options. “The truth is that while Jews in South Africa are grateful for the new democratic dispensation, they nevertheless still feel unsafe, as do many other minority communities. As long as they feel this way, they will always want to tread a fine balance between different approaches.” Michael Bagrain captured the nature of this awkward balance and the ongoing need for quiet diplomacy, saying, “The Board needs to tread a delicate line, not out of fear but in order that it remains in a position where it is best equipped to promote the interests of its constituents.”

In June, the ANC called on all South Africans to join in a day of mass action against the occupation of Palestinian territory. “Jewish South Africans,” responded the *SA Jewish Report* (June 15), “are justifiably furious that the ruling party should officially take so partisan a stance on so complex an issue that affects them deeply.” A joint SAJBOD and South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) delegation met with Minister of Foreign Affairs Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma to discuss the government’s position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The minister assured the delegation that South Africa was committed to a two-state solution and wished to maintain diplomatic and military ties with Israel. She also indicated that she had been unaware that South Africa had voted against the inclusion of Magen David Adom in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Society. At the same time, the ANC took out a full-page advertisement in the *SA Jewish Report* committing the party to a two-state solution.

The 2007 Pew Global Project Attitudes Survey indicated that 28 percent of South Africans sided with Israel in the conflict while 19 percent sided with the Palestinians and another 19 percent sympathized with both equally. However the survey was conducted in urban areas only.
Jewish leaders had long been concerned about anti-Israel bias shown by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). A storm had erupted in 2006 after the chief of news and current affairs, Dr. Snuki Zikalala, had prohibited Paula Slier—whom Zikalala called “that white Jewish girl”—from reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see AJYB 2007, pp. 542–43). The SAJBOD had a constructive meeting with the SABC in August 2007 and it was agreed that an independent monitoring group would evaluate SABC reportage on the Middle East for a year. This agreement enraged Paula Slier, who charged the Board of cutting “a deal with Zikalala” that did not include any redress of her grievances. The SAJBOD acknowledged that it should have communicated the details of the meeting to Slier as a courtesy, but claimed that Slier herself had indicated she did not wish them to bring up her case. This was denied by Slier.

With comparisons regularly being made between apartheid South Africa and Israel, it was hardly surprising that Jimmy Carter’s new book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, attracted considerable attention. Ronnie Kasrils upset the community further by comparing Israel’s behavior to that of the Nazis, leading the *SA Jewish Report* (June 5) to condemn the analogy: “In the complex and interminable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, wrongs have been committed by all sides. There is plenty of blame to go around. But resorting to the Nazi analogy by government ministers is something else. It suggests a more sinister motive than objective comment.”

There was much hostile print and electronic coverage of the 40th anniversary of the Six-Day War. Thus a cartoon by prize-winning cartoonist Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro) in the *Mail & Guardian* (June 6) depicted the war as a planned land grab, and the SAZF lodged a complaint against the weekly. But the press ombudsman turned it down, saying, “Your Federation may not like it, but there are other opinions on the subject and there is no reason they should be suppressed.”

Despite South Africa’s clear pro-Palestinian tilt, President Mbeki saw fit to pay an unexpected visit to the Israel Independence Day celebrations in Durban. Greg Bass, chairman of the KwaZulu Zionist Council, praised the visit and suggested it indicated the president’s “commitment to minority rights in general and the Jewish community in particular.” Mbeki had not planned the visit in advance. He had been at an unrelated meeting at the Durban Jewish Club where the event was taking place, and decided to drop in.

A number of prominent Israelis visited South Africa. One was Dr. Eli
Opper, chief scientist at the Israeli Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor. Opper came as the guest of South Africa’s Department of Trade and Industry, which invited him with a view toward helping the building of small- and medium-sized businesses in South Africa. Opper was optimistic that exchanges with Israel in the area of technology could aid South African agriculture and farming.

Benjamin Pogrund, director of the Yakar Center in Jerusalem, and Bassem Eid, executive director of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, arrived in South Africa together on a visit sponsored by Yakar and the Centre for International Political Studies at the University of Pretoria. Pogrund, a prize-winning journalist born in South Africa, and Eid addressed multifaith gatherings and NGOs.

Issie Kirsh, a South African businessman and founder of Radio 702, established a twenty-four-hour-a-day English-language radio station, 96.6 Ram FM, in Ramallah and Jerusalem. The station was licensed by the Palestinian Authority.

Industrialist, philanthropist, and Jewish leader Mendel Kaplan was an unsuccessful candidate for the presidency of the World Jewish Congress.

**Anti-Semitism**

After a record year in 2006, the number of reported anti-Semitic incidents declined in 2007, but was still above the average annual figure since records began to be kept. The incidents were not violent in character and usually involved verbal abuse or intimidation often linked with hostility to Israel and Zionism. There was one cemetery desecration, vandals smashing Jewish tombstones at a cemetery in Nigel, near Johannesburg. Also, during the year, a member of the city council of Cape Town, Badih Chabaan of the African Muslim Party, made racist and anti-Semitic comments. He was removed from office on unrelated charges.

Professor Hussein Solomon, a scholar of Islam in Africa at the University of Pretoria, expressed concern at the type of Islam that was so prevalent in the country. Speaking to the Union of Jewish Women (UJW), he referred to South African Islam as “reactionary, anti-Semitic, insular, emotional, stupidly militant, and bereft of all reason.” He noted that South African Muslims refused to see the “connection between the vitriolic sermons and publications, the resultant ideologies of hatred that emanate from it and the murderous actions that could arise from this hatred” (SA Jewish Report, Mar. 30).
A prominent Muslim business leader, Solly Noor, called on Muslims worldwide to follow the Jewish example and emulate their world domination program, along the lines of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and “wrest control of South Africa” from the Jews. Noor was speaking at the launch of the second annual First National Bank (FNB) Islamic Finance Business Awards for 2007.

In a panel discussion in Johannesburg exploring relations between Jews and Muslims, the chief rabbi, Dr. Warren Goldstein, and Ebrahim Rasool, the Western Cape premier, stressed the need for dialogue between the two groups. “Both Muslims and Jews understand displays of both fundamentalism and certitude that have often been occasioned by positions taken on Palestine and Israel,” explained Rasool. “We have the democratic space to deal with problems without one faith demonizing the other . . . . It is a common set of values that holds us together—justice, peace, and humanity.” Rasool’s comments were endorsed by the SA Jewish Report (Dec. 17), which added its voice to the call for dialogue. An editorial declared: “Both Muslims and Jews are minority groups in this country. Both carry feelings of insecurity deriving from their status. It is essential if we are to live successfully together as South Africans that we always continue to search for and consolidate common ground between us, which is more extensive than what divides us. We must not allow the extremists to negate this.”

The Broadcasting Complaint Commission of South Africa dismissed a charge by the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) against Dr. Jud Newborn, an American cultural anthropologist and guest of the Cape Town Cultural Centre. The MJC charged that during a talk-show interview Newborn had compared Islam and Nazism, and thus was guilty of race hatred and incitement.

The Islamic Unity Convention (IUC), owners of the Muslim station Radio 786, challenged the constitutionality of certain provisions of the Broadcasting Code of Conduct relating to the hearing of complaints. While ostensibly seeking to overturn restrictions on free speech, the challenge, if successful, would have negated a ruling by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) upholding the SAJ BOD’s complaint against Radio 786 for anti-Semitic broadcasting. The case, which went back to 1998, was finally adjudicated in 2006 (see AJYB 2007, p. 543). The Ministry of Telecommunications opposed the challenge. In December, the Constitutional Court dismissed it on all counts.
Holocaust-Related Matters

The Cape Town Holocaust Centre presented a multimedia exhibition titled “Witnessing Darfur.” It included screenings of Darfur Diaries: A Message from Home, which featured recorded testimonies of refugees who fled the conflict. In his speech opening the exhibition, Jody Kollapen, chairman of the South African Human Rights Commission, claimed that "we have the responsibility as Africans to take an interest in what is happening in Darfur. We have to engage civil society and the faith-based community about the political and humanitarian interventions that must happen.”

The Holocaust Centre also hosted another exhibition, “German Resistance: The White Rose Movement,” brought to South Africa by the Centre and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Franz Josef Mueller, an 82-year-old veteran of the movement that had defied Hitler, and honorary president of the White Rose Foundation, participated in the opening ceremony.

A chair in Holocaust and genocide studies was established at the University of South Africa by the Prime Media Foundation. Tony Blair, the British prime minister, gave the opening address.

In November it was announced that a new Johannesburg Holocaust Centre was to open, directed by Tali Nates. It would be part of the newly established South African Holocaust Foundation, which would include within it the flagship Cape Town Holocaust Centre.

South Africa hosted an event posthumously honoring Theodor Criveanu as Righteous among the Nations. Criveanu blocked the deportation of a number of Romanian Jews to Nazi death camps (see above, p. 518). The certificate and medal were presented to his son, Willie Criveanu, who lived in Johannesburg. Israeli ambassador Ilan Baruch attended the function.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

Communal Affairs

There was some public discussion during the year about forming the equivalent of AIPAC in South Africa. “Ultimately,” wrote David Saks, a SAJ Bod senior researcher, “the setting up of such a proactive lobby may
well depend on the political will of our community to embark on an even more bold approach to public affairs than hitherto, allowing the established representative organizations to get on with their normal work in aid of Israel" (SA Jewish Report, May 11).

The SAJBOD maintained interfaith dialogue with the South African Council of Churches, Cape Town's Turkish Muslim community, and representatives of the Baha'i faith. In August, a Western Cape Religious Leaders' Forum was launched to address the many social ills facing Cape society.

In December, Anglican archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungame visited the Habonim Dror Jewish summer camp to speak to participants. He called on the youths to share in addressing the challenges faced by South Africans, saying, "You should ask yourselves: What is it that I can do?"

The Jewish leadership of Gauteng Province met with a delegation from the UJA-Federation of New York. In welcoming the group, Zev Krenge, Gauteng Council chairman, praised the powerful ties of kinship that united the Jewish world. In addition to meeting with Jewish leaders, the delegation met with the outgoing head of the Democratic Alliance, Tony Leon, and with former president F.W. de Klerk.

The SAJBOD published *Reach—Jewish Helping Hands in South Africa*, a record of what Jewish organizations were doing on behalf of the wider South African society. Among the many initiatives, ORT South Africa and MaAfrika Tikkun were particularly noteworthy. ORT teamed up with Bidvest, the international services, trading, and distribution group, to improve the quality of math, science, and technology teaching in underfinanced schools. Bidvest committed 3.7 million rand over four years for skills training. MaAfrika Tikkun began construction of three new community centers in Diepsloot, near Johannesburg.

The Jewish community also received assistance. Helping Hands, launched in 2006, both raised funds and connected young adults to the welfare needs of the community. It raised 3.6 million rand for use by the *hevrah kadishah* (Jewish burial society). Kosher Mobile Meals funded meals for 150 recipients.

The Union of Jewish Women (UJW) celebrated 75 years. Leah Aharonov, president of the International Council of Jewish Women (ICJW), visited South Africa for discussions with the UJW in preparation for the ICJW's proposed quadrennial convention, to be held in Cape Town in 2010.

At its biennial conference, the SAJBOD expressed an upbeat mood.
David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, was the guest of honor and keynote speaker. Harris spoke about the threat Iran posed to Israel and about the danger that Jews might succumb to fear. Speaking at the same conference, Minister of Safety and Security Charles Nquakula urged the Jewish community to help in the fight against crime.

Zev Krengel was elected national chairman of the SAJBOD, taking over from Michael Bagraim who was elected president. Krengel stressed the Jewish community's commitment to South Africa. He noted that the country had one of the lowest levels of anti-Semitism in the world and that Jews were protected by the constitution. "We are proudly South African and we are proudly Jews," he told the conference.

The SAJBOD hosted an exhibition in December on 120 years of Johannesburg Jewry. The SA Jewish Report (Dec. 14) editorialized that despite all the difficulties, "this community in the city of Johannesburg will endure and prosper for another 120 years. There are so many opportunities for creative minds. Who better than the Jews to identify them and make something out of them through passion and hard work?"

Religion

Chief Rabbi Goldstein, working with the National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF) and the Department of Education, spearheaded the creation of a Bill of Responsibilities, with the aim of building a culture of responsibility in schools. Goldstein, an executive member of the NRLF, presented the idea to President Mbeki and senior cabinet members, explaining that the concept was "very much based on Judaism."

In May the South African Union for Progressive Judaism (SAUPJ) approved the Jewish validity of marriages between same-sex Jewish couples. "This is a matter of justice and principle and we believe it is what Judaism requires of us in this day and age," said Steve Lurie, SAUPJ chairman. "The SAUPJ honors the divine within all human beings, and their right to live with dignity."

Jews for Judaism, a division of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues (UOS), submitted a formal complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa (ASASA) about an ad for a Christian missionary group that portrayed a surgeon in a mask, with the caption, "Ten out of ten Jewish doctors recommend Jesus." The ASASA upheld the complaint, accepting the argument that the ad was misleading.
There was controversy from time to time in the columns of the *SA Jewish Report* on various aspects of Judaism and over whether the community was indeed open enough to tolerate full debate. One frequent subject of comment was the Jewish attitude toward homosexuality. Another was the proliferation of small congregations, often located in homes. Martin Sacks, who chaired the Israel-United Appeal, complained that these congregations caused financial problems for the traditional large synagogues.

Rabbi Azriel Goldfein, who headed the Johannesburg yeshiva, passed away in November. Coming to South Africa from the U.S. in 1972, he established the yeshiva together with Rabbi Moshe Kurtstag. In a special tribute, Chief Rabbi Goldstein spoke of Rabbi Goldfein’s “revolutionary and dramatic impact on South African Jews.” He said that Goldfein’s “self-evident burning sense of mission and dedication to building a yeshiva here primarily for the training of South African rabbis for South Africa has literally changed the face of South African Jewry.”

**Education**

The Yeshiva College of Cape Town was renamed the Phyllis Jowell Jewish Day School in honor of the late writer, who specialized in books about the Jewish heritage. The school was largely funded by Mendel Kaplan, who insisted that even though it educated the sons of rabbis, it was “not going to be haredi and disrupt the unity of the community.”

The new state curriculum, which stressed the development of verbal skills, accepted Hebrew but not Jewish studies to fulfill certain requirements. Students following the new syllabus would matriculate in 2008.

South Africa held its first Limmud gatherings in Johannesburg and Cape Town. These educational retreats proved a great success, with 400 attending in Johannesburg and 200 in Cape Town. Modeled on the Limmud program founded in England in 1980, the retreats attracted a mix of participants who enjoyed open discussion within a tolerant and pluralistic context. “There was an electric feeling that we were all embarking on an incredible journey of magical proportions, the destination not quite clear, other than a commitment to adventure, promising arguments for the sake of heaven,” commented Vivienne Anstey, the Limmud chair.

A memorial fund was established in the name of Cyril Harris, the late chief rabbi. The Chief Rabbi C. K. Harris Memorial Fund would award scholarships to both Jewish and non-Jewish South Africans.
Culture

A celebration of Jewish culinary styles, "In our Mother’s Kitchen—Jewish Food," was exhibited at the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. The museum director, Shea Albert, explained that the aim was "to show people where our Jewish culinary roots came from and how they evolved." Two other exhibitions were hosted by the museum during 2007. One was "The Moving Spirit," photographs taken by the acclaimed Paul Weinberg of religious rituals and spiritual practices. The other was "Between Hearth, Heim and Home: Three Jewish Women’s Encounters with the New World," which explored the identities of immigrant and second-generation South African Jews. Two further exhibitions were mounted in Johannesburg. An exhibition of photographs by Marion Davis, "Absence and Loss," looked at memorials in Berlin. "What Will Come" featured works by artist William Kentridge.


Personalia

Dr. Brian Romberg was elected president of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association; Professor Phillip Tobias, a paleontologist, received the Walter Sisulu Special Contribution Award from the city of Johannesburg; and Justice Arthur Chaskalson, first president of South Africa’s Constitutional Court, was honored by the Jewish National Fund.

Among prominent South African Jews who died in 2007 were Aida Geffin, doyenne of South African real estate; Benjamin Eisenberg, distinguished agriculturalist; Bennie Resnick, devoted communal worker in Cape Town; Ruby Caplan, stalwart of the South African Union of Progressive Judaism; Dick Friedlander, former mayor of Cape Town; Maximilian Mendel (Max) Borkum, founding member of the Progressive Party and well-known stockbroker; Isaac Richards, rabbi emeritus of Temple David, Durban; Moïse Israel, founding member of the Sephardi Hebrew Congregation of Cape Town; Richard Lurie, former president of
the South African Stock Exchange; Arthur Ginsberg, long-serving member of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues; Nathan Vogelman, highly decorated World War II veteran; David Kuper, chairman of Investec Property Group; Reuben Sher, expert on AIDS; Mannie Feldman, acclaimed architect; Professor Ellison Kahn, legal scholar; Rabbi Azriel Goldfein, yeshiva head; and Violette Fintz, prominent survivor of the Holocaust.

Milton Shain