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Mbeki Plans to Stay in Office

By [MICHAEL WINES](#)

PRETORIA, [South Africa](#) — South Africa's president, [Thabo Mbeki](#), said Friday that he intended to remain in office until his term ended in early 2009, despite being ousted as leader of the [African National Congress](#) earlier this week by his rival and most likely successor, [Jacob G. Zuma](#).

Mr. Mbeki also rejected the common assumption that Mr. Zuma's ascension to the A.N.C.'s highest post entitled him to become the next president of South Africa, the route to power followed by Mr. Mbeki and by the nation's first democratic president, [Nelson Mandela](#).

Modern South Africa's 13 years of existence is too brief to establish any binding traditions, Mr. Mbeki said, but he acknowledged that Mr. Zuma would be a front-runner to succeed him, in part because of his long experience in government.

Mr. Mbeki spoke outside his hilltop mansion here, in South Africa's administrative capital, at a rare news conference that appeared to be devised to address the fallout from Mr. Zuma's decisive victory in the contest to head the A.N.C., by far the nation's dominant political party.

That contest had been widely depicted as a death struggle between Mr. Mbeki, a polished, if eccentric leader credited with cementing South Africa's status as a developing power, and Mr. Zuma, a charismatic but rough-hewn opponent who, prosecutors say, may face corruption charges within days or weeks.

Mr. Mbeki went out of his way on Friday to quash the widely held notion of a bitter power struggle between himself and Mr. Zuma, whom he fired as deputy president in 2005 in the midst of a bribery scandal.

Mr. Mbeki insisted that their contest to lead the A.N.C. was without rancor, adding that he could not remember “one single instance in which we’ve differed significantly about anything.” He played down the extent of divisions within the party, saying he had no explanation for the fusillade of catcalls and pro-Zuma songs and slogans that dominated the opening evening of the A.N.C. convention.

But on crucial issues of authority and political power, Mr. Mbeki gave Mr. Zuma no ground. Beyond insisting that his government would not resign, and that Mr. Zuma was not automatically entitled to succeed him, Mr. Mbeki also said there was common agreement that Mr. Zuma should stand trial if prosecutors charge him.

Mr. Zuma’s financial adviser, Schabir Shaik, is already serving a lengthy prison sentence after being convicted in 2005 of funneling money to Mr. Zuma in exchange for assistance in landing a lucrative military contract for a French manufacturer. Similar bribery charges against Mr. Zuma were thrown out this year on procedural grounds, but prosecutors said this week that they were preparing to refile those — and other — accusations.

Mr. Mbeki said that it was “perfectly obvious” that Mr. Zuma had to resign as his deputy president after Mr. Shaik’s corruption conviction. At a news conference on Friday, Mr. Mbeki stressed that Mr. Zuma should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty, but added that his party’s top officials were agreed that “the law should take its course” should Mr. Zuma be charged with a crime.