

South Africa in Its Leading Role on the African Continent

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Introduction:

During this year 2010, seventeen African countries are celebrating the 50th anniversary of their independence from the former colonizers. And this year of the 50th anniversary has coincided with the year in which the 19th edition of Football World Cup was organized by the Republic of South Africa, the very the first time this worldwide event happens in Africa. This event has made the international community focus on the Republic of South Africa. Actually, the choice of South Africa to organize this event is due to many reasons, among them are not only its economic performance, the political stability, but also the leading role the country has been playing in the African continent and in the international arena since the historical victory of the African people over the long-lasting apartheid in South Africa from the beginning of the 1990s of last century.

The leitmotiv of the Republic of South Africa's leading role

The Republic of South Africa (RSA) has been the first in Africa to gain independence from the British colonisers. But this independence has been catastrophic in southern Africa as the British made the mistake of transferring power to an exclusively white regime in South Africa in 1910.¹ So when the dream of African unity bore in 1900 and persisted with African nationalism in the 1950s, above all by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, though the majority of Blacks in southern Africa morally supported the movement of Nkrumah, the government of the "independent" RSA didn't and could not take an active part in the struggle under the African unity dream achievement because of its apartheid polity.

Many African countries individually or under the newly created in 1963 Organization of African Unity (OAU), denounced Western colonisers but especially severely criticized the South African apartheid regime. Not until the release in 1990 of Nelson Mandela — the icon of the struggle against apartheid and quest for human rights in southern Africa—and his election as the first black president of South Africa in 1994, has the whole country gained back its seat in the concert of transnational forums of the African states.

The election of President Mandela followed by the installation of the new regime in RSA *de facto* rang the knell of the white apartheid regime and a new start of the whole nation of South Africa.

This rebirth of the Republic of South Africa has not been only seen in the whole African

¹ Crawford Young, "The Heritage of Colonialism" in *Africa In World Politics*, edited by John W. Harbeson and Donald Rothchild, Westview Press, 1991, p. 30.

continent as a victory over colonisation and violation of human rights but also made African people proud of their achievement in southern Africa.

South Africa's new regime, while engaging reforms in the country to do justice to the big majority of people and improve their political, economic, social and cultural conditions, showed at the same time great interest into the African continent issues including politics, economics, society, but especially the settlement of conflicts among African countries and the quest for the sustainable development of the whole continent. One might say that the interest and engagement of the Republic of South Africa from the end of apartheid in the whole continent issues is its way of showing gratitude to the whole continent's support to the people of South Africa during the hard time of struggle and resistance to the apartheid regime.

Although the RSA came to be the last of the African nations to gain independence, but it didn't last long before the country became a leader in conducting the destiny of the whole continent. A continent that has been searching for an African leading country since independence.

Actually, before a nation plays a leading role on the whole African continent, certain prerequisite conditions are necessary to be fulfilled. In the case of the Republic of South Africa, its political stability gained through implementation of democratic rules, its economy stability and its overall soft power over the continent facilitated its engagement as a leader on the whole continent.

South Africa political overview in post-apartheid era

Racial strife between the white minority and the black majority has played a large part in the country's recent history and politics, culminating in the apartheid which was instituted in 1948 by the National Party, although segregation existed prior to that date. The laws that defined apartheid began to be repealed or abolished by the National Party in 1990 after a long and sometimes violent struggle by the Black majority as well as by many white, coloured, and Indian South Africans. The legacy of apartheid etched the country into the conscience of the world, especially in the 1980s, and resulted in economic sanctions from the international community.

The country is one of the few in Africa to have never had a coup d'état, and regular elections have been held for almost a century; however, the vast majority of Black South Africans were not enfranchised until 1994.

The promulgation of South Africa's Interim Constitution at the end of 1993 marked one the most momentous milestones in the country's history, as indeed in the whole world. The constitution agreed upon at Kempton Park, although a compromise document, facilitated the country's clean break away from apartheid and provided a "historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice,

and the future on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful coexistence...”²

From 1990 on, apartheid legislation was gradually removed from the statute books, and the first multi-racial elections were held in 1994. The African National Congress (ANC) won by an overwhelming majority and has been in power ever since. In 1994, the government had launched the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which envisaged the injection of large sums of money into education, housing, land redistribution and other programmes designed to mitigate the legacy of apartheid.³

The new regime’s social housing policy has produced some improvement in living conditions in many areas by redirecting fiscal spending and improving the efficiency of the tax collection system.⁴

Since its first post-apartheid all-party elections in 1994, South Africa has developed a firmly entrenched democracy, a free press and a sound economy. The finally peaceful transition and transfer of power to the Black majority in South Africa and following peaceful and regularly held elections under democratic norms have won the admiration of the international community but particularly the nations of Africa that consider the Republic of South Africa as a good example.

South African Economic hegemony

One can say with no doubt that South Africa is an economic hegemony in the whole African continent. The economic record basis of the Republic of South Africa is a positive legacy left by the regime of apartheid to the present leaders of the country. In fact, the RSA, before being acting nowadays as a major economy of the continent, has first been a regional economic leader.

Seen from the secure perspective of aggregate data, South Africa is an economic heavyweight among neighbouring flyweights including several of the nearby states such as Zimbabwe, Angola, Zambia, and Mozambique. One could recite a litany of data and economic facts to demonstrate this historical asymmetry. A few examples will illustrate the depth and extent of South Africa’s economic advantages.

—In 1969, South Africa’s gross domestic product constituted 65.5% of the combined GDPs of the twelve states in the region. By 1978 that proportion had risen to 70.7%. The 1988 figure was 84.4%.

—South Africa remains the only industrialised country in the region. Although Zimbabwe has started to industrialize, the other countries are largely producers and exporters of primary products. In most cases, just one or two commodities dominate their trade. In one or two instances, the export of labour to South Africa is the major foreign exchange earner for the countries’ economies.

² See the postscript to the Interim Constitution of The Republic of South Africa, 200.

³ Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 432.

⁴ http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/South_Africa

—Except Botswana—which has shifted from a cattle-raising economy to one powered largely by mining—and Angola—which moved from agriculture to petroleum—there has been little fundamental alteration of state economies since 1970.

—Prior to 1982, 95% of Malawi’s overseas trade went through Mozambican ports. By 1986, 95% passed through South Africa.

—Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland have formalized trading patterns with South Africa through a regional customs union agreement.⁵

The region’s economic infrastructure has long been dominated by South Africa. Efforts to alter these patterns, including the development of new railway lines and ports, have been undermined by wars in the region and by South Africa former apartheid regime’s efforts to destabilize black governments—either directly or through proxy forces. ⁶

Considerable efforts are being made to shift these ties and patterns, but they have proven difficult to break. The years since the creation of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) in 1980 have been unsettling. SADCC has tried to redraw the economic map of the region—that is, to end the economic dependence of SADCC member states on South Africa. But despite hard-won changes, South Africa’s advantages seem as constraining as ever.⁷

In the new century, South Africa is the biggest and most advanced economy in Africa. It is an emerging market underpinned by an abundant supply of natural resources; well-developed financial, legal, communications, energy (despite some difficulties which highlighted inadequacies in the system), and transport sectors; an effective and growing stock exchange and a modern infrastructure. With a population of 47.5 million people and gross domestic product per capita estimated to be US\$5,906 in 2007, South Africa is an upper-middle income country, although there remain large disparities in income within the country.⁸

Mining and related activities remain at the centre of the South African economy and account for nearly 40% of earnings from merchandise exports. The manufacturing sector is largely centred on mineral processing and contributes about 18% of GDP. ⁹

South Africa is one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of gold and is a major player in the value-added processing of minerals. The services sector is the largest employer, with over half of total employment, and accounts for over 60% of GDP.¹⁰

The financial sector and institutions in South Africa are highly sophisticated and include banks and financial institutions with the ability to handle complex international financial

⁵ See Kenneth W. Grundy “Southern Africa: The revolution prolonged”, in *Africa In World Politics*, edited by John W. Harbeson and Donald Rothschild, Westview Press, 1991, p. 99.

⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁸ http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/south_africa/south_africa_country_brief.html

⁹ http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/south_africa/south_africa_country_brief.html

¹⁰ http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/south_africa/south_africa_country_brief.html

transactions. South Africa is a net exporter of food, producing a wide variety of products such as fruits, wine, tobacco, sugarcane and corn.

While South Africa's post-apartheid trade policy has been broadly supportive of trade liberalisation, there has been a shift in recent years towards greater government intervention in economic policy-making through industry policy. The change reflects growing concern about large-scale unemployment and the need for rapid job growth.

The South African Ministry of Finance has highlighted the importance of increasing investment in infrastructure, improving municipal planning and service delivery, and reforming the regulatory environment in order to promote business growth and employment.¹¹

The ANC inherited a country mired deep in debt and bankruptcy. Despite this, conditions in the country have improved dramatically. South Africa boasts a sound macroeconomic policy and attracts international investment. Millions of blacks who previously lacked basic facilities now have electricity, housing, and running water. Thousands of schools have been integrated, and many blacks have been steadily climbing the economic ladder.¹²

At the start of 2000, President Thabo Mbeki vowed to promote economic growth and foreign investment by relaxing restrictive labor laws, stepping up the pace of privatization, and cutting unneeded governmental spending. His policies face strong opposition from organized labour. It is estimated that South Africa accounts for up to 30% of the gross domestic product of the entire African continent. South Africa is also the continent's largest energy producer and consumer.

By U.N. classification, South Africa is a middle-income country with an abundant supply of resources; well-developed financial and legal resources, communications, energy, and transport sectors; a stock exchange that ranks among the ten largest in the world; and a modern infrastructure supporting an efficient distribution of goods to major urban centres throughout the region. South Africa's per capita GDP positions the country as one of the 50 wealthiest in the world.¹³

South Africa's leading role in the continent

Contribution to the settlement of transnational African States and to the development of the whole continent are key roles played by South Africa through out the whole continent.

Facing the African continent economic problems, the Republic of South Africa represented by its leaders has been showing its credo in finding African solutions to African problems

¹¹ http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/south_africa/south_africa_country_brief.html

¹² See *South Africa 10 Years After Apartheid*, "Rapping against the ANC" by Jennifer Abrahamson, April 9th 2004, <http://slate.msn.com/id/2098018/entry/0/>

¹³ http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/South_Africa

including solutions to economic problems, settlement of transnational conflicts, etc.

The international community has noticed that, by the end of last century, the African continent has been subjected to economic difficulties. For these countries, the key economic challenge is to develop and implement policies which successfully meet the challenges of grinding domestic poverty and a very competitive international economic environment. Wars, declining commodity market prices, deficiency of economic infrastructure and inept leadership have combined to produce a continent increasingly irrelevant in global economic calculations. For these countries, developments in the world economy pose new challenges, which must be adequately responded to. The alternative to adequate response does not bear thinking about. Phenomenal advances in technology have brought about a globalization of the world economy. No longer can small individual countries hope to successfully go it alone.¹⁴

In this regards, South Africa's role in determining the pace and direction of African affairs, especially in the areas of socio-economic renaissance of the continent as evidenced by the President Thabo M'beki's involvement in the conceptualisation and articulation of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which was launched on the initiative of the new democrats—Thabo Mbeki, Olushegun Obasanjo and Abdoulaye Wade---was an attempt to link democracy to ambitious plans for continental economic norms through The African Peer Review Mechanism.¹⁵

With political and economic resources which far outstrip those of its neighbours, South Africa has sought to support peace and development on the continent of Africa, both bilaterally and through its leading role in pan-African institutions. South Africa was the first chair of the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). NEPAD, brought about largely through the efforts of President Mbeki, is an African owned and led initiative, which is intended to achieve sustainable development in Africa in the twenty-first century. Through the African Peer Review Mechanism, African countries evaluate each other's performance in governance terms. Ghana and Rwanda were the first countries to undergo this process, intended to enhance governance across the continent and deter corruption.¹⁶

So, together with Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, Abdel Aziz Bouteflika of Algeria and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Mbeki has played a leading role in conceptualizing and harmonizing the various ideas such as the Millennium Partnership for the African Recovery Programme (MAP), New African Initiative, the Omega Plan, New Compact with Africa, to come up with a coherent socio-economic programme.¹⁷

¹⁴ Enase Okonedo, "The Euro: Implications for 3rd world countries",
<http://www.africaeconomicanalysis.org/articles/gen/eurohtm.html>

¹⁵ Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p.433.

¹⁶ http://www.rte.ie/tv/farawayupclose/2006_southafrica.html

¹⁷ Abuja Declaration, 26 October 2001, NEPAD Document, Abuja, Nigeria, 26 October 2001.

Although NEPAD, such an ambitious project, has been meeting challenges to be executed on the African continent, but this situation doesn't at all lighten the leading contribution of South African leaders to the economic renaissance of the whole continent.

Regarding South African leading role in settling African transnational conflicts and others, it's no news that there have recently been numerous civil wars and conflicts going in Africa, some of which are still going on, including Burundi, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte D'Ivoire, Eritrea/Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan and South Sudan Darfur, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Tchad, Somalia, etc. Roughly speaking, still two dozen of Sub-Saharan African states have been at war since the end of the Cold War period.¹⁸

Political corruption, lack of respect for the rule of law, human rights violations are all common reasons heard for some of the causes of Africa's problems. Although not the only reasons, some often overlooked root causes also include the legacy of European colonialism, especially the artificial borders created by colonial rulers, the natural struggle to rebuild, the unequal international trade, the comparative disadvantages, the corporate interests, exploitation, corruption and other issues.

In the face to this litany of conflicts, South Africa is not only finding solutions for the settlement of conflicts, but the leaders of RSA engaged some strategic partnership with key regional countries' leaders like with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt as regional leader in North Africa, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi in the Horn of Africa, President Obasanjo of Nigeria in West Africa, President Joseph Kabila in the Great Lakes Region, etc. in order to tackle together transnational conflict issues.

In East and Central Africa, South Africa specially plays a very important role in the facilitation of the peace process in Burundi where it leads the African Union peacekeeping mission (AMiB). South Africa has also been very active in promoting peace in the Great Lakes Region, instrumental as it was in the agreement of the Sun City Accords, which paved the way for an all-inclusive, power-sharing government in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The country is currently providing 887 troops to the UN peacekeeping operation in the DRC. South Africa has also been directly involved in peace initiatives in Lesotho, Angola, Mozambique and the Comoros.¹⁹

In West Africa, in January 2002, the Linas-Marcousis accord was signed through the direct intercession of Jacques Chirac, Thabo Mbeki and the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Anan.²⁰

Thabo Mbeki re-iterated firmly that South Africa would "continue to contribute" to helping Ivorian leaders and people "implement all the necessary steps to end the crisis in their country, creating the possibility for the holding of democratic presidential elections in October this year in a unified country." Mbeki later re-iterated: "Everything must be done to

¹⁸ www.globalissues.org/article/84/conflicts-in-africa-introduction

¹⁹ See http://www.rte.ie/tv/farawayupclose/2006_southafrica.html

²⁰ Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p.480.

solve the Ivorian crisis, given the importance of this country, which has the third-largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa.”²¹

In southern Africa, in Zimbabwe, Mbeki said South Africa would work as part of the southern African Development Community in pursuance of free and fair elections. Tensions between the South African government and Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) have eased slightly since a meeting between Mbeki and MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai, and the MDC is taking part in the elections.²²

Conclusion:

South Africa from the beginning of the 1990s of last century has been trying its best through its successive leaders in finding solutions to African problems. It's true that it is hard for a single country to find solutions to problems of a whole continent. Therefore, even though South Africa is proving determination, at the same time it is already showing its limits. Its mitigated attitude towards Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe's regime is a clear proof. The discrimination faced by Zimbabwean refugees in RSA at the beginning of the recent Zimbabwe crisis is another embarrassment Africans have broadly felt towards South Africa. The RSA is also facing many internal problems involving issues of ANC dissidents and challengers, AIDS problems, and the possibility for the new ANC government to find practical and definitive solutions to the majority black community.

To sum up, South Africa's leading role on the African continent is based on the relative stability of its economy, but also the charm of its practice of democracy. The talent of its successive leaders, Mandela and Mbeki, are non-negligible factors of the influence of the country on the whole continent. On its own South Africa could not solve problems of the whole continent, but the African continent would welcome any potential true leader like South Africa.

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²¹ See Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the Second Joint sitting of the Third Democratic Parliament, Cape Town, 11 February 2005.

²² See *ibid.*