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Zuma Is Chosen to Lead A.N.C.

By [MICHAEL WINES](#)

POLOKWANE, [South Africa](#) — The [African National Congress](#) chose the Zulu politician Jacob G. Zuma as its new leader on Tuesday, handing South Africa's president, [Thabo Mbeki](#), a resounding defeat.

After three days of furious politicking at a national conference here, the A.N.C.'s 3,900 delegates voted to oust Mr. Mbeki as leader of the party and award the job to Mr. Zuma, whose popularity has surged despite facing corruption and rape charges last year.

Mr. Mbeki, who led the party for 10 years and the nation for more than 8, won fewer than 4 in 10 votes.

Mr. Zuma now becomes the prohibitive favorite to succeed Mr. Mbeki as president when Mr. Mbeki's second term ends in early 2009. But he faces at least one daunting hurdle: a continuing corruption investigation that has dogged him for much of this decade and seems likely to lead to another round of criminal charges soon.

If Mr. Zuma were charged and convicted, he would be ineligible for the national presidency under South Africa's Constitution. The mere filing of new charges would be likely to set off a long stretch of political turmoil until the case against him was resolved.

Neither that prospect nor Mr. Zuma's considerable other political baggage — the unsuccessful rape prosecution and the conviction of a Durban businessman on charges

of bribing Mr. Zuma when he was deputy president — stopped the party's delegates from electing him and his slate of senior A.N.C. candidates.

The announcement of the vote caused pandemonium at the conference, held in a vast white tent at the University of Limpopo under a constant summer drizzle.

The mood of Mr. Zuma's supporters was captured in a single gesture by much of the crowd — two hands, rotating over each other like bicycle pedals. Soccer coaches use it to signal players to leave the field for a substitute, and thousands of delegates directed it at Mr. Mbeki throughout the conference.

Mr. Mbeki, a skilled technocrat, has run South Africa's government and economy with admirable efficiency, analysts and politicians say. But he was accused of shutting lower party officials out of decision making, being intolerant of dissent and — most seriously — ignoring the party's powerful left wing, which wants more money and attention given to the nation's vast underclass and the working poor.

An alliance of left-leaning trade unions, Communists and the rural poor made Mr. Zuma its standard-bearer, and it surprised many by scooping up the support of delegates even in regions under Mr. Mbeki's nominal control.

“People are sick and tired,” Sipho Seepe, a political analyst, columnist and Mbeki critic. “They're saying ‘no’ to this fellow. They have to send a clear and unambiguous message.”

The message to Mr. Mbeki may have been unmistakable, but Mr. Zuma's own plans for South Africa remain opaque. What little he has said and done has been ambiguous.

Alternately charming and prickly, comfortable in a tailored suit or tribal dress, Mr. Zuma is arguably South Africa's most adept politician. In eastern South Africa, where he helped broker an end to guerrilla war in the early 1990s, he is idolized by his fellow Zulus, but he is well-liked among other ethnic groups as well.

Mr. Zuma has built a reputation as a populist and a champion of the poor against an unfeeling government — fertile political soil in a nation with at least 25 percent unemployment and a yawning wealth gap.

But as the scholar and political analyst Xolela Mangcu said in a June speech, “There is nothing about his public actions that suggests he is a populist, that he would return power to the poor.”

A moderate while in Mr. Mbeki's government, Mr. Zuma tied his quiet campaigning for the A.N.C. leadership to the South African political left, which has called for the renationalization of basic industries and guaranteed incomes for the poor.

Nevertheless, Mr. Zuma met privately in recent weeks with foreign investors in the United States and Britain, apparently to assure them that South Africa's economy would not become another Bolivia under his rule.

Mr. Zuma has carefully sidestepped any direct criticism of Mr. Mbeki, who dismissed him as deputy president in 2005 as corruption allegations against him gained credence.

One veteran analyst of South African politics, Steven Friedman, said Tuesday that critics who were casting Mr. Zuma's populist rhetoric as a sign of radical change were mistaken.

“The guy is personally problematic, and he has a lot of questions to answer,” Mr. Friedman said. “But this is a mainstream figure who was a bosom buddy and close confidante of Thabo Mbeki. He’s not some wild man coming in from the hills to destroy the palace.”

Sharon Lafraniere contributed reporting from Johannesburg.