

## I WILL NOT BE SILENCED

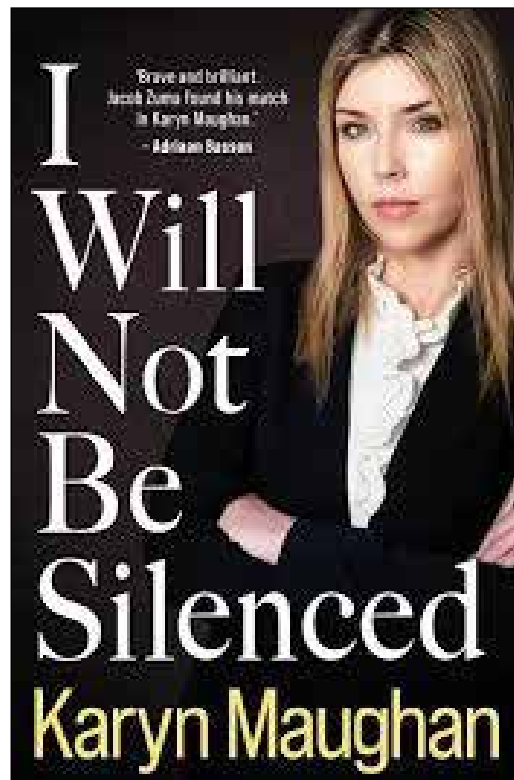
by KARYN MAUGHAN

Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2024

**B**ETWEEN 2023 and 2024, the international press freedom monitoring organisation Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) downgraded South Africa's rating from 25 to 38 among 180 nations. Acknowledging our robust constitutional context, RSF nevertheless noted the obstruction of reporters out on the beat and the increased incidence of smears incited by political parties against investigative journalists. But it missed a trick and failed to record use of the SLAPP suit, abusive legal action designed to intimidate and induce silence. In 2022, Karyn Maughan became the first South African journalist to face private prosecution – for doing her job.

She fell into court reporting very early in her career at the *Argus* by accident and without legal background. But she has shown that knowing her way around the system and scrupulous attention to detail are key to providing first-rate coverage for the public. She is now a household name and has broadcast for international networks. Reporting on Jacob Zuma's corruption and other legal cases for nearly twenty years has been a full-time occupation as he adopted Stalingrad tactics and showed a willingness to do almost anything to avoid justice, while adopting the persona of a wronged and persecuted victim.

Maughan's initial encounter with the world of Zuma was in 2006 with his rape trial of the young woman known as Khwezi (Fezekile Kuzwayo). This was the first demonstration to the nation of methods that would be used to promote Zuma's political ambitions and suppress his critics. In the streets there were depraved demonstrations against the complainant, in court a parade of lies, and behind the scenes vilification of opponents, especially women. A signature tactic employed by populists globally is to denounce critics as foreign agents; in the South African case working for the CIA, George Soros or even Amnesty International



will do. In the case of Khwezi, intimidation accompanied her to the grave as threats were made around her funeral.

Maughan took inspiration from Khwezi's ordeal, noting that 'truth and justice matter' (p. 16) in the face of violence implicit in the lies broadcast by powerful men. Sometimes they are assisted by conniving women such as Zuma's daughter, the Tweet-queen Duduzile Sambudla, who is notorious for weaponising social media with incitement. She orchestrated the hate campaign against Maughan, lying about her as alcoholic, mentally ill, a foreign spy, or, with a touch of authentic tradition, a witch. Another of Zuma's inhinged

acolytes, Carl Niehaus, described Maughan as a dog who deserved to be kicked.

The case brought against Maughan and state prosecutor Billy Downer had a precedent in accusations against Frank Chikane over the suicide note relating to the death of Kate Zuma in 2000. Entirely properly, he informed the relevant people of the contents and handed the original to the police. In due course, it appeared as a public document in the inquest. But Chikane was subsequently hounded.

Downer and Maughan were accused of publishing detail from an uninformative document admitted in open court proceedings and therefore part of the public record. This related to a postponement hearing in which Zuma's poor state of health while incarcerated at Estcourt, allegedly unable to make his bed or clean his cell, was given as the prime reason. Often such hearings are held in camera, but there was no such request in this case. Indeed, Dali Mpofu, Zuma's advocate assured Maughan she had done no wrong.

Yet in October 2022 Maughan, alongside Downer, found herself in the dock at Pietermaritzburg High Court protected by armed guards facing the possibility of a criminal conviction with a maximum prison sentence of fifteen years, which she identifies as insane.

(Sambudla at one point alluded to the possibility of Maughan's rape in jail.) The legal campaign waged against Maughan and Downer is described as 'abusive and ... bizarrely contradictory' (p. 50); a somewhat understated description. It was factually baseless and a legal nonsense, and widely recognised as such. Yet such an egregious perversion of the system was allowed to carry on for nearly a year. This was confirmed in the ruling of June 2023 that dismissed the case and recognised a process designed simply to intimidate backed by poisonous social media. The Supreme Court of Appeal ruled likewise, but the threat of a case lingers. It is a scenario worthy of Kafka. On a more sinister note, it has recently been revealed that the probable funder of Zuma's campaign is the extreme right-wing businessman, Louis Liebenberg.<sup>1</sup> White fascism meets black fascism.

There is an old newspaper saying that when a journalist becomes the story, it's no longer a story. In fact, Maughan reported on her own court case because of its wholly illegitimate nature and threat to a free press. Maughan's story is a vital warning about the fragility of press freedom, but she uses her traumatic experience to focus on other women who have been vilified and slandered for falling foul of male populists. Apart from Khwezi, there have been Maughan's friend Thuli Madonsela and Zuma's wife Nompumelelo Ntuli, whom Maughan interviewed after she was falsely accused of poisoning her husband and thrown out of her home. More recently, Janet Love was gratuitously vilified in connection with the general election. Ironically, two of these women were genuine MK operatives.

At one time Maughan regarded Mpofu, perhaps naively, as a friend. In this account he emerges as duplicitous, employing court tactics so lacking in logic they appear to have been ad-libbed. This waste of court time, a circus approach in Maughan's opinion, earns him buckets of money. She characterises him as a man who has lost sight of a just means to an end and suggests that he may have problems with competent and clever women.

When Maughan reported on the court case between Iqbal Survé and Nedbank, which refused to do business with Sekunjalo, she was compared with the Nazi publicist Leni Riefenstahl in Independent Media publications. She was also accused of racism, the cheapest jibe in South Africa, but one that leaves a mark

somewhere. A Press Council hearing cast doubt on the authenticity of one Edmond Phiri and pointed out that opinion must have a basis in truth. A damning finding implied that Independent Media was little more than a propaganda machine and its refusal to comply with the Press Council's ruling resulted in its expulsion on 23 October 2024.

The populist assault on South African democracy is led by a coalition of the disaffected, fuelled by social media, and fed from unlikely sources. One was the now-defunct British public relations firm Bell Pottinger, which devised the phrase white monopoly capitalism. It is a world of degenerates concocting lie after lie that is becoming an international plague: Ukrainians are Nazis; vaccines cause autism; hurricanes are being controlled, and so on. One consequence is that people anywhere can be persecuted for doing an honest competent job if it affronts some power-hungry and ruthless politician backed by a deluded cult following. In South Africa, Zuma's 'narcissistic delusions' and paranoia have driven the lies enabling the persecution of diligent, upright people.

This is an extraordinarily brave book, not just in the way it resolutely faces up to intimidation. Maughan is honest about the anxiety and fear she felt as the case against her developed; and the diabetic hypoglycaemic comas she suffered as often as twice a week. She places great stress on her Christian faith and the support of family and friends and acknowledges resolute backing received from News24.

Maughan's personal story is truly inspirational and important in its implications for a pillar of democracy, press freedom. But it has far wider relevance. It deals forthrightly with the plight of the world's most persecuted group: women. And it addresses the most urgent issue of our time: the identification and dissemination of truth. But above all, Maughan's experience gives further insight into the war on our Constitution and a glimpse of the way South Africa will be run should Zuma and Mpofu's MK Party attain national power. We have been duly warned.

CHRISTOPHER MERRETT

## NOTES

- 1 Marianne Thamm, 'Inside story: Louis Liebenberg's scheming and plotting exposed' *Daily Maverick* 168, 23 November 2024: 4–5.