

South African foreign policy's conflict mediation outcomes are significantly shaped by the democratic deficit which characterises the African continent

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South African foreign policy has brooked a fair amount of criticism from observers and commentators in recent times. The suggestion has been that it is unclear and that its core values and priorities are obfuscated by practitioners. The following is an attempt to understand the key influences that have shaped South African foreign policy priorities after 1994, in particular, conflict mediation as a key South African Foreign policy priority. South Africa transformed from being a global and continental pariah to a respected actor in international affairs. This occurred within an African context which was ceased with the challenge of ensuring that democratic governance is deepened and consolidated.¹ This brief contribution argues that the democratic deficit which characterises the African continent has been a key influence in terms of shaping democratic South African's Foreign Policy and approaches to conflict mediation.

South African Foreign Policy and the African Agenda:

Since the beginning of the democratic dispensation in 1994, South Africa's foreign policy evolution has consistently asserted the importance of prioritising South Africa's relations with the rest of the African continent. This is crystallised by the ANC government's insistence that the African agenda is integral to South Africa's foreign policy architecture.² Following decades of isolation, the first democratically elected president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, recognised the magnitude of the task of positioning South Africa as a full

¹ Adebayo O. Olukoshi, *The Democracy Debate in Africa-An Outline*, 16-39

² Chris Landsberg, *The Diplomacy of Transformation: South African Foreign Policy and Statecraft*, (Pan Macmillan 2010), 139-165.

and bona fide participant in world affairs. In this regard he spelled out six cardinal pillars upon which democratic South Africa's foreign policy would rest, namely:

- “that issues of human rights are central to international relations and an understanding that they extend beyond the political, embracing the economic, social and environmental;
- that just and lasting solutions to the problems of human kind can only come through the promotion of democracy worldwide;
- that considerations of justice and respect for international law should guide the relations between nations;
- that peace is the goal for which all nations should strive, and where this breaks down, internationally agreed and non-violent mechanisms, including effective arms controls regimes, must be employed;
- that the concerns and the interests of the continent of Africa should be reflected in our foreign policy choices;
- that economic development depends on growing regional and international economic cooperation in an interdependent world”.³

These Pillars outlined by former President Mandela have informed the strategic thrust upon which Foreign Policy in democratic South Africa has been premised. Critics have also often cited that in practice, foreign policy has been at odds with the principles enunciated in these pillars. Against this backdrop, South African foreign policy in the context of mediation and South Africa's relationship with the African continent warrants a closer examination.

Democratic South Africa's relationship with its regional and sub-regional counterparts has been underpinned by two complementary themes; firstly, constructive engagement with the African continent, which has entailed concerted attempts to shed South Africa's image as an antagonistic actor in the affairs of the continent. Secondly, the realisation that South Africa's developmental trajectory is intricately intertwined with that of its African neighbours.⁴ These priorities are best reflected by the then Department of Foreign Affairs Strategic paper of 2005, which highlighted that “the regeneration of Africa is the main pillar of South Africa's foreign policy objectives. It is central to ensuring a better life for all in South Africa and on the continent”.⁵ Therefore, the foreign policy trajectory pursued by South Africa is one that is inextricably embedded in the African context.

The Democratic deficit in Africa and South African Foreign Policy:

The post independent African political landscape can broadly be characterised as exhibiting a democratic deficit which has produced political instability underpinned by intractable conflicts, coupled with high levels of poverty and general underdevelopment.⁶ There has been much debate amongst African scholars, practitioners and observers alike about what constitutes a “bona fide” democratic experience in Africa. For some, democracy ought to be instrumental in that its value is linked to the extent to which it can improve the lives of citizens in the respective African polities.

For others, democracy is worth fighting for, simply, for its normative political value. Ultimately, another group resolved that democracy's normative political and instrumental values are not mutually exclusive; and that popular confidence in democratic governance would be bolstered by its ability to improve people's

³ Mandela N, New Pillars for a New World, South Africa's future foreign Policy: Article by Nelson Mandela in Foreign Affairs, Vol. 72, No.5, November/December 1993, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4113>

⁴ Lotze W, de Coning C, Neethling T, Peace Keeping Contributor Profile, <http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/2014/04/03/contributor-profile-south-africa/>

⁵ 2005 Strategic Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Paper, quoted in Chris Landsberg, The Diplomacy of Transformation, 139-165.

⁶ RDM News Wire in Times Live, Conflict in Africa fuelling poverty and underdevelopment Says Mbeki, 08 October, 2015, <http://www.timeslive.co.za/africa/2015/10/08/Conflict-in-Africa-fuelling-poverty-and-under-development%E2%80%9A-says-Mbeki>

livelihoods.⁷ Therefore, against this backdrop, the function of democracy could be broadly accepted as a context wherein political conditions and institutions to a greater extent, reflect popular aspirations and function primarily for the material benefit of the populace. The absence of such conditions would represent a deficit in democratic values and practice.

In the African context, this democratic deficit has been made most visible by the high rates of inter and intrastate conflict with the latter being more prominent.⁸ At the risk of labouring the point, a clear nexus between violent conflict and human insecurity has thus been observed in numerous post independent African contexts. As a result, characteristics such as political instability, acute poverty levels and stifled economic development in general have prevailed.⁹ In the period between the 1960s and 1990s 48 countries in Sub-Saharan African have experienced about 80 violent changes in government. At the turn of the millennium about 18 countries were facing armed conflict and about 11 countries were facing acute political crises.¹⁰ This is the ineluctable continental political and economic context within which democratic South Africa has had to forge its foreign policy agenda and in particular its conflict mediation strategy.

With South Africa having emerged from a history of protracted intrastate violence and unrest itself, the democratically elected South African government emphasised that:

“socio-economic development cannot take place without political peace and stability as they are a necessary condition for socio-economic development. Conversely, socio-economic development is necessary in the context of addressing the root causes of conflict and instability. Within this framework our efforts are directed at creating an environment in which all states on the continent can achieve their full potential”.¹¹

Amongst a plethora of priorities, South African foreign policy has continuously demonstrated both an intensive and extensive involvement in the affairs of the African continent. South Africa’s most notable foreign policy footprint has been its involvement in conflict mediation and peace building efforts on the African continent. The Mandela administration became a key interlocutor in the Burundi conflict in the early 1990s, this trend was followed in later years when the Mbeki administration saw itself playing a central mediation role in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe.¹²

The Zuma administration continued with the conflict mediation brief in Zimbabwe within the ambit of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) mandate. Recently the Zuma administration has played a key role as a conflict mediator in Madagascar and Lesotho. The South African government has also allocated a significant amount of time and resources to peace keeping and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in conflict ridden contexts on the continent.

In contexts such as Burundi and Lesotho political conflict and instability have re-emerged. Against this backdrop, some observers have suggested that this is a reflection of the flaws which exist in South Africa’s mediation strategy. In this regard it has been suggested that South Africa’s mediation strategy has attempted

⁷ Adebayo O. Olukoshi, *The Democracy Debate in Africa*.

⁸ Adeleye Oyeniyi, *Conflicts and Violence in Africa: Causes, Sources and Types*, Transcend Media Service, <https://www.transcend.org/tms/2011/02/conflict-and-violence-in-africa-causes-sources-and-types/>, accessed 23 March 2015.

⁹ Richard Bowd and Annie Barbara Chikwanha, *Understanding Africa’s contemporary conflicts: Origins, challenges and peace building*.

¹⁰ Abdalla Bujra, *African conflicts: Their causes and Their Political and Social Environment*, Development Policy Management Forum Occasional Paper, No 4. <http://www.dpmf.org/images/occasionalpaper4.pdf>

¹¹ 2005 Strategic paper

¹² Kataboro Miti, *South Africa and Conflict resolution in Africa: From Mandela to Zuma*, Southern African Peace and Security Studies, Volume 1 Number 1

to export its own reconciliation model which is geared towards establishing a government of national unity in which conflicting parties share power until an election is held to determine a democratic government.¹³

It is highlighted that this is a “one size fits all” approach which will not work under certain conditions. Speaking at a Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) policy dialogue, independent analyst Sanusha Naidu suggested that in South Africa’s mediation strategy, “we are looking at a model of mediation that is very cosmetic and very much just, kind of, papering over the cracks and trying to get through a transformative agenda”.¹⁴ At the same policy dialogue, renowned analyst and commentator on Zimbabwe, Professor Brian Raftopoulos highlighted that in South Africa’s mediation in Zimbabwe for instance, “the manner in which much of the mediation took place; the power relations were always in favour of the incumbent, as they often are”.¹⁵ Perhaps there are gaps and shortcomings that are identifiable in South Africa’s mediation strategy and track record on the continent, some criticism may be warranted. . However, the perceived gaps and shortcomings should also be viewed against the constrained democratic conditions within which South Africa has had to mediate, as highlighted above. Moreover, these shortcomings do not absolve regional neighbouring states from their primary responsibility to ensure that the necessary democratic conditions which will bring about political stability and economic prosperity are in place. . This underscores the reality that external mediation in isolation cannot be the panacea to the resolution of domestic political conflicts.

A comprehensive conflict mediation solution would require a few key ingredients, namely: securing the unwavering commitment of political elites who are party to the conflicts, strong and functional state institutions, as well as reasonably well developed multiparty political systems in which political parties respect political contestation via the electoral ballot. External mediation from countries like South Africa will most likely be unable to unilaterally ensure the existence of these factors. This is also due to the reality that these are factors that do not fall directly within its immediate sphere of influence, especially in an international system which upholds the national sovereignty of countries as a key tenet of international cooperation.

Conclusion:

A balanced assessment of South Africa’s foreign policy and its conflict mediation record after 1994, would need to reflect the reality that the African continent has formed a pivotal part of South Africa’s foreign policy blueprint. Moreover, it would need to recognise the constrained democratic conditions which have characterised much of post-independent Africa’s political landscape. Thus, it is these political contours which South African conflict mediation practitioners have had to contend with, in crafting their mediation interventions. This is not an attempt to absolve South Africa’s conflict mediation efforts from their shortcomings but rather an attempt to highlight that the more pressing challenge, is that of deepening and consolidating the democratic on the African continent.

¹³ SALO Policy Brief, South Africa Zimbabwe-Relations: An assessment of South Africa’s mediatory role in Zimbabwe (2007-2013), as well as the current state of South Africa- Zimbabwe relations and possible future developments, 31 August 2015

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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