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The rise and fall of Mangosuthu Buthelezi

BY

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South African public life is rife with revisionism, often opportunistic. Take the case of Mangosuthu Buthelezi.



Buthelezi in 1983 in Amsterdam. Credit: WikiCommons.

While South Africa's Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) is now in decline, between its founding in 1975 and the run up to the first democratic

elections in 1994, it played a key, but complicated role in South African politics. For all that time, it was led by Inkosi Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who as leader of the KwaZulu bantustan at various times collaborated with the apartheid state and the African National Congress (ANC). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the IFP became synonymous with political violence in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and parts of what is now Gauteng province, including violently disrupting elections in April 1994. On October 30, 2017, Buthelezi — who still served as IFP President — announced his retirement from public politics in South Africa.

Few envisioned this day would come, especially in light of the [splintering of his party](#) in 2011 when the party's national chairperson, Zanele Magwaza-Msibi, broke away to form the National Freedom Party (NFP) when Buthelezi refused to hand over the reins. Buthelezi will not stand for re-election as president at the IFP national elective general conference. In a public letter, Buthelezi expressed confidence in the IFP's ability to thrive in his absence. "Naturally there is some sadness in seeing this particular chapter of my life draw to a close," Buthelezi [wrote](#), "But we have been working toward this moment for several years now, so the transition feels peaceful and right." Velenkosini Hlabisa, current mayor of the northern KZN city of Hlabisa and current KZN Provincial Secretary for the IFP, has been [chosen](#) as the IFP national council's choice for President. Though [Inkosi Mzamo Buthelezi](#), a traditional leader from eMbongombongweni and a distant relative of Mangosuthu Buthelezi's, remains in place as the Deputy President, the organization looked to Hlabisa as a more experienced leader who enjoys support from all levels of the party.

It is hard to imagine an IFP without Buthelezi; he has been synonymous with not only the party since its founding in 1975 but also the machinations of the KwaZulu bantustan and the civil war that plagued KwaZulu-Natal and the PWV region between 1985 and 1996. For this

reason, it has been astounding to watch the platitudes from his fellow politicians. Bantu Holomisa, leader of the United Democratic Movement, [praised Buthelezi](#), using the chief's *izithakazelo* (praises): "His astute leadership qualities became evident. . . Shenge was very influential at the negotiating table during Codesa. His vision and commitment could not be ignored." Mmusi Maimane, leader of the Democratic Alliance, the opposition party that has recently found strong support in former IFP strongholds in KZN, [thanked Buthelezi](#) "for the role he played in KwaZulu-Natal in the early 1990s" and appreciation "for the 1994 decision Buthelezi took to participate in the first democratic South African election after he initially refused." The ruling ANC offered [lukewarm](#) well wishes. Notably silent on Buthelezi's retirement? President Jacob Zuma, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) founder Julius Malema and Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, all of whom have engaged in public antagonism with Buthelezi throughout their political careers. Malema perhaps felt no need to comment, having made his point in 2011 when he publicly [attacked](#) Buthelezi, labeling him as "an old man who is refusing to go on retirement" because he "wants to die president of the IFP."

This amnesia is not limited to politicians and is at least partially the product of Buthelezi's skill in managing his image. During apartheid, he promoted himself via the Inkatha Institute and [Inkatha's 1987 purchase](#) of the storied *Ilanga lase Natal*, as well as the authorized 1976 biography by Ben Temkin. He sued, or threatened to sue, for defamation just about every [journalist](#) and scholar who dared to accurately analyze his rise to power.

His staff [recently wrote](#) to the website [South African History Online](#) with a request to publish a more sanitized version of his biographical entry. Buthelezi [decries](#) all efforts to connect him to the apartheid regime or the [violence](#) that marked its demise. It is all part of a "long campaign of propaganda and vilification" promoted by the ANC. The latest manifestation of this self-positioning is the [Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi Museum and Documentation Centre](#), which [whitewashes Buthelezi's](#) roles

in fomenting violence and facilitating apartheid in the KwaZulu-Natal region. He marketed a particular narrative of Zulu history that has proved hard to dispel. On the other hand, this amnesia persists despite solid studies of the Inkatha leader from the 1980s that have stood the test of time — academic Gerhard Maré and journalist Georgina Hamilton’s *An Appetite for Power* (1987) and the ANC activist Jabulani “Mzala” Nxumalo’s then-banned *Gatsha Buthelezi: Chief with a Double Agenda* (1988).

The naming of the museum and archive tells us much about how Buthelezi wants to be remembered — as Zulu royalty and a legitimate heir to the power he wielded for nearly five decades. Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi was born in 1928, the son of Princess Magogo, the sister of King Solomon Dinuzulu and the tenth wife of Inkosi Mathole Buthelezi. Buthelezi has long made much of this relation to the Zulu royal family — claiming his descent from the first Zulu king through Princess Magogo and the role of “prime minister” to Zulu kings for the Buthelezi with this marriage as evidence. This heritage is far less significant than Buthelezi would have us believe. Mzala has shown that others occupying similar positions in the royal family do not claim prince as title and that there is no established practice that requires Zulu kings to choose a Buthelezi as premier. While Buthelezi’s great grandfather did serve as premier to King Cetshwayo, the title is not hereditary.

Before taking up leadership positions, Buthelezi studied at Adams College (1944-1947) and Fort Hare University (1948-1950) — schools famous for producing African nationalist leaders such as Joshua Nkomo, Seretse Khama, Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela, and others — but he took a very different path from those alumni. From school, he embedded himself within apartheid structures. He worked as a clerk in the Bantu Affairs Department before taking up the chieftaincy of the Buthelezi in 1953 (he was officially recognized by the apartheid state in 1957). While Buthelezi positions himself as the rightful heir due to

Princess Magogo's position as chief wife, his half-brother [Mceleli](#) also claimed this right as the first born of Mathole.

Historian Jabulani Sithole marks this succession dispute as the beginning of Buthelezi's cooption in the apartheid state's counter-revolutionary efforts.

Buthelezi's concern for his own position, first vis-a-vis his brother and then, the Zulu king, meant that the aspirant leader did his best to straddle the line between resistance that would endanger his standing with the apartheid regime and collaboration that would end any popular support. When his chieftaincy of the Buthelezi was in doubt due to a legal challenge from Mceleli, he refuted any idea of hostility to Bantu Authorities — the apartheid system that would give life to separate development by making every black South African a member of a “tribal authority” and stripping them of citizenship in South Africa in favor of political rights in an ethnic bantustan. When he ultimately participated in Bantu Authorities, he delayed elections in KwaZulu — the marker of the second phase of “self-government” towards faux independence — until he had sidelined several other contenders, including Prince Mcwayizeni Zulu (the regent for Goodwill Zwelithini) and then King Zwelithini himself, for control of the nascent bantustan. Buthelezi used KwaZulu to rise to the leadership of conservative black politics.

Buthelezi defended his participation in Bantu Authorities by calling upon ties to the ANC. At Adams College, he studied with one of ANC President Albert Luthuli's sons and later consulted with the ANC leader about whether or not he should take up the chieftaincy of the Buthelezi. The ANC denounced Bantu Authorities — Luthuli had been deposed from his position as chief for his politics in 1952 — but did quietly maintain contact with rural leaders such as Buthelezi and Thembu King Sabata Dalindyebo. The ANC leadership did offer tacit approval for the formation of Inkatha, provided that it not operate on an ethnically exclusive agenda and with the idea that it could be used to mobilize rural people. Oliver Tambo

would [later lament](#) not doing enough to shape Inkatha into the organization the ANC envisioned when it offered approval. This tentative connection with the ANC meant that the apartheid state was not always convinced of Buthelezi's malleability and at times preferred an actual member of the Zulu royal family. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that Buthelezi served as state witness against the ANC activist [Dorothy Nyembe](#) in the 1968 trial that would send her to prison for fifteen years for her work with uMkhonto weSizwe. When in 1998 Buthelezi's speechwriter Walter Felgate turned against the leader and [testified in camera](#) at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), he revealed that Buthelezi began to receive intelligence briefings from South African agencies as early as 1973 — well before his split with the ANC. Inkatha and the ANC suffered a very public break in 1979 when Buthelezi used a meeting to promote himself as the conservative black leader dedicated to non-violence with whom South African and western leaders could work. Indeed, Buthelezi opposed international sanctions and divestment campaigns and accepted South African and American funding for rallies and to launch a conservative trade union, the [United Workers Union of South Africa](#) (UWUSA) as a counter to the Congress of South African Trade Unions, in 1986.

After Buthelezi's break with the ANC, he increasingly saw Inkatha as the only legitimate liberation movement and began to rely upon force to mobilize support. While most bantustan leaders contributed to violence and repression in the last decade of apartheid, the journalist Mondli Makhanya, who grew up in KZN in the 1980s, got at the particular brutality of Buthelezi's reign when [he declared](#): "Of all the bantustan leaders who collaborated with the apartheid regime, he was the worst." For every politician's platitude, another South African has shared memories of the loss and [pain](#) suffered at the hand of Buthelezi and his followers. Then President P.W. Botha's "Total Strategy" to counter an alleged "total onslaught of international communism" included a campaign of low-intensity conflict that relied upon Buthelezi and Inkatha in KwaZulu and Natal.

The rising tide of student resistance in the early 1980s and the popularity of the United Democratic Front (UDF) after its launch in 1983 challenged Inkatha — and therefore Buthelezi’s dominance in KwaZulu and Natal. Inkatha began paramilitary training for its youth at [Emandleni Matleng Camp](#) as early as 1980. In the wake of school boycotts that same year, students refused to return to class when Buthelezi called for order. He asked for Inkatha supporters to organize and protect schools; indeed, his supporters began to organize to harass, intimidate, and attack students in KwaMashu and Lamontville. After the launch of the UDF, these trained young men began forced recruitment campaigns across the Durban and Pietermaritzburg townships in efforts to protect Inkatha hegemony. Civic and youth organizations allied with the UDF set up self-defense units and the region’s violence spiraled.

Despite [destruction](#) of government documentation, the Durban lawyer Howard [Varney’s submission to the TRC](#) and documents accessed by James Sanders for his *Apartheid’s Friends* (2006) revealed the extent to which Buthelezi worked directly with the apartheid state from 1985 to fuel this civil war. Late that year, he met with apartheid General Tienie Groenewald to request training for a paramilitary force, perhaps after having been fed rumors that the ANC intended to assassinate him. The apartheid government approved and knew the need to cover-up such support. In what became known as Operation Marion, named to reflect the government’s vision of Buthelezi and Inkatha as its puppets, the South African Defence Force trained 200 Inkatha supporters in the Caprivi Strip in Namibia in the use of weapons and explosives as well as strategies to avoid arrest. The TRC found these Caprivians responsible for most of the deadly incidents between 1985 and 1996 while deployed as KwaZulu Police or as “security” for local Inkatha leaders, chiefs, and headmen — many of whom earned reputations as warlords.

In one of the most infamous incidents, Buthelezi called on Inkatha to resist a stay-away in support of striking Metal and Allied Workers

Union (MAWU) workers at BTR-SARMCOL in Howick in KZN in 1985. The following year, Inkatha bussed in supporters to Mpophomeni where the dismissed MAWU workers lived. The Inkatha supporters attacked people and property and Caprivians murdered three MAWU shop stewards. BTR-SARMCOL replaced the striking workers with UWUSA members. At KwaMakhutha in 1987, Inkatha supporters ambushed the home of a UDF supporter and killed eight children and five adults. In December 1988, a joint Inkatha-SAP force killed eleven people at Trust Feed. Then in March 1990, more than 200 people died, and hundreds of homes were destroyed in what became known as the Seven Days War — a week of violence that began in the wake of an Inkatha rally funded by the Security Branch of the South African Police. 1990 also saw the spread of Inkatha's destruction to the Gauteng townships where local circumstances affecting migrant laborers in the hostels shaped the unfolding of the violence. Inkatha sent the [Black Cats gang](#), which had trained at Inkatha's Mkhuze camp in 1990, to Wesselton and Ermelo where they were assisted by the SAP and Caprivians to assassinate individuals affiliated with the ANC. Conservative estimates suggest that 20,000 people died between 1985 and 1996 — 13,000 of those in KZN — during this civil war fueled by state cooperation with Buthelezi's Inkatha.

Since his announcement, other transition-era figures have praised Buthelezi for ultimately participating in the first democratic elections. They selectively remember, obscuring the damage done by Buthelezi's delay. Buthelezi announced Inkatha's transformation into a national political party in July 1990 and, claiming different hats that many recognized as one and the same, demanded delegations for Inkatha, the KwaZulu bantustan, and the Zulu King to participate in the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. The Inkatha president consistently put up stumbling blocks while violence raged — refusing to sign the declaration of intent that outlined the principles of a new South Africa and forming an alliance of bantustan leaders that withdrew from the negotiations. Throughout these negotiations, the collaboration between Buthelezi and the state fueled violence — at [Sebokeng](#) and [Boipatong](#), among others —

that plagued the process. The need to bring Inkatha in forced the ANC to compromise, but Inkatha rejected even those proposals. The government declared a state of emergency in Natal and prepared to hold the elections without Buthelezi — when a week before, Inkatha announced its decision to contest the election. Inkatha won 10.5% of the national vote and 50% of the vote in KwaZulu-Natal, giving Buthelezi control of the province. The late decision of Inkatha to participate resulted in [large irregularities](#) in parts of KwaZulu-Natal with illegal polling stations, inadequate observation, and threats to existing observers. Even with Inkatha's victory in the province, violence continued for two more years. Combined with the demands of Inkatha-affiliated traditional leaders, this delayed the first local elections in KwaZulu-Natal.

Since those elections, Buthelezi and Inkatha have suffered steadily declining support. Buthelezi gained perhaps more legitimacy than he deserved when Nelson Mandela and then Thabo Mbeki appointed him the Minister of Home Affairs. This is not to suggest that Buthelezi enjoyed a frictionless relationship with either president. In fact, in 1995, Buthelezi staged a walkout of Zulu delegates from the National Assembly and clashed publicly with Mandela on numerous occasions. And in 1998, acting as standing president while Mandela was travelling abroad, he launched an [invasion](#) of Lesotho to prop up Pakalitha Mosisili's administration. In both [Long Walk to Freedom](#) and the recently published [Dare Not Linger](#), Nelson Mandela reflects on their contentious relationship, simultaneously recognizing Buthelezi's position as a central figure in South African politics while also pointing out the hurdles that Buthelezi presented on the path to democracy. And his biography of Thabo Mbeki, [A Legacy of Liberation](#), the journalist Mark Gevisser summed up the Mbeki policy towards Buthelezi: "Bring him in, promise to see to his grievances once the country has made it to the other side of the rainbow and hope that the grievances recede as he busies himself with the authority and status accorded to him in the new democracy." Mbeki would eventually [drop](#) Buthelezi as

Minister of Home Affairs in 2004, marking a decline in Buthelezi's national relevance.

The [election of Jacob Zuma](#), the first isiZulu-speaking president of the democratic South Africa, in 2009 had a devastating effect on Buthelezi's party. In the 2009 general elections, the IFP suffered [dismal results](#), winning only 22% of the votes in KZN, a drop in 12% from the 2004 elections. The successful presidential campaign of Zuma allowed the ANC to gain support in areas of KwaZulu-Natal long monopolized by the IFP, especially Zuma's home district in Nkandla. Based on these poor results, the IFP began to look for ways to change and regain their ground. With the insinuation from Buthelezi that he would not seek re-election in 2005, the party split its loyalties with the old-guard leaders advocating for former Inkatha Youth Brigade leader and general secretary [Musa Zondi](#), the Youth Brigade and IFP-aligned South African Democratic Students Movement supporting [Zanele Magwaza-Msibi](#), and the National Council advocating for Buthelezi to remain power to preserve unity in the party. These rifts in the party resulted in the expulsion of some in the party, particularly those loyal to Magwaza-Msibi.

This infighting in the party and the eventual split with Magwaza-Msibi in 2011 threatened Buthelezi's hold on KZN and inspired his paranoia that the ANC was out to undermine him. In the [2011 elections](#), the IFP lost even more ground in KZN, losing control of 32 of the province's 61 municipalities. After the elections, the ANC and NFP [formed](#) a coalition to co-govern 19 hung municipalities in the province, with Magwaza-Msibi becoming mayor of the Zululand District Municipality. This coalition added fuel to the [rumors](#) that the ANC had met with Magwaza-Msibi to form a plan to destroy the IFP while she was still serving in the party. This suspicion towards the ANC came to a head in a 2013 National Assembly session when Buthelezi called out Zuma publicly, [shouting](#) "Some of your ministers... referred to the fact that – repeating almost what [you] said to me – you think I should retire..." Zuma laughed off this attack, [pointing out](#) Buthelezi's waning influence

and the ineffectiveness of the coalition to see him removed from the presidency. “Certainly, I have no difficulty if the opposition join hands... some people, as parties, have difficulties to have a distinct view on issues; they must hang on others... and be very proud.” The “opposition” Zuma referred to was a coalition spearheaded by the EFF’s Julius Malema and Buthelezi who shelved their mutually antagonistic relationship (if only briefly) for the hope of bringing down Zuma in an ultimately [unsuccessful](#) vote of no confidence.

In 2014, the IFP lost its status as the official opposition in KZN at the provincial *and* national level, [receiving](#) only 9.8% of the vote in KZN and 2.4% nationwide, being outpaced nationally by both the DA (22.23%) and EFF (6.35%) as the main opposition to the ANC. In 2016, the IFP made a bit of a comeback, winning six KZN municipalities outright. This 2016 success, however, has to be credited in part to the IFP’s decision to [join](#) into a super-coalition with the DA, Congress of the People, the African Christian Democratic Party, Freedom Front Plus, and Holomisa’s United Democratic Movement. This tenuous foothold following the 2016 elections has been tempered by a slate of [violent clashes](#) between NFP and IFP supporters. This volatile political climate in KZN, best embodied by the spate of taxi murders in recent weeks, combined with still skyrocketing unemployment (with 47,000 jobs being [lost](#) in KZN between 2016 and 2017) and more than a third of KZN residents living below the [poverty line](#) (R318 a month), makes the forthcoming 2019 elections critical for the future of the IFP, even more so now in the face of Buthelezi’s retirement and lingering discontent with the rampant corruption of the ANC.

In addition to the political decline of the party synonymous with his leadership, the symbolic power of Buthelezi as leader of the Zulu declined over the decades as the symbolic and practical powers of King Goodwill Zwelithini rose. This was not a product of time and popular opinion, but a political miscalculation on Buthelezi’s part. Inkatha ultimately agreed to participate in the first elections once the

ANC and National Party guaranteed the recognition of the Zulu monarchy. This recognition allowed King Goodwill Zwelithini to begin to [move away](#) from the Inkatha leader who had managed him as symbolic puppet in KwaZulu and into the arms of the ANC. (Other members of the Zulu royal family such as Prince Israel Mcwayizeni had earlier moved into the ANC/UDF-aligned Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa and allied themselves with the ANC). During the early years of his kingship, Zwelithini was reliant upon and even subordinate to Buthelezi, but by the 1990s the king had broken from the IFP stalwart, aligning himself with the ANC. In 1994, Buthelezi pushed back against King Zwelithini and his ANC supporters, passing the House of Traditional Leaders Act through the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Assembly, an act designed to establish an advisory council of Zulu chiefs which virtually stripped the king of his authority as leader of all Zulu chiefs. The royal house issued an ultimatum that the IFP should repeal the act or face the consequences, sentiments echoed by the ANC. The IFP passed the act anyway, which was seen as a blatant attack against the king. Though it was eventually repealed by presidential intervention, the die had been cast.

Since then, King Zwelithini has rapidly outpaced Buthelezi as the public symbol and heart of the Zulu nation. Though many insist that he is nothing more than a puppet (first for the IFP and now for the ANC), the authority the king wields in KZN is undeniable. With the confirmation and expansion of his position under the [Nhlapo Commission](#), King Zwelithini has enjoyed significant symbolic, political, and financial powers. His position as trustee of the [Ingonyama Trust](#) (a land trust designed to manage lands formerly owned by the KwaZulu government that Buthelezi claims is his “[brainchild](#)”) puts him in charge of over 30% of KwaZulu-Natal’s landmass and as beneficiary of the leases the Trust collects. King Zwelithini also receives a substantial annual salary from the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government, managed by the Department of Royal Affairs, and innumerable benefits from his participation in the [male circumcision campaign](#) for the prevention of HIV beginning in 2009. The

2016 “[Zulu 200](#)” celebrations in Durban focused not on Buthelezi’s 41 years in power, but rather King Zwelithini’s 45-year reign (the longest of any Zulu king).

Buthelezi’s role has shifted from the political firebrand to the elder statesman, attending events with King Zwelithini, delivering speeches of support and providing quick, easily digestible soundbites for news articles and television spots. In this context, perhaps the announcement of his retirement should not be surprising — his relevance had long been the result of force and apartheid support and has only waned since the end of apartheid.

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Reference

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