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"STATE CAPTURE": HOW THE GUPTA BROTHERS HIJACKED SOUTH AFRICA USING BRIBES INSTEAD OF BULLETS

It started with black market rations and ended with "the wedding of the century." Novelist Karan Mahajan travels to India and South Africa to understand how three small-time investors fleeced an entire country—aided by some of the world's most respected consultants.

BY KARAN MAHAJAN

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A MODERN COUP
President Jacob Zuma (left) has been accused of helping the Gupta brothers—Rajesh, Ajay, and Atul—plunder as much as $7 billion from South Africa. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHASE.

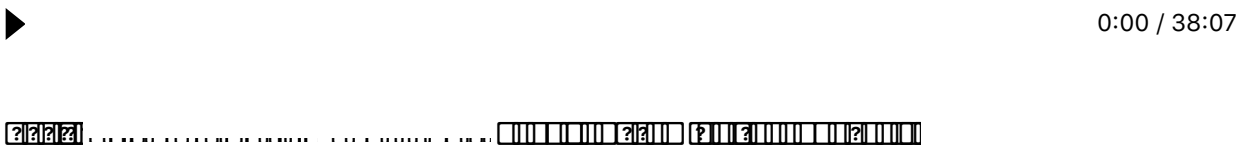
At eight o'clock on a morning ravaged by sharp winds, 300 South African coal miners sat on the stone steps of a makeshift amphitheater on the edge of a soccer field.

They hugged themselves against the chill. In the distance, four squat, beige smokestacks rimmed with black were belching up clouds of silent white smoke. A safety sign above the miners' heads declared, FINGERS DON'T GROW ON TREES. In recent months, with paychecks coming less and less frequently, many of the miners were starving. They were meeting this morning to decide whether to strike. As they listened to their union leader outline the options, they all knew whom to blame: the Guptas.

The three Gupta brothers—Ajay, Atul, and Rajesh—had bought the Optimum Coal Mine in December 2015, adding it to the tentacular empire they were building across South Africa, with interests in uranium deposits, media outlets, computer companies, and arms

suppliers. The miners, the union leader told me, would watch as the Guptas landed their helicopter in the parched soccer field with its rusty goalposts, only to swagger around with their gun-toting white bodyguards and take their kids to the mine vents without protective gear. Sometimes, when the brothers were in a magnanimous mood, they would dole out fistfuls of cash to miners who had been particularly obsequious that day. At the same time, they cut corners viciously. Health insurance and pensions were slashed. Broken machines were patched up with old parts from other machines. Safety regulations were flouted.

Then, a few months after the Guptas bought the mine, a tectonic corruption scandal upended South Africa. A government official testified that the Guptas had offered him the position of finance minister; the three brothers, it turned out, had effectively seized control of the state apparatus. It was, to date, one of the most audacious and lucrative scams of the century. Drawing on their close ties to President Jacob Zuma—and with the help of leading international firms like KPMG, McKinsey, and SAP—the Guptas may have drained the national treasury of as much as $7 billion. Zuma was forced to resign. McKinsey offered an extraordinary public apology for its role in the scandal. The Guptas fled to Dubai. And the mine, which the brothers had obtained in a corrupt deal brokered and financed by the government, tipped into bankruptcy.



The miners were among the ground-level casualties of complex schemes engineered on pieces of paper. In the months following the bankruptcy, they rioted and burned tires and courted arrest; today's meeting was, by contrast, a rather sanguine affair. But now, as my colleague and I edged toward the discussion, things once again erupted.

All of the miners in the field, save for a couple of mythically wizened white faces, were black. Yet the men who wrecked the mine—along with much of South Africa's economy—were, like my colleague Dhashen and me, of Indian origin. As Dhashen lumbered to the front of the crowd and began taking pictures with his iPhone, the miners suddenly stopped talking. For a moment, there was silence. Then, almost as one, they began jeering

and shouting.

"No Guptas!" a woman yelled. Others shouted in Zulu, raining the word "Gupta" down on us. The miners didn't see two Indian journalists: they saw the ghosts of the Guptas.

"He's not one of them!" the union leader shouted, trying to calm the miners. Order was finally restored, and by the afternoon, the workers had decided to strike, breaking into jubilant protest songs. But the underlying tension remained. During a break for lunch, a female blaster asked us, half-jokingly, to introduce her to an Indian man, so she could be "financially stable." Speaking about the Guptas, another blaster wryly turned to face me. "Your brothers," she said.

What the Guptas pulled off in South Africa has been extensively documented: the backroom deals, the rigged contracts, the wholesale plunder of national resources. The brothers, who declined to comment for this story, have denied all the accusations against them, and have yet to face charges. But the global arc of the tale—from a provincial town in India to the corporate boardrooms of London and New York—offers a case study in a new, systemic form of graft known as "state capture." This was a modern-day coup d'état, waged with bribery instead of bullets. It demonstrates how an entire country can fall to foreign influences without a single shot being fired—especially when that country is ruled by a divisive president who is skilled at fueling racial resentments, willing to fire his own intelligence chiefs to protect his business interests, and eager to use his elected position to enrich himself with unsavory investors. The Guptas had immigrated to South Africa from a backwater in India, but the skills they learned there proved indispensable in an age of globalized corruption.

Tragically, the scandal has also inflamed racial tensions in a country still struggling to recover from decades of apartheid. Indians, who came to South Africa under British rule in the 1860s as indentured laborers and traders, played a prominent role in the country's anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles. Gandhi invented satyagraha in Johannesburg, and two of Nelson Mandela's closest allies during his three decades in prison were South African Indians. But in a few short years, the Guptas had wiped away any lingering goodwill toward Indians, who make up less than 2.5 percent of the population. "Some miners are even saying that white people were better than these Indians," Richard Mgzulu, a union representative, told me. In one leaked e-mail, an employee complained

that Rajesh Gupta referred to his black security guards as “monkeys.”

The home in Saharanpur where the Guptas grew up—and learned to ply the black market. BY SAUMYA KHANDELWAL.

The family's Johannesburg estate served as a base of operations. BY FELIX DLANGAMANDLA/FOTO 24/GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES.

Arriving soon after the fall of apartheid, the Guptas showed that it was possible to hijack the best of Mandela's intentions—that nonwhites should be given a chance to prosper—by turning them against the country. The Guptas "would have heard that these A.N.C. guys are suckers," said Ronnie Kasrils, a former African National Congress minister and comrade of Mandela's. "They're friendly, they're open, they don't have prejudice." After years of enduring corrupt and ruthless white rule, many A.N.C. members were also hungry for self-enrichment, believing it was their "time to eat," as one anti-apartheid activist told me. In the Guptas, they found the perfect enablers of their greed.

When the Guptas arrived in South Africa, in 1993, they encountered a country in a state of hopeful transition. For the first time in history, black citizens were able to live in areas formerly reserved for whites. But in order to preserve the peace, Mandela had struck what many later saw as a devil's bargain: the segregated social and political orders would be repealed, but the economic structure would be preserved. There would be no mass takeover of white lands or businesses, as would happen later in Zimbabwe. South

Africans, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, would learn to forgive one another and live together—even though, in practice, many lied to the commission or simply failed to show up: more Reconciliation than Truth. So a desperately unequal country remained unequal, and only a few black elites moved into the spaces long ruled by whites.

These elites welcomed men like the Guptas, who could infuse cash into a country starved by anti-apartheid sanctions. Back in India, the Guptas had been small-time businessmen, but with a highly ambitious streak. This ambition had come down to them from their father, a devout man who wore a trilby hat, dabbled in tantric beliefs, and ran a fair-price shop in the city of Saharanpur that provided government-subsidized essentials like rice and sugar to the poor. In the Indian economy, fair-price shops are infamous nodes of corruption. Many of the rations they are supposed to provide wind up being diverted to the black market, where they are sold at inflated prices, bypassing the poor altogether.

Saharanpur itself was an unpromising place from which to conquer the world. A mishmash of old bazaars and shanties in one of India's most corrupt states, it was infested with pigs and bats, but granted a sense of wildness by its monsoonal greenery. Growing up in the city's cramped old quarter—a warren of crumbling Art Deco buildings, temples, and hundreds of small stalls selling fabric—the brothers bicycled to their one-room school, where they were educated in Hindi rather than more cosmopolitan English.

When Ajay, the oldest brother, came of age in the 1980s, his father sent him to Delhi, where, according to a source, he worked for a company that smuggled computers and spices from Nepal into India. Ajay became an expert in the so-called "gray market" for electronic goods sold outside the normal tariffed channels; his brothers soon joined him. From there—again at the instigation of their father—the brothers immigrated to Singapore, the hub of the electronics gray market in Asia. According to a friend who still lives in Saharanpur, "Ajay Gupta has a massive mind"—one agile enough to exploit the trade policies of rival countries. At one point while in Singapore, Ajay approached an associate to set up a factory in Saharanpur to manufacture computer memory cards. But there was a catch: The factory wouldn't actually produce anything. Instead, Ajay would send the memory cards fully assembled from Singapore, and the associate would simply ship them back, claiming they had been made in India. That way, Ajay could obtain an Indian government subsidy of $2 per card, while showing a loss of $1 on the books.

Why the Guptas moved from Singapore to South Africa remains a mystery. The Guptas say they were once again prodded by their father, who believed that "Africa would be the next America of the world." But when Atul arrived in Johannesburg, at age 25, with an initial investment of $350,000, South Africa's future was far from obvious. Roiled by internal racial and ethnic strife, the country was on the verge of forming its first democratic government, and Indian businessmen who had prospered under apartheid thought Gupta was a fool. "We are all leaving," they told him. "Why are you coming? This country's going to go to the dogs."

In South Africa, the Guptas found a country with the allure of the white First World, but all the guile of the Third World in which they'd been raised. And unlike other Indians in South Africa, they were free of the country's history of oppression; as Hindu males born in independent India, they had been like white men back home. Which is why, when opportunity presented itself in South Africa, they acted like white men before them—with impunity.

Soon after arriving, sources say, the Guptas started slapping together gray-market computers from undervalued imported parts and selling them under the logo Sahara. The name was a tribute to their hometown of Saharanpur and Africa's Sahara—but it was also a blatant imitation of the brand of a famous Indian company. The Guptas would later maintain that they commenced their Africa sojourn humbly, by selling shoes at a mall. But this story has proved difficult to verify: none of the longtime shop owners I spoke with at the mall remember the Guptas, and one former official who has investigated them extensively told me they had concocted their rags-to-riches fable. In any case, as their profits soared, the Guptas were welcomed into South Africa's inner circle of business and political elites. Atul—with his pinched expression, unctuous smile, thin mustache, and disarmingly reedy voice—was the P.R. face of the family. Invited to join a business delegation to India, he struck up a friendship with Essop Pahad, a South African Indian politician and A.N.C. stalwart.Pahad, an India enthusiast, arranged for Ajay to be appointed to an advisory committee to President Thabo Mbeki.

The Guptas, who had been unknown back in India, enjoyed hobnobbing with the elites. They became famous in Johannesburg for inviting politicians to parties at their large, one-acre compound in the tony neighborhood of Saxonwold, and for entertaining the Indian and South African cricket teams after matches. (They also began to sponsor

cricket stadiums.) The social investments paid off: before long, the Guptas befriended the man who would be most responsible for wrecking the post-apartheid dream of South Africa—Jacob Zuma.

For an African freedom fighter, Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, whose middle name can be translated as "a person who eats you up while he's smiling at you," bears an uncanny resemblance to Donald Trump. He rose through the political ranks and won Mandela's affection by expertly consolidating his base of conservative Zulu supporters—the largest ethnic group in the country—with his son-of-the-soil charm. He became notorious for his unchecked and opportunistic philandering. And he relied on handouts of cash from shady businessmen to keep himself afloat. Forward and friendly, he looked a bit like a cat who has been found with his face in the cream and, instead of backing away, invites you to join him.

By the time the Guptas had met him, in 2002, Zuma was deputy president of South Africa. A "conservative traditionalist," according to one former official, Zuma acquired five wives (in addition to an ex-wife) and has 23 kids. He also lived beyond his means, writing dud checks and refusing to pay his taxes. Strapped for cash, he received interest-free loans from Schabir Shaik, a South African Indian businessman, who engineered an annual bribe for Zuma from a French arms company. In 2005, Shaik was found guilty of having a corrupt relationship with Zuma and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Zuma, facing corruption charges of his own, was forced out of office.

THE FAMILY'S MANSION WAS **LITTERED WITH KITSCHY STATUES**, ITS BATHROOM FIXTURES **DETAILED IN GOLD**.

Then, in a revelation that seemed to doom any chance of a political comeback, the daughter of an A.N.C. comrade came forward and accused Zuma of raping her in the guest room of his home. She was 31 and an H.I.V.-positive AIDS activist; he was 63. Never one to shy away from boasting about his libido, Zuma maintained that the sex was consensual and that the woman had worn a colorful traditional wrap—an obvious invitation to sex. "You cannot just leave a woman if she is already at that state," he testified. He also insisted that he had showered after he had sex with her, to mitigate the chance of contracting AIDS—a comment that made him an international laughingstock. But Zuma survived by painting himself as the victim of a political conspiracy. His

supporters swarmed the courthouse with signs proclaiming, BURN THE BITCH and 100% ZULU BOY, and in 2006 the judge acquitted him on all charges. That following year, tapping into an early surge of the populist forces that would soon consume the world, Zuma trounced the neoliberal Mbeki to become head of the A.N.C. In 2009, with the corruption charges against him thrown out on a technicality, Zuma was elected president of South Africa.

The Guptas, who were canny investors, had begun playing the long game from the moment they met Zuma. They put his son Duduzane on their payroll in 2003, and continued to promote him even after Zuma's fall. The youngest Gupta brother, Rajesh —nicknamed Tony—was especially close to Duduzane, who was "in and out of their house like a fourth Gupta," according to Pahad, their A.N.C. ally. Duduzane was eventually made a director of several Gupta-linked companies. The brothers helped set him up in a $1.3 million apartment in the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world's tallest skyscraper, and paid for his five-star vacations. (Duduzane, who declined to comment for this story, has denied owning property in Dubai.) In 2014, when Duduzane crashed his Porsche into a minibus, killing two passengers, the first person he called was Rajesh.

The Guptas insisted that Duduzane was employed on his own merits. "This young boy since beginning with us and he work even 16 to 18 hours daily," Ajay told a reporter in his characteristically broken English. "He go himself to the all mines, all places. He don't sit in an air-conditioned room and just count the money or do this. He earn, very hard-earned money, he do that." But Duduzane also enabled the Guptas to present their companies as black-owned businesses—a display essential for winning government contracts in post-apartheid South Africa. And it endeared the Guptas to Zuma, who was in and out of their house during his embattled years, performing *pujas*, or prayers, with their mother, who directed her sons' domestic lives after the death of their father, in 1994.

In the Guptas' compound, Zuma found a conservative household that mirrored his own—a place where old values flourished in a new country. Though the brothers had bought four adjacent mansions in Johannesburg, they lived in a single home with their wives and children and mother in a feudal setup imported wholesale from India. They conversed in Hindi and didn't eat meat or drink alcohol. The women dressed modestly and generally did not interact with guests; daughters-in-law had to obtain permission to

visit their own parents. Indian servants in tattered vests ran barefoot through hallways littered with kitschy statues and busts; the fixtures in the bathrooms were detailed in gold. Ajay, now 53, sported the diamond ring his father had once worn. Rough-hewn and imposing, with a permanent swath of stubble, he was the family patriarch and the political brain of the operation. Atul, 50, oversaw outreach to corrupt government officials, while Tony, 46, served as the family's gruff business negotiator.

The Guptas' loyalty to Zuma wound up paying massive dividends. The brothers, Atul told an employee, supported Zuma before "anyone thought he could be president." The family "stood by him until he came out victorious. He would often come to our house and meet Ajay and me. Look where that support has brought him—today he is the president."

From the moment Zuma was elected president, the Guptas began to plunder the South African government on an unprecedented scale. It was the perfect arrangement: Zuma did not have to be present in the room, or even included on e-mails, while the Guptas cut deals and moved money in and out of the country. Ajay, one government whistle-blower later recounted, would lounge on a sofa during meetings with his shoes off, wearing a T-shirt and gray track pants, looking like a swami who expected people to "kiss his feet" as he brainstormed ways to bribe officials. The Guptas had taken the model of their father's fair-price shop and exaggerated it to fit the modern economy.

State capture goes far beyond paying off greedy officials; it's about distorting government policy for personal gain. In April 2010, the state-owned Industrial Development Corporation lent the Guptas $34 million, which they used to buy a uranium mine. It seemed like a risky move: at the time, worldwide uranium prices were plummeting. But the Guptas appeared to have inside knowledge that Zuma was planning—over the objections of his own treasury—to sign an expensive deal with Russia to open a series of nuclear power plants. Once the facilities were up and running, they would buy uranium from the Guptas, who wound up pocketing all but $1.8 million of the government loan.

Three months later, the Guptas launched a newspaper called *The New Age*. Zuma promptly called the head of the government's communications arm, Themba Maseko, and instructed him to help "these Gupta guys." When Maseko paid a visit to the family's compound, Ajay ordered him to turn over the government's entire advertising budget—some $80 million a year—to *The New Age*. If he didn't cooperate, Maseko later testified,

Ajay said he would "speak to my seniors in government, who would sort me out and replace me with people who would cooperate with him." Six months later, Maseko was removed from office, and the government handed its advertising money over to the Guptas. Though *The New Age* gained no real audience, every government department appeared to subscribe to it, with thousands of copies lying around in offices, unread. According to court documents, the newspaper was later used to launder money through fake advertising invoices.

Duduzane Zuma, the president's son, profited while working for the Guptas. BY ALAISTER RUSSELL/THE SOWETAN/GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES.

That October, an A.N.C. member of parliament named Vyjtie Mentor was invited to meet with Zuma. She later testified that she was picked up at the airport in Johannesburg by Atul and Tony; with their dark suits, earpieces, and sunglasses, she assumed they were the president's drivers. Mentor soon found herself at the Gupta compound, sitting across from Ajay, who offered to make her minister of public enterprises—provided that, in her new position, she help a Gupta-linked airline win a coveted route to India. When Mentor

angrily refused, President Zuma suddenly emerged from the next room. Carrying her bag, he escorted her to a waiting cab. “Go well, young woman,” he told her in Zulu. “Everything will be O.K.” A few days later, the minister of public enterprises was fired after she refused to meet with officials from the airline.

The Guptas’ brazenness was becoming obvious in government circles. In 2011, to shield the brothers from investigation, Zuma fired the chiefs of all three intelligence agencies and replaced them with loyalists. The following year, leaked e-mails show, a Gupta shell company acquired the rights to run a government-funded dairy farm meant to empower poor black farmers. The director of the Gupta company was a former I.T. salesman with no experience in farming; the contract was won without a bidding process. According to court documents, the Guptas siphoned $16 million from the operation. The dairy fell into disuse, with some 100 cows reportedly dying from lack of proper feed. (The Guptas have denied any connection to the operation, beyond a $10,000 consulting contract.)

The following year, the Guptas moved into television, launching a channel called ANN7 to secure more government ad revenues. Rajesh Sundaram, who became the channel’s editor, told me he met with Zuma and Atul Gupta three times in 2013 to discuss the launch. The president, who acted like a secret shareholder in the channel, told Sundaram that he wanted it to disseminate “subtle propaganda.” ANN7 served as a microcosm of how the Guptas ran their operations: low on quality, high on greed. Laborers were flown in from India on tourist visas and housed in substandard barracks. No one was offered medical benefits. Atul monitored the lengths of employee bathroom breaks, and installed G.P.S. in company cars to make sure reporters weren’t straying from their work beats. Attractive models were hired in lieu of trained anchors. During the channel’s launch, one model-anchor froze on camera as she waited for her teleprompter to function. In another segment, an anchor waiting for a transmission from a correspondent was instead greeted by the sound of a backstage technician making an anguished mooing sound.

The downfall began, like a Shakespeare comedy in reverse, with a wedding. In 2013, the Guptas decided to throw “the wedding of the century” for their eldest niece. They booked the upscale Sun City resort in South Africa, two hours north of Johannesburg, plotting four days of events for 400 guests. They flew in Bollywood stars from India, and dancers from Brazil and Russia. They ordered 30,000 bouquets spread across the volcanic grounds of the resort, a 70s-era version of Wakanda complete with gigantic

plaster elephants. The invitation itself was so imposing—six ornate containers laden with delicacies from six continents—that when one invitee, the wife of a provincial police commissioner, received it, the local bomb squad was called in to detonate it.

Then, on April 30, more than 200 guests from India began to arrive. They flew not to Johannesburg but to Waterkloof, a South African air-force base a few miles south of Pretoria. Waterkloof is a reddish, parched patch of earth with the endless, low-lying feel of a college campus. As the bleary-eyed guests disembarked from a chartered flight not long after sunrise, they were greeted by Atul, dressed in a pink T-shirt and dark-blue blazer. Atul ushered the guests into seven helicopters and 60 white Range Rovers for the trip to Sun City, accompanied by police escorts.

All of this would have gone off without a hitch had it not been for Barry Bateman, a radio reporter in Pretoria. Tipped off about the arriving guests, he rushed to Waterkloof and walked up to Atul outside the passenger terminal with a simple question: “Why are you using an air-force base to bring your family in?”

Military bases, Bateman knew, are typically reserved for flights involving high-ranking government officials or heads of state. It was as if a wealthy Russian oligarch had been permitted to use Andrews Air Force Base to land hundreds of guests for a private affair in Washington, D.C.—one scheduled to be attended by the president himself. When Atul refused to answer Bateman’s question—“Don’t be smart with me,” he said—the reporter immediately tweeted about the curious landing: #GuptaWedding.

For the first time, ordinary South Africans suddenly knew who the Guptas were—and how high their influence reached. The country was outraged. The “Zuptas”—Zuma and the Guptas—became a staple of daily cartoons and Trevor Noah parodies. The officials who had orchestrated the landing later said they had received instructions from “Number One,” a clear reference to President Zuma.

The Guptas, meanwhile, were unapologetic. “One day these officials will know the power of the Gupta family,” said Atul. Ajay, the canniest of the brothers, felt the scandal would get them “eyeballs” for their new TV station. Later, leaked e-mails would reveal that they paid for the wedding using money they had looted from the dairy farm and routed through the United Arab Emirates. KPMG wrote off the lavish celebration as a business expense.

Emboldened by their survival, the Guptas kicked their corruption into overdrive. In 2014, Zuma's associates awarded them the largest-ever supply contract with Transnet, South Africa's rail and port company—a deal worth $4.4 billion. The Guptas used the contract to secure millions in kickbacks—which they called "commissions"—from international players eager to do business with the firm. Zuma also installed four Gupta allies on the board of Eskom, South Africa's power utility, which illegally handed the Guptas $38 million in government funds to buy the Optimum Coal Mine. (Eskom had hounded the mine's previous owners into bankruptcy at the Guptas' behest.)

If you wanted to do business in South Africa, it seemed, you had to go through the Guptas—much as certain white-owned enterprises had cornered the economy during apartheid. Respected international firms rushed to make deals with the brothers and their associates. McKinsey & Company, the global consulting giant, partnered with Eskom on a scandalous deal—its largest-ever contract in Africa—that wound up funneling money to a Gupta-linked firm. (McKinsey denies that it did "anything illegal.") The London-based P.R. firm Bell Pottinger used Twitter and fake-news Web sites to inflame racial tensions in South Africa, spreading the idea that "white monopoly capital" was orchestrating the attacks on the Guptas to create "economic apartheid." And KPMG, the accounting firm, was hired for $1.65 million by a top Zuma ally to discredit South African tax officials who were investigating the brothers. The firm essentially copied memos provided by the government, portraying the officials as a "rogue unit" that illegally spied on the Zuma administration and "engaged the services of prostitutes during their leisure time." The fake-news campaign worked; several senior tax officials were forced to resign, and scores more quit.

Then, on October 23, 2015, the Guptas tried to bribe the wrong man.

The unfinished temple the Guptas are building in Saharanpur. BY SAUMYA KHANDELWAL.

On that day, a balmy Friday, Mcebisi Jonas, the country's deputy finance minister, was invited to a hotel to discuss business with the president's son Duduzane. Instead, Duduzane drove him to the Gupta compound. There, Jonas later testified, he met with one of the brothers, whom he believed to be Ajay. Ajay told him that the "old man"—President Zuma—seemed to like him. The family, he added, wanted to see whether Jonas was someone who "can work with us."

"You must understand that we are in control of everything," Ajay said. "The old man will do anything we tell him to do."

The deal on offer, Jonas recounted in his testimony, was as simple as it was enticing. Zuma would appoint Jonas as the nation's finance minister. The Guptas, in turn, would pay Jonas $45 million to purge treasury officials who opposed the deal to build Russian-run nuclear energy plants that would operate on fuel supplied by the Gupta uranium mine.

Jonas, a soft-spoken man with a neat white goatee and a tie that always seems on the

verge of coming undone, was outraged. When he got up to leave, Ajay tried sweetening the deal. If Jonas was willing to cooperate, Ajay said, he would deposit money in an account of his choosing—in South Africa or Dubai. In fact, he could give him $45,000 on the spot. “Do you have a bag?” he asked Jonas. “Or can I give you something to put it in?” When Jonas again refused, Ajay followed him to the door. If he told anyone about the meeting, Ajay warned, the Guptas would have him killed. (In a sworn affidavit, Ajay insisted that he was not present at the meeting, which he calls an “intentional fabrication to implicate me in alleged wrongdoing in which I played no part.”)

In March 2016, as the Guptas and Zuma continued to try and bend the finance ministry to their will, Jonas decided to go public. This time, the A.N.C. was unable to brush off the allegations—they came from within the ruling party itself. The Guptas fled for Dubai in April, and the ensuing investigations toppled top executives at McKinsey and KPMG, which is under investigation for its ties to the Guptas, as are HSBC, Standard Chartered, and SAP. Bell Pottinger, the P.R. firm, imploded after accusations that it had tried to stir up racial resentments at the Guptas’ behest. Threatened by a vote of no confidence and with his candidate having lost the vote for A.N.C. president, Zuma was forced to step down in February 2018. A few months later, Duduzane appeared before a judge in shackles, wearing a gray wool jacket and a rakish black scarf, and was charged with corruption. The era of the Guptas, it seemed, was over.

Even in exile, the Guptas remain a central meme in South African consciousness; the few available stock photos of the brothers circulate regularly on the front pages of the country’s newspapers. On the day I arrived in Johannesburg last fall, a commission of inquiry had begun its investigation into state capture—a brief moment of hope that quickly curdled into disappointment. With a budget of $17 million, the commission was expected to complete its work in six months. But the wise, turtle-like judge overseeing the inquiry sonorously predicted it would go on for two years. It soon became clear that the Guptas would not appear. It was an open question as to whether Zuma could be compelled to testify, and the government has temporarily withdrawn corruption charges against Duduzane, pending further evidence from the commission. On the first soporific day, in a large hall that could have been the foyer of a bank, the lead prosecutor presented such boring PowerPoints that I almost wished McKinsey could be brought back to enliven them.

The economy, meanwhile, remains devastated by all the plunder and corruption. Tax collections have plunged by billions since Zuma's purge of the once-respected state tax agency. The rand is reeling, and credit-rating agencies have downgraded the country's bonds to junk status. A quarter-century after the end of apartheid, South Africa has the worst income inequality in the world—evident in the profusion of high walls, electric fences, and guards to protect parked vehicles. Almost two-thirds of blacks live in poverty, compared with only 1 percent of whites, and half of all young people are unemployed.

These young people, like the miners I met at Optimum, are growing impatient. In 2015, a student movement called "Rhodes Must Fall" successfully pressed for the removal of a statue of the colonialist Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town. Now the movement has morphed into "Fees Must Fall," demanding free university education for poor families as a means to self-empowerment—though it is unclear where the money for such largesse might come from. And calls for land reform—in a country where whites own 72 percent of all privately held farmland—are also growing. The less the country can deliver, the more radical the demands have become.

The Guptas have created an atmosphere of distrust in which ancient group feelings are being resurrected. Many whites, who make up 9 percent of the population, blame the A.N.C. for the country's downfall—and see themselves as victims. One of the first things I heard on the radio when I arrived in Johannesburg was a middle-aged white man calling in to a talk show to complain that "the benefits of the end of apartheid have been outweighed by the way we're being discriminated against." There was no acknowledgment of the devastation caused by apartheid, or why it might necessitate affirmative action for blacks.

In a Cape Town bookstore, at a discussion about state capture between a professor and a government minister, I found an audience full of politically engaged, middle-aged whites fired up about what the Guptas and Zuma did to the country. But talking to them, I discovered that they were the South African equivalent of Trump's most fervent followers. One sixtysomething white woman with rabbity teeth, keen blue unseeing eyes, and an orthopedic metal cane told me that poverty in India was "dignified," unlike the "begging and entitlement" in South Africa. Another white woman, overhearing a conversation I was having, rebuked me for not supporting Trump, calling him "the only knight in shining armor in a dark reality." Trump himself had tweeted a few days earlier about "the

large scale killing" of white farmers in South Africa—a patently false statement. How could I tell her that the broadside on behalf of white South Africans was meant to divert attention from Michael Cohen's guilty plea that day? Did anyone wish to see beyond their own narrow version of the truth?

Back in India, meanwhile, the Guptas have been slowly raising their profile. When I visited Saharanpur, I discovered that the brothers are considered heroes, though the adulation is shot through with the sort of gossip you expect from small towns—accounts of film stars and politicians visiting the family's home, the difficulty of getting an appointment with the Guptas' sister. In one fetid corner of the old city—so cramped that cars cannot get through—I encountered the scaffolded bones of a massive temple with more than 50 rooms for religious education, surrounded by carved sandstone blocks waiting to be joined together to create shrines. The temple would be complete in 2022; it was the Guptas' $28 million gift to their town.

The brothers now live openly in Dubai, though their time there may be limited: in September, the U.A.E. and South Africa finally signed an extradition treaty, mainly, it is thought, to ensnare the Guptas. Undeterred, the brothers continue to revel in their wealth. They recently sent out a 17-page invitation for yet another extravagant family wedding, this one projected to cost $7 million. Under the names of their children was inscribed, almost wistfully, their place of residency: "Johannesburg, South Africa."

The Guptas, remarkably, seem hurt that their former fiefdom—the place that made them who they are—has turned against them: had they acted so differently from the white colonialists before them? "Was Ajay Gupta or Gupta family proven guilty?" Ajay asked a reporter recently, employing the third person. "One place? One smallest thing?" A journalist who met Ajay in India told me that the Gupta patriarch is "seething in rage" over his family's fall. "We've always eaten two rotis," Ajay declared defiantly. "We'll keep eating two no matter what happens." The same could not be said for the starving miners—and the looted country—the brothers had left behind.

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