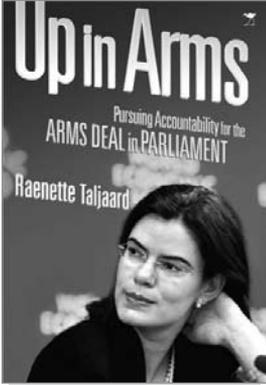


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UP IN ARMS: PURSUING
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BOOK REVIEW

Up in Arms: Pursuing Accountability for the Arms Deal in Parliament by Raenette Taljaard

Fourteen years ago, Parliament approved the Defence Review, a study that was commissioned to establish the future needs, role and structure of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). This launched not only the Strategic Arms Procurement Package, also known as the “arms deal”, but also a chain of political events that are still shaking the country to this day.

On 15 September 1999 Cabinet announced that R21.3 billion would be spent over eight years to procure the required armaments. In the same month, Patricia de Lille, then a Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) Member of Parliament, alleged that key players in the arms deal had received kickbacks.

The corruption allegations led to the conviction of Shabir Shaik, the former financial adviser of President Jacob Zuma, on charges of corruption and fraud. Following Shaik’s conviction, former president Thabo Mbeki fired his deputy Zuma and set in train a series of political events which ultimately led to his downfall in September 2008 and Zuma’s election as the president of the ruling party in December 2007 and President of the country in 2009.

The inauguration of Zuma as head of state in May 2009 happened barely a month after the National Prosecuting Authority had controversially decided to withdraw charges of corruption against the African National Congress (ANC) president and thus launched what I call The Zuma Moment – a moment in South African politics born out of the intrigue of the arms deal. The Zuma Moment also coincides with the deepening of factional tensions and division in the ANC, and the perception that the ruling party, a former liberation movement, has lost its moral compass, with its members engaging in naked battles for power and money.

Will the arms deal be seen by future generations as the moment in South African political history when the forces of liberation lost their innocence, or will this loss of innocence be seen by political historians as something that happened much earlier?

What seems indubitable in this regard is the fact that the arms deal constituted the betrayal of the hope that our post-apartheid order would not only result in the birth of something beautiful to behold – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world – but would also translate into reality the values by which those who fought against the evil of apartheid lived and died for.

This sense of betrayal is captured vividly in the book, *Up In Arms: Pursuing Accountability for the Arms Deal in Parliament*, by Raenette Taljaard, a former member of parliament for the Democratic Alliance (DA) and former director at the Helen Suzman Foundation.

While this is not the first book on the arms deal, the fact that the author was a teenager when the ANC was unbanned and Nelson Mandela was released from prison means that she is part of a generation of South Africans to whom the gift of freedom and democracy was bequeathed by older generations of freedom fighters. Her excitement about the events which led to the 1994 democratic breakthrough and her high levels of hope for the future are captured in the early parts of the book in a manner that makes the disappointment of those like her about the deeper meaning of the arms deal painfully palpable.

Taljaard's disappointment about the arms deal as evidence of a lack of accountability in the relationship between those who govern and the citizens of this country is not that of a distant observer. Not only did she witness the birth of our democratic constitution and the labour pains that went with it, she was there when the initial discussions about how the multi-agency probe into arms deal corruption allegations would be conducted happened.

She writes:

“Around the time of the meeting I attended in the Auditor-General's office in Pretoria, the response of the government to the unfolding drama seemed to be proper and reassuring. In early October 2000, shortly after the Scopa hearings with the Department of Defence, the Cabinet issued a statement committing itself to co-operating fully with any probe. The statement gave the assurance that the ministers concerned with the arms procurement would be available to meet with Scopa at any time.”

These assurances, however, were not the only thing which gave Taljaard the hope that neither effort nor sacrifice would be spared in the investigation, irrespective of who the casualties would be. She gives an account of how the parties involved seemed to prioritise the oversight role of Parliament when confidential documents and minutes of Cabinet and Cabinet sub-committee decisions about the arms procurement process were made available to Parliament. Fortunately for ANC party bosses, most parliamentarians did not bother to read them. This may be the reason why the executive may have succeeded in putting pressure on ruling party members of parliament to fall in line with the desire to obfuscate.

Taljaard argues in the book that, “Over the course of 2001 a Kafkaesque plot unfolded that would eventually, and astonishingly, exonerate the South African government from any wrongdoing in the arms deal.” She later says that the programme of Scopa was almost entirely taken up by the arms deal but, “We were making the kind of history one cannot be proud of.” In this regard, the chapter titled “Drama, deceit and deception” gave me a few sleepless nights and the events contained in it must have destroyed whatever idealism was left in the young woman who shed tears of joy when Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer announced that the ANC and the National Party had agreed on the final compromise text that would open the door for the adoption of the constitution in May 1996.

At the end of the day, the question this review must answer is whether Taljaard's book is fit to read. The book is a useful addition to the growing – albeit slowly –

literature on the arms deal in particular and the interface between governance and the arms industry in general. Does the book answer all questions about arms deal machinations? No single book can, especially since in Taljaard's case the book is about her as a witness to but one part of the sordid saga. The higher order question at the moment is whether the new probe that was announced by President Zuma last year will deliver on the promise of an unfettered investigation. Ultimately, the answer lies in whether the ruling party can survive such a probe.

However, this book is fit to read also for reasons that have nothing to do with the arms deal. The perception that the removal of the Special Investigating Unit of former judge, Willem Heath, from the multi-agency investigation was part of a wider plot by the executive to subvert the process is a comment about the need for electoral system reform in South Africa. Such reform may, to some extent, address the authoritarian streak which, as part of the proportional representation electoral system, currently afflicts all political parties without exception.

In addition, the book is about the author's disappointment that the hope of the realignment of opposition forces has not materialised for reasons which, in part, have to do with some of the weaknesses of the DA. In her own words, she bemoans what she sees as,

“a degree of gatekeeping and gamesmanship that simply leads the organisation to scoring ‘own goals’ in respect of racial transformation. The heated exchanges that currently mark the election for the leadership of the party in Parliament in 2011 may still, irrespective of its outcome, fracture the party on factional and racial lines, and its support base too.”

It is unfortunate, therefore, that this book has caused very little debate about the issues the author traverses. It is clear that Taljaard is an example of the poverty we all suffer when the able and thoughtful among us exit the political stage because they are losing hope not only in the ruling party, partly because of how it managed the arms deal saga, but also because the opposition has become parochial in its approach to the detriment of the vision of a non-racial future in which the office of the citizen will, indeed, be the highest office in our democracy.

This book is about the need to privilege accountability over the narrow interests of political parties and their bosses. But Taljaard's is not the story of paradise completely lost. She ends with the promise that, “I myself will contribute from where I am with that I have – my talents such as they are, deployed in academia and civil society to help in building a better South Africa. In my heart and mind I carry to inspire me the snaking voting lines of 1994, the beautiful melodies that erupted spontaneously in the old Assembly chamber to celebrate the new Constitution; and the dreams of Mandela's life and values. There is but one Republic of South Africa and I am grateful and proud to be a daughter of her soil.”

The ugliness of the arms deal notwithstanding, Taljaard's is ultimately a book that reminds us about the need to nurture hope and the resilience of the human spirit.