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Book Review

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The Old Revolutionary

The career of Mac Maharaj sheds light on the new South Africa.

SHADES OF DIFFERENCE

*Mac Maharaj and the Struggle
for South Africa.*

By Pádraig O'Malley.

648 pp. Viking. \$32.95.

By **JEREMY HARDING**

IN 2003, Mac Maharaj, who had served under Nelson Mandela in South Africa's first fully democratic government, was accused in the press of taking kickbacks during his time as minister of transport. Maharaj had left politics four years earlier, when Thabo Mbeki succeeded Nelson Mandela as president, and was working in the private sector.

The accusation, it turned out, was the result of a high-level leak from the public prosecutor's office. Though no charges were ever brought, the rumors persisted and Maharaj was unable to salvage his reputation. His employer, First Rand, carried out its own investigation and cleared him, but he left the company and a little later he left South Africa. It was a sad end to a legendary career.

"Mac" — or Satyandranath Ragunanan Maharaj — had spent nearly 40 years as an anti-apartheid activist, much of it in exile and some of it underground or in detention in South Africa, as well as a further five in government. "Shades of Difference," by Pádraig O'Malley, the John Joseph Moakley professor for international peace and reconciliation at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, is a collaborative biography, bringing together the author's analysis and Maharaj's own reflections, transcribed from hours of interviews. The result is exactly what O'Malley set out to achieve: "a portrait of Mac and of South Africa." It is a striking success.

Maharaj was born in 1935, to Hindu parents in Natal. An earlier generation had been shipped from colonial India during the 19th century as

indentured labor for South Africa's cane fields. Mac wanted to read for a law degree, but his skin color was against him. As a fervent young Marxist with a hatred of apartheid, he was skeptical about nonviolence at a time when many, including Mandela's organization, the African National Congress, still favored it. "I took to Communism," he tells O'Malley, "like a fish to water."

In the mid-1950s, he left the country to study law in London. Here he mixed freely with Communists, becoming a member of both the British Communist Party and the banned Communist Party of South Africa. Before sending Maharaj back home in 1962, the exiled Communist opposition arranged a stint in East Germany where he trained in printing and sabotage.

He returned to South Africa, O'Malley explains, to lead a knife-edge existence as "the struggle's publisher and bomb maker," a member of the party's central committee and also of the military wing of the A.N.C. He made pipe bombs, printed pamphlets and spirited militants out of the country for combat training. But the circle was tightening, and in 1964 he was arrested.

O'Malley, who provides a very good sense of the political context, tells us that from about 1960 until Mandela's release in 1990, some 80,000 people were detained without trial. There were no rules, least of all behind closed doors. During his interrogation, which included

beatings and appalling torture — described in detail here — Mac tried to slit his wrists with eggshells. The attempt failed, but his willpower held up: he gave only the names of comrades he knew were safely out of the country.

Mac was charged with four counts of sabotage. On Robben Island he quickly fell in with Mandela and the other political prisoners. Mandela, he says, had nicknames for everyone. Mac was “Neef,” or “Nephew” in Afrikaans. Mac called Mandela “Oom” or Uncle. “Of course I was pleased,” he told O’Malley. “Looking back, I can see it was also a way of wrapping us into a relationship in which we had to maintain a certain respect.” For his part, Mandela, writing honestly and well about Mac in his foreword to “Shades of Difference,” says the strength of their relationship “transcends the struggle.”

After serving 12 years, Maharaj moved to Lusaka, Zambia, where he joined the A.N.C. By the mid-1980s he was a senior member, and went on to become one of the key figures behind “Operation Vula,” the A.N.C.’s complex underground communications system. It linked militants inside the country with the exiled leadership in Lusaka, and smuggled freedom fighters into South Africa. One of the strengths of this book is to show how crucial Vula was to the A.N.C. — how much the exiled

leaders felt they'd lost touch with homegrown activists in the townships.

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Maharaj himself re-entered South Africa in 1988 in disguise. He and his colleagues had put the word about that he was gravely ill and receiving treatment in Moscow. Even his children were deceived, as O'Malley explains in a careful evaluation of the damage done to Mac's family life by his political commitments.

Back in South Africa Mac made contact with labor union leaders and political figures, while running weapons through Botswana. Operation Vula remained in place even after Mandela's release, in case the talks with F. W. de Klerk's government broke down.

Maharaj was detained again in 1990 on charges of terrorism and subversion, and waited several months before his release on bail. The charges were eventually dropped, and Mac benefited from a group indemnity granted by de Klerk. In 1994 he became a member of Mandela's cabinet.

Was Maharaj really guilty of taking bribes at the end of his extraordinary career? And why was the allegation leaked so assiduously several years after he had quit politics? O'Malley speculates that Mac was the victim of a complicated internal feud within the A.N.C., involving several government figures and including the deputy president of the country.

It's not clear if Thabo Mbeki approved of Mac's fall from grace. Mac doesn't say, but O'Malley believes he did. The whole episode confirms his suspicion that the new post-Mandela South Africa has turned sour. Mbeki, he writes, has given "the thumbs-up for the revolution ... to start eating its own," and doing "what postrevolutionary movements do best: marginalize old comrades and trample on others in the stampede for power." □