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South Africa's Zuma Considers Stepping Down Early

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Zuma has the authority to hire and fire ministers such as Gordhan, but if senior party figures openly criticize him it would weaken his position.

Jacob Zuma is considering offering to step down next year, at least 12 months before his term as South African president ends, under a deal with opponents in his ruling party that would see Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan leave office now, two senior party sources said.

Zuma is due to be replaced as leader of the African National Congress at a party conference in December after serving his allocated two terms, but was expected to remain the country's president until elections in 2019.

The offer appears intended as a way out of an impasse over the country's leadership within the divided ANC, but may not be enough to satisfy opponents of Zuma, who want the president out early anyway and urgently want Gordhan to stay.

There is precedent for an ANC leader to leave the presidency early. Thabo Mbeki was removed by the ANC as South African president in 2008.

A split in the ANC deepened this week after Zuma ordered Gordhan to return from an investor roadshow in Britain, raising expectations of a cabinet reshuffle that markets fear will include Gordhan's removal.

"Zuma's early departure after December conference is on the table," one of the sources told Reuters. "He could be forcibly removed so it makes sense for him to go on his own terms."

