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# Fall from Grace: South Africa and the Changing International Order

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Post-apartheid South Africa has gone from being a good international citizen to defending a number of authoritarian regimes and obstructing various international initiatives aimed at strengthening the global human rights regime. This article presents this slide as a move from a 'liberal' foreign policy to a 'liberationist' one and emphasises the external sources of this shift, particularly the influence of the rest of Africa and a rising China.

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## Introduction

Upon its democratisation, South Africa quickly occupied a very different position in the international order from that during apartheid. Whereas the apartheid regime was belligerent and internationally isolated, post-apartheid South Africa turned out to be a peace-maker, a keen multilateralist and a spokesperson for Africa and the developing world. Initially, democratic South Africa explicitly placed moral considerations at the heart of its international relations. Unfortunately, such moral rectitude soon dissipated. It was not unexpected that South Africa would before long put self-interest above moral considerations, but what was surprising was how often South Africa started defending oppressive governments and obstructing international efforts to strengthen the international human rights regime.

This article depicts post-apartheid South Africa's slide from good international citizen to a 'rogue democracy' (*Washington Post*, 2008) over the past 20 years, emphasising the external forces that have pushed the country in this direction. South Africa's moral decline is characterised as going from a liberal identity to one described as 'liberationist'. The two positions can be opposed along five dimensions. First, a liberal insists on *liberal* democracy, whereas the liberationist permits the curtailment or postponement of democratic freedoms for the sake of political stability or economic development. Second, the liberal sees human rights as universal, while, for the liberationist, national sovereignty trumps universal human rights when these two conflict. Third, a liberal largely accepts the current, Western-dominated world order, whereas a liberationist is anti-Western, wants to counter-balance the West and strongly identifies with the developing world. Fourth, whereas a liberal aspires to deracinated human relations and universal agreement on moral questions, the liberationist sees racial and cultural relations as antagonistic and fraught with hierarchy, power and skewed representations, and motivates an insistence on the equal worth of non-Western cultures. Fifth, liberals broadly accept the current neoliberal economic order; at most they seek a consistent application of

global economic rules and more concern for the poor. Liberationists desire a radically different order. Although they have trouble saying what this order should look like, it would be much more amenable to the interests of developing countries. At the domestic level, liberals give as much scope as possible to the free market, whereas liberationists prefer greater state involvement in the economy.

While it is possible to be a liberal on some dimensions and liberationist on others, the first four elements, which are political in nature, typically go together. Where one stands on the four political aspects only weakly predicts where one will stand on the fifth, economic dimension. The liberal approach is, to adopt loosely Robert Cox's terms, 'problem-solving', for it does not put in question the power relations that underpin the international order or how this order came into existence and therefore finds most support from states that benefit most from the status quo, that is, the industrialised states of the West. By contrast, the liberationist approach enjoys more support among developing countries. With its origins in dependency theory, Marxism and the anti-colonial movement, the liberationist approach offers a 'critical' perspective because it asks how international order and the power relations that underpin it came about and seeks to identify ways in which this order is changing or can be changed (Cox, 1996, pp. 87–90).

Below, the internal and external influences that shape South African foreign policy are presented. Particular emphasis is placed on the constraints that other African countries place on South African foreign policy. The main section consists of a depiction of the alleged shift in South Africa's foreign policy, organised in terms of movement along the five dimensions of the liberal–liberationist distinction.

### **From good international citizen to 'rogue democracy'**

Although South African foreign policy continues to be shaped by both liberal and liberationist ideas (Evans, 1999), the African National Congress (ANC) government has increasingly moved in a liberationist direction on the above-mentioned four political dimensions. It has, however, embraced a liberal position on the fifth, economic dimension. On occasion, liberal and liberationist tendencies move in the same direction, for example promoting democracy or doing peacekeeping in Africa, yet, when these two approaches come into conflict, South Africa repeatedly falls to the liberationist side.

As is frequently noted, foreign policymaking in South Africa is highly centralised and dominated by the executive (Alden and Le Pere, 2004, pp. 283–287; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006, p. 49). The country's second democratic president, Thabo Mbeki, played a significant role in shifting South Africa in a liberationist direction, a foreign policy path that is likely to continue under the current president, Jacob Zuma. The executive's task is made easier by the growing liberationist sympathies within the ANC, the weakness of opposition parties and the re-racialisation of South African politics. However, the continuing presence of both liberal and liberationist values in South Africa means that the makers of foreign policy can find domestic support for either direction. More significant constraints on South Africa's foreign policy lie in its international relations and its position in a changing world order. In this regard,

South Africa's relations with the rest of Africa and the rise of China are particularly important.

South Africa wants to be a leader of the developing world and of Africa in particular. Fortunately for South Africa, the rest of the world also regards the country as a leader. South Africa's standing is suggested by: frequent invitations to G8 summits; that it is the only African member of the G20; and that it has been chair of the African Union, Commonwealth, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Southern African Development Community (SADC), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In particular, industrialised states see South Africa as an important partner in addressing Africa's many problems.

South Africa's international leadership, however, depends on support from the rest of Africa and it therefore has to avoid being seen as pushy and a lackey of the West (Hamill and Lee, 2001, p. 49). South Africa's balancing act is complicated by the fact that African countries are generally worse governed and less democratic and respectful of human rights than itself. South Africa is also expected to subscribe to the norm that African leaders should remain united and not criticise each other (Clapham, 1996, pp. 106–132). Moreover, South Africa also has to smooth over its unequal economic relationship with the rest of Africa and make its support for a neoliberal economic agenda more palatable. Liberationist actions and posturing buys South Africa some credibility as a leader and deepens solidarity with Africa and the rest of the developing world. Such solidarity helps to obscure South Africa's unequal economic relationship with the rest of Africa and creates the sense that neoliberal policies are in the continent's interest.

China, in its hunger for natural resources, has become one of the continent's leading trading partners, investors and creditors (Alden, 2007, p. 14). Moreover, China, unlike the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, does not impose political conditions on its loans or investments. South Africa, which is expected to insist on good governance and respect for human rights from other African governments but has relatively little of material value to use as leverage, thus has to compete for influence in Africa with a country that has much to offer of immediate and tangible value and that refrains from trying to make other countries more democratic. China's growing presence in Africa thus forces South Africa, in so far as it wants to maintain a following among other African countries, into defending their sovereignty and relying on liberationist arguments to cover its retreat from liberal principles.

Before I discuss the five dimensions of South Africa's movement in a liberationist direction, it should be noted that multilateralism has been a prominent feature of post-apartheid South Africa's foreign policy (Lee, Taylor and Williams, 2006). Multilateralism makes sense for a middle power such as South Africa, because it allows for the pooling of resources, sharing of information and lowering of costs; establishes greater order and predictability in the international system; and presents a forum for persuading others of one's point of view. In the African context, South Africa is able to mitigate the impression that it is acting as a regional hegemon by directing its efforts through multilateral channels. Strengthening multilateral institutions on the continent also serves to deepen the integration between South Africa

and the rest of the continent. At the global level, Cox has argued that multilateral institutions are conservative in that they serve to legitimise the current hegemonic order. However, as Ian Taylor and Paul Williams (2006, p. 5) point out, it is also possible to use multilateral institutions to challenge the hegemonic order, as indeed South Africa has done, by, for example, defending regimes that the West finds unpalatable and campaigning to reform the UN Security Council in the interests of developing countries.

### **Support for democracy**

The first dimension along which it is possible to see South Africa's movement from liberalism to a liberationist position is in its support for the international promotion of democracy. In a 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Nelson Mandela (1993, p. 88) conveyed the ANC's commitment to the international promotion of democracy because '[o]nly true democracy can guarantee rights'. However, already by 1997, the ANC (1997) began to downplay the importance of promoting democracy internationally. South Africa also started equating democracy with a relatively well-run polling day, with little regard for what happens in the period before an election. Political stability has become more important to South Africa, especially if we consider the regional consequences of a civil war in Zimbabwe. Hence, South Africa has consistently sided with the incumbent in cases where there was the possibility that continuing conflict with its domestic opponents might lead to political instability. South Africa has thus readily given its stamp of approval to highly dubious polls, such as the 2007 elections in Nigeria and various elections in Zimbabwe. Moreover, South Africa refrains from criticising elections elsewhere in the world and usually reserves comment for when a change of government takes place through something as blatant as a coup.

In 2001, South Africa seemed to have won the commitment of African governments to greater levels of democracy by getting African countries to sign up to Mbeki's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). A key element of NEPAD was to be the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), whereby, or so it seemed initially, African countries would assess the levels of democracy in those that signed up for peer review and then mete out punishment to those that were not democratic enough. However, such hope was soon waylaid, as Mbeki (2002, p. 2) wrote that peer review would be 'non-adversarial' and entail assessment, recommendation and informal dialogue among peers (see also Taylor, 2005, pp. 64–74). Indeed, when Rwanda, which Freedom House classified (and still classifies) as 'not free', became one of the first countries to pass its peer review, it showed that the APRM was toothless (Jordaan, 2007).

### **Sovereignty versus human rights**

As with democracy, the above-mentioned article by Mandela announced South Africa's commitment to human rights, promising that '[h]uman rights will be the light that guides our foreign affairs' (Mandela, 1993, p. 88). Initially, South Africa lived up to its stated intentions. Mandela spoke up for the Kurds, the people of Western Sahara, the East Timorese and the Palestinians. South Africa played an

important role in establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Nel, Taylor and Van der Westhuizen, 2001, p. 1); it tried to negotiate peace deals in the Democratic Republic of Congo, even in Northern Ireland and between Israel and the Palestinians, and later in Burundi, Sudan and the Ivory Coast. Significantly, in 1997, South Africa refused to block a UN Human Rights Commission (HRC) resolution that condemned China's human rights record (Cornelissen, 2006, p. 39).

One of the most formative events in South Africa's relationship with Africa took place at the 1995 Commonwealth meeting. During the summit, news arrived that despite countless international appeals for clemency, the Abacha regime in Nigeria had executed nine activists from the country's troubled Niger Delta region. Mandela called for sanctions against Nigeria and its suspension from the Commonwealth. Although Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth, Mandela's calls for sanctions went unheeded. Mandela's condemnation of Nigeria was almost unheard of among African leaders, as was insinuated by Nigeria's response which referred to South Africa as 'a white state with a black head' (quoted in Barber, 2005, p. 1084) and was explicitly stated by the aptly named Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which described Mandela's actions as 'not an African way to deal with an African problem' (quoted in Vale and Maseko, 1998, p. 272). In the aftermath of this episode, Thabo Mbeki, then deputy president of South Africa, argued that in this case understanding would have been better than confrontation. In liberationist fashion, Mbeki then moved the focus away from Nigeria by blaming the West for manipulating Mandela (Barber, 2005, p. 1084). A few months later, the limits that the rest of Africa placed on South Africa's ability to pursue a liberal normative agenda became visible when, at a meeting of the HRC, South Africa helped to dilute a resolution on Nigeria in an effort to obtain as much African support as possible (Black, 2003, p. 42).

More recently, in 2009, the controversy surrounding an ICC arrest warrant for Sudanese president Omar-al-Bashir on charges of war crimes showed how Africa constrained South Africa's foreign policy. The ICC sought al-Bashir's immediate arrest, while the majority of African Union (AU) members rejected the ICC arrest warrant. South Africa did not want al-Bashir to enjoy impunity, but also did not want to alienate its fellow AU members. South Africa took the lead in the search for a compromise and thus tried to convince the ICC to postpone its indictment of al-Bashir for one year (*Mail and Guardian*, 2009).

Following the Nigeria episode, human rights began to occupy a lesser importance in South African foreign policy. However, what was unexpected was that South Africa would quickly move from being a defender of human rights to a defender of human rights abusers. South Africa started using multilateral institutions to challenge the West and to shield various human rights abusers. In 2007, South Africa voted against a UN Security Council resolution condemning human rights abuses in Burma, arguing that the matter should be dealt with by the HRC. In 2007, as international concerns grew over Iran's nuclear programme, South Africa defended Iran's 'inalienable right' to develop a peaceful nuclear programme at the UN. In recent years, South Africa has declined to support key UN resolutions on human rights abuses in Belorussia, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe; voted down a UN General Assembly resolution to condemn the use of rape and sexual abuse as a military or

political tactic; refused to support a UN declaration that called for the decriminalisation of homosexuality (even though gay marriage is legal in South Africa); and, in 2003, even campaigned for the election of Libya as chair of the HRC (Cornelissen, 2006, p. 39). South Africa, whose democratisation owes much to international pressure on the apartheid regime and support for the ANC during apartheid, no longer speaks up for the liberation struggles in Western Sahara and Tibet and has remained silent about the ongoing authoritarian abuses in Burma, even though Burma, when it was still democratic, was vocal in its opposition to apartheid (Boggert, 2008). Rather than defend victims of human rights abuses, as democratic South Africa set out to do, or defend other liberation movements, as South Africa still does for Robert Mugabe and his ruling Zanu-PF, the principle at work seems to be that South Africa reserves its solidarity for the incumbent rulers of all developing countries, no matter how they rule, a sentiment that is even stronger towards other African regimes.

### **Support for the international order**

A liberal position is identified as accepting of the current, still Western-dominated world order, whereas a liberationist position is anti-Western, seeks a counterweight to the West and strongly identifies with the developing world. On political matters South Africa's loyalty has moved towards the developing world. At the UN, for example, South Africa has made it plain that it wanted to counter the 'imbalance of global power' that exists in the UN Security Council (*Washington Post*, 2007). Although South Africa has not used the G8 summits to which it has been invited to challenge the current balance of power, it continues to seek a realignment of power in international relations. South Africa's involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement and the more recently created India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum should be understood as weak, initial efforts towards realignment.

### **Race and identity in international relations**

While a liberal believes it possible and desirable to suspend one's racial and cultural identity to achieve universal standards of judgement and morality, a liberationist perspective views such universality as a disguised Western perspective; regards cultural and racial relations as more antagonistic than liberals admit; and tends to view morality and justice as rooted in particular communities. Initially post-apartheid South Africa assumed a strongly liberal stance. The ANC had based its campaign against apartheid on a universalist vision of a non-racial South Africa in which all people would enjoy political and legal equality. During Mandela's presidency, racial fears were played down.

Mbeki, his successor, however, constantly injected race and assertions of African identity into South Africa's local politics and foreign relations. Already in 1996, Mbeki proclaimed 'I am an African!', thereby asserting his identity as a black man in South Africa, but, more importantly, his connection to the rest of Africa. This stronger sense of its Africanness led to South Africa's increased involvement in the continent's problems. Mbeki started sending South African peacekeeping troops to various conflicts in Africa and personally tried to negotiate peace deals. Mbeki

tirelessly campaigned for debt relief and increased aid for Africa's poorest countries. In 1997, Mbeki announced an 'African Renaissance', which remained 'more promise than policy' (Vale and Maseko, 1998, p. 276). More significantly, Mbeki was the principal force behind NEPAD, an elaborate proposal that committed African leaders to solving Africa's problems. South Africa further threw its weight behind various multilateral bodies on the continent, such as SADC and the newly established African Union.

Stronger identification with Africa, however, also brought certain problems, such as acceptance of the habit that African leaders respect the sovereignty of others to the point of not criticising each other. So strong was South Africa's solidarity with other African leaders and its respect for the sovereignty principle that when the United States challenged the Mugabe regime, which by 2008 had become openly murderous, Mbeki wrote a scathing letter to US President George W. Bush in which he told him to 'butt out' and to respect the views of the Zimbabwean people (*Washington Post*, 2008). Mbeki's disdain for what he saw as Western arrogance also seems to have pushed him into a confused and dangerous AIDS policy at home, which saw the belittling of (Western) medicine and science and the promotion of traditional medicines such as beetroot and garlic as treatment for the illness. Although South Africa's closer association with Africa has benefited the continent, the country's new-found loyalty has unhinged the ability of its leaders to recognise the home-grown causes of Africa's problems and accept legitimate criticism from the West.

### **Acceptance of the international economic order**

While South Africa has moved in a liberationist direction on political matters, it has not done so in the economic realm. Liberals accept neoliberal globalisation, although some might seek greater consistency in the application of global economic rules and more care for the world's poorest. Liberationists, by contrast, desire a radically different economic order, but have trouble describing such an order. Upon assuming power, many expected that the ANC would opt for strongly interventionist and redistributive economic policies, considering that the party's supporters were mostly poor blacks in an extremely unequal society, that its allies all lay to the left and that, before assuming power, it had promised a redistribution of wealth. However, after initial hesitation, the ANC announced its embrace of neoliberalism with the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. South Africa soon began converting others to its economic vision. The South Africa-driven blueprint for Africa's economic recovery, NEPAD, stressed Africa's commitment to market liberalisation and continental economic integration. At the World Trade Organization (WTO), South Africa assumed an active role as a bridge-builder between North and South, although in practice this has meant that 'South Africa works with the South to try to get them to go along with the demands from the major powers' (Lee, 2006, p. 57).

While South Africa has refrained from questioning the foundations upon which the neoliberal order has been built, it has tried to soften its edges, by seeking debt relief and more aid and investment for poorer countries (Hamill, 2006, p. 124). At the IMF, South Africa has campaigned for a change to the institution's voting rules in favour of developing countries. The country's former finance minister, Trevor



Manuel, is currently the chair of the IMF committee charged with its reform. At the WTO, South Africa has not entirely been a pawn of the powerful states, demanding that Western governments adhere to the free trade doctrine they espouse; specifically, that they accept the liberalisation of their agricultural markets. Still, South Africa's embrace of free trade has caused tensions with its economically less advanced African neighbours, but with millions of poor people of its own, it looks set to exploit its regional economic superiority and seek further liberalisation and integration of African economies.

## Conclusion

South Africa continues to derive influence from being the most developed country in Africa. Shortly after becoming democratic, South African foreign policy was able to 'punch above its weight' and on occasion go against the liberal wishes of the major Western powers because it possessed a moral authority that derived from the stature of Nelson Mandela, the virtuousness of the ANC, the exemplary nature of South Africa's democratic transition and the country's unilateral dismantling of its nuclear arsenal. However, these sources of moral authority are no longer available: Mandela has withdrawn from politics; there are daily newspaper reports of corruption by ANC officials; and the country has gradually become politically less free, according to Freedom House. South Africa's lapsed moral authority means that it is less able to stand alone and that building consensus through multilateral organisations will assume even greater prominence in the country's pursuit of its goals.

The elements designated here as liberal are Western in origin and approximate universal values. However, as the power of the West declines, its hold over South Africa decreases. Moreover, the shift in international power from West to East is prying the world's most important multilateral institutions loose from the powers that created them, thus offering the developing world more room to contest the direction of its governance. Although South Africa continues to support international economic institutions, such as the WTO, in roughly its current form, the country is at the forefront of the struggle to reshape the international political order. Whether one would welcome the likely direction of such reshaping depends on whether one agrees with the values that underpin the liberationist vision.

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