

JOHANNESBURG (AFP) - Former Haitian president Jean Bertrand Aristide, exiled in South Africa since his 2004 ouster, received a doctorate in African Languages Wednesday in a ceremony attended by President Thabo Mbeki. The 53-year-old priest, who became Haiti's first democratically-elected leader, was among a group of several dozen awarded doctorates in the ceremony at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria.

A university spokesman said that Aristide had become fluent in Zulu since being appointed an honorary research fellow shortly after his exile began. His wife Mildred works at the same university.

Neither Aristide nor Mbeki made any comment to reporters who attended the ceremony.

The populist ruler, who failed to win the approval of Haiti's middle and upper classes during his two stints as president, also has qualifications in theology, philosophy and psychology obtained at universities in Haiti and Rome.

Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma told parliament last year the government was covering the costs of the stay of Aristide, his family, staff and entourage, which were "similar to the cost normally incurred for a South African cabinet minister."

She said conditions such as stability and an assurance of the former president's safety were not yet in place for him to return to Haiti.