

DAILY MAVERICK



The suit and the sandalista: Rise of the independents, Songezo Zibi and Zackie Achmat

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Independent candidates, at least notionally independent, have raised their hands to contest next year's general election. The two stand-out examples are Songezo Zibi and Zackie Achmat.

At the time of writing, Zibi has yet to formally associate himself, and will probably be part of Rise Mzansi, which will announce its intentions next week. Achmat has declared his intentions as an independent candidate.

It's fair to present Achmat and Zibi as independent, at least in the sense that they are not part of existing political parties or alliances, and because their opening statements promise to breathe new life and fresh ideas into party politics in the coming months and beyond.

Let's set their likely policies aside, or leave it to policy wonks and analysts who may be better suited to make sense of what they stand for... This is not the first time that independent candidates have contested elections, but it is the highest profile of independent candidates in a national poll.

Zibi and Achmat represent two different traditions in South African political life. Zibi is quintessentially an intellectual, while Achmat is in the first instance an activist. This is not to say that Achmat is not intelligent.

That sounds terribly patronising, but I proceed from the established view that everyone is an intellectual – everyone has the capacity to think – but that some apply their intellect and knowledge as a social function to shape and protect values and drive politics towards nonviolent social change and transformation.

What sets them apart is primarily the idea that a fresh wind will sweep away the stale politics of groups and vested interests, that elite spawned by three decades of African

nationalism and prebendalism, and within a few years after the creation of the Economic Freedom Fighters, an ethno-nationalism of a particular kind.

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At first glance, the “break” is that the electorate will be provided with the effective choice of casting their vote for a person (Zibi or Achmat), and not a party or a group of people. Peeling away surface or visible representations reveals more of the candidates than what is assumed; that there will be “fresh winds”, “new ideas” and an end to vested (class or group) interests.

Candidate of the liberal capitalist establishment

It's *passé*, I realise, but citizens, politicians and public intellectuals do not rise spontaneously or in some supernatural way. We are all products of our families, communities, societies, socio-professional communities and intellectual traditions that conspire to shape our thoughts, ideas and our efforts.

It is not unreasonable to make the claim that Zibi in effect represents the liberal capitalist establishment, although he has often made references to social democracy. Zibi's socio-professional conditioning was in the corporate world, in the business press, and [the Rivonia Circle](#), which lists him as the chairperson.

The [Rivonia Circle](#) website provides greater detail. “Prior to joining Absa, he was Editor of *Business Day* newspaper... from 2014 to 2016 after a year as Senior Associate Editor at the *Financial Mail*. As a journalist and editor, Songezo has written extensively about South Africa's political system, economy and social dynamics. Since 2007 he has been a consistent and recognised voice for accountability, good governance, nation-building and the building of a dynamic, inclusive economy.”

The same statement made about Zibi is worth restating about Achmat: citizens, politicians and public intellectuals do not rise spontaneously or in some supernatural way as a result of a type of invisible hand.

In other words Zibi should have no problem getting votes from the tax-paying corporate class; the class which, in a much earlier example (the French elections of 1789 to 1791), when the landowners and bourgeoisie were given the opportunity to effectively vote for themselves.

Zibi has also had ties with the Centre for Development and Enterprise, a fairly conservative (arguably) or right-of-centre think tank. The CDE presents itself as “independent,” much like the way that, say, the Council of Foreign Relations, The Rand Corporation, the Hoover Institute, Cato Foundation or even the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the US have always represented themselves as “[independent](#)”.

Archival research has shown that these “independent” think tanks have played an important role as a “historical bloc” in engineering consent around Washington’s priorities and shoring up US dominance and control of global affairs from as early as the interwar period to the 21st century.

It is difficult to imagine a “think tank” being atomised and completely disconnected from the society and political economy in which it is established. It is also difficult to imagine an independent electoral candidate turning her back on the intellectual and corporate tradition that shaped her.

Zibi is a person of apparently high integrity and intellect; that much can be gleaned from his public persona. I have no doubt that he may present himself in a different light than what is alluded to here.

It’s worth bearing in mind that politicians and political candidates rarely present themselves as anything other than being good for society. Whether or not we agree with him, Zibi is, arguably, a liberal capitalist establishment candidate.

An activist wants to go to Parliament

Three decades ago, the ANC and its allies entered Parliament and government as activists. Politically significant, meaningful and measurable social change was required. The ANC in government embarked on, and was successful in taking public goods and services (electricity and water supply, housing and social welfare) to millions of people.

By 2006, South Africa had stabilised what was a political economy on the verge of collapse in the early 1990s. The country had reduced its fiscal deficits and debt-servicing costs, which resulted in credit-rating upgrades, and by 2006 the budget deficit was just 0.5% of GDP – the lowest it had been in 25 years.

Then came Polokwane in 2007, the recall of Thabo Mbeki in 2008, and President Jacob Zuma. Corruption, cronyism, mismanagement, criminalisation of the state, prebendalism – State Capture – and the collapse of state-owned enterprises ensued. Credit ratings were now downward. These have all been covered in the press.

Amid all the debris caused by the wrecking ball that was Zuma, Achmat (by 2022) seemed to have disappeared into the background of South African politics. *Business Day* would ask: What happened to Zackie Achmat?

That newspaper made the point, correctly, that “Achmat was one of the most vociferous voices against former president Thabo Mbeki’s HIV denialism in the late 1990s and early 2000s” and that he now lived in “downtown Cape Town and fights State Capture – and broken trains”.

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Achmat's profile as an activist has also been reported in the media over the years, less so than Zibi who for a while was a journalist before he returned to the corporate world. Zibi and Achmat would remain relatively "quiet". Some of us were aware of their respective contributions to society, though not as politicians.

Achmat is primarily an activist and a campaigner for human rights and social justice. This is markedly different from Zibi, who I have difficulty seeing as a *sandalista* in jeans and T-shirt carrying protest signs, and singing liberation songs.

As co-founder of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), which presents itself as "a unified health system that provides equal access to quality and dignified healthcare services for all. Including people who are living with HIV and TB," Achmat launched his campaign to stand for Parliament in next year's elections. Somewhat similar to Zibi, though representing different constituencies, Achmat put himself forward as an independent, but with strong moorings in social movements.

When he launched his candidacy at the end of last month, Achmat said "many of us are tired of parties, political parties. Support strong independent candidates who are progressive. Support candidates who will want to fix the state. The work of Parliament is long, boring and hard. And I am willing to do that work, but not alone with tens of thousands of people outside."

The TAC is, of course, not neutral, nor is it entirely independent. It relies on external funding and public support, so it is probably not a good idea to paint them as completely independent.

The same statement made about Zibi is worth restating about Achmat: citizens, politicians and public intellectuals do not rise spontaneously or in some supernatural way as a result of a type of invisible hand. We are all products of our families, communities, societies, socio-professional communities and intellectual traditions that conspire to shape our thoughts, ideas and our efforts.

There should be no surprise if it was found that the TAC and the Centre for Development Enterprise received some of their funding from the same sources.

We do, nevertheless, have two independent candidates who represent their socio-professional class and interests. It's not unfair to say that Zibi represents the liberal capitalist establishment and the middle class, while Achmat is a more "grassroots" activist campaigning "on the ground" for access to justice, equality and the ideas and material conditions of a common good that is not filtered through liberal economic orthodoxy and corporate interests.

More than three decades ago we had an editorial policy at the *Sowetan*, unspoken and unscripted, where we, as black journalists, wrote about community "health".

On the other side of Johannesburg, white newspapers were concerned with “medical” issues. These were distinct categories. I’m not sure if that’s a fitting analogy, but I am sure that we were concerned with the health of the community, and not medical issues... This is, somehow, parallel with the differences apparent between Zibi and Achmat.