



# South Africa

**Assessment:** Fair

**Trend:** ↔

Capital: Pretoria

Type of Government: Republic

Head of Government: President Thabo Mbeki  
(since 16 June 1999)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Nkosazana Clarice  
Dlamini-Zuma

Population: 43,586,097

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 107

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Africa has a **fair** record of democracy promotion abroad, exemplified by its role in building norms of democracy in southern Africa, helping to forge a budding Africa-wide regime of good governance, and supporting some pro-democracy and human rights resolutions in international arenas. This record, however, has been sullied by South Africa's equivocation over democratic abuses in Zimbabwe and by its continued alliances with authoritarian regimes in Cuba, China, and Libya. In promoting democracy, South Africa has worked primarily through regional organizations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU – now the African Union (AU)), as well as through international organization such as the Commonwealth and the UN. South Africa views these organizations as a source of collective leverage for promoting democratic values abroad. Increasingly, South Africa has also used the SADC and the AU to take policy stances it is unwilling to take unilaterally or bilaterally.

This mixed record with regard to the promotion of democracy abroad stems from tension between South Africa's desire to be the beacon of democracy in Africa, and its limited leverage in influencing the course of democracy outside its borders. In addition, South African policymakers have continually tried to balance competing domestic demands from advocates of a foreign policy that focuses on adherence to democratic principles abroad, and those that favor a pragmatic policy aimed at sustaining South Africa's external alliances and economic interests. Although the ideals of democracy will continue to inform South Africa's domestic politics, translating them into consistent foreign policy positions will remain a major challenge for the government.

## FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Since South Africa's multiracial democratic transition of 1994, the government led by the African National Congress (ANC) has embraced democracy as a central tenet of its foreign policy in the belief that foreign relations must mirror its deep commitment to the consolidation of a democratic South Africa. Although South Africa's negotiated settlement became the recipe for democratization and informed its foreign policy in Africa, the ANC also recognized that promoting democracy would, in some instances, undercut its adherence to the principles of territorial sovereignty and Pan-African solidarity.<sup>1</sup> The challenge for policymakers then became how to reduce the tension between the goals of democracy promotion and the long-standing principles governing Africa's interstate relations.

Conscious of the limits to its capacity to act unilaterally, Pretoria chose to work creatively within recognized regional and international fora. In southern Africa, the centerpiece of this policy was utilizing the reinvigorated structures of the SADC. In renouncing regional hegemonic ambitions, South Africa has drawn its neighbors into economic and security interactions based on partnership and interdependence. Apart from its economic components, the SADC created an Organ on Politics, Defense, and Security in 1997 to promote



regional security, the rule of law and democratic governance. From the outset, Pretoria also helped to define the founding principles of regional cooperation, including democracy as a core value.

Outside of southern Africa, South Africa pursued democracy promotion objectives primarily in the OAU-AU and the Commonwealth. Using diplomatic tools to promote democracy, South Africa has taken a leadership role in attempts to enshrine the values of accountability, transparency, and democracy in the new structures of the AU under the organizational rubric of the "African Renaissance." Likewise, the Commonwealth has afforded South Africa leverage to articulate new principles that advance human rights and democracy.

The global democratization trend has been the larger strategic context in which South Africa has pursued its foreign policy objectives. In addition to its successful domestic transition, South Africa has seized the opportunity of global changes to advance democratization in Africa. At the core of foreign policy decision-making are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the presidency. These institutions respond to wider pressures from civil society, trade unions, and business organizations. An equally significant factor in the foreign policy domain has been the change in presidential leadership from Nelson Mandela to Thabo Mbeki. Mandela's moral stature allowed him to adopt a more activist human rights agenda and endowed South African foreign policy with wider legitimacy. Although President Mbeki maintains a commitment to the norms of good governance and democracy, he has accorded human rights a secondary emphasis in South Africa's foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

### **RESPONSE TO THE OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS**

South Africa has condemned the overthrow of democratically-elected governments in Africa and has participated actively in diplomatic and military efforts to isolate regimes that seize power by force in southern Africa. South Africa's intervention in Lesotho following attempts to reverse democratic gains in 1994 and 1998 established the pattern of balancing diplomatic and military means for democracy promotion. Working within the multilateral framework of the SADC, South Africa mediated Lesotho's return to constitutional rule in 1994. When civil violence perpetrated by opposition groups resurfaced in 1998, South Africa collaborated

with Botswana on a military intervention to shore up the elected government. After preventing the collapse of the government, South Africa and Botswana maintained a military presence in Lesotho until the elections of May 2002. They also assisted in creating more equitable electoral rules for the future.

The policy instruments in the Lesotho case varied from the extremes of diplomatic pressure to military intervention. In the initial phase of the conflict, South Africa was reluctant to take a hard-line stance against the Lesotho military because of its apartheid-era history of regional intervention. By opting for collective mediation, South Africa initiated a new era of diplomatic engagement with its neighbors in defense of democracy. When South Africa intervened militarily in 1998, the conflict had escalated to the point where Pretoria felt it could not stand aloof. Throughout the Lesotho intervention, South Africa contended that it was inspired by the SADC principles of responding to a neighbor facing threats to its democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Outside southern Africa, South Africa condemned the coup that led to the overthrow of democracy in Cote d'Ivoire in December 1999. When the military junta refused to relinquish power, South Africa joined a ten-nation OAU committee that sought to increase diplomatic pressure on the military to give up power. In October 2000, the committee met with all major actors in the conflict and demanded the resignation of the military and the formation of an inclusive government to organize elections.<sup>4</sup> However, in contrast to Cote d'Ivoire, there is no record of a South African position on the coup that overthrew a democratic regime in Niger in April 1999.

South Africa's response to the events in Cote d'Ivoire reflects its interest in playing a leadership role in Africa's quest for democratization and anti-militarism. For this reason, South Africa closely coordinated its policy on Cote d'Ivoire with Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo. As leading proponents of Africa's political and economic regeneration, Obasanjo and Mbeki saw mediation of the crisis in Cote d'Ivoire as an essential component in these efforts.

### **RESPONSE TO THE MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

South Africa has a poor record of responding to electoral manipulations abroad. Despite a rhetorical commitment to democratization, Pretoria has been slow to condemn egregious violations of democratic norms by foreign



governments. In addition, although South Africa has been active in sending election observers to African countries -- either independently or through the SADC -- it rarely censures pre-election manipulations abroad.

Pretoria's approach to electoral abuses in Zimbabwe in 2001 and 2002 illustrates this record. Prior to the parliamentary elections in June 2001, South Africa and SADC sent observers to monitor the polls, but remained largely silent in the face of the electoral violence and intimidation perpetrated by the Mugabe government. In the run-up to the presidential elections in March 2002, President Mbeki made veiled references to the dangers of a flawed election in Zimbabwe. Similarly, a task force made up of South Africa, Malawi, and Mozambique chastised Mugabe in September 2001 for the deterioration of the rule of law and the rise in political instability. Nonetheless, South Africa and SADC remained implacably opposed to the economic sanctions advocated by a growing domestic constituency and Western countries.<sup>5</sup>

South African and SADC election monitors went to Zimbabwe amidst Mugabe's introduction of draconian legislation that curbed the role of the media, restricted the campaigns of the leading opposition party, and disenfranchised a large part of the population. On the eve of the elections, Mbeki reiterated that South Africa and her neighbors would continue to do everything possible "to contribute to the victory of the struggle for a democratic, peaceful and prosperous Zimbabwe."<sup>6</sup> But this constructive diplomatic engagement did not prevent Mugabe from stealing the elections. More critically, after Mugabe's triumph, the SADC described the elections as "substantially free and fair."<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, the South African observer team endorsed this position, blaming the long lines of voters unable to vote on "administrative oversight."<sup>8</sup> It was only through pressure from his Commonwealth colleagues that Mbeki conceded to the one-year suspension of Zimbabwe from the organization. Subsequently, South Africa and Nigeria embarked on a new course to mediate between Mugabe and the opposition for a government of national unity, but Mugabe's recalcitrance and the opposition's demands for a new vote under international supervision have doomed these efforts.<sup>9</sup>

South Africa took a low-key approach in response to the 2000 Zambian constitutional crisis occasioned by former President Fredrick Chiluba's bid to change the constitution so that he could stand for a third consecutive term. Chiluba was forced to

abandon this plan following a nationwide outcry and a serious split within his own party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). The SADC sent election observers to the December 2001 elections in which Chiluba's successor, Levy Mwanawasa, won a narrow victory. But while opposition parties claimed that massive fraud and ballot rigging swayed the result, SADC and local observers were unable to provide any specific evidence of wrongdoing except to note that the elections were not conducted efficiently and successfully.<sup>10</sup>

In dealing with Zimbabwe and Zambia, South Africa primarily used diplomatic tools within the structures of the SADC and the Commonwealth, underscoring its preference for multilateral, rather than unilateral and bilateral, influence. Although civil society groups and opposition parties demanded more forceful action, particularly regarding Zimbabwe, and Mbeki himself gave interviews to foreign agencies criticizing the Mugabe government, South African policymakers deferred to the SADC task force on Zimbabwe. In the end, South Africa effectively squandered the opportunity to influence the electoral outcomes and seriously undermined its own efforts to project an image of a new Africa committed to improving respect for democracy and human rights. Further, in opposing demands for economic sanctions, South Africa, in part, emboldened the Mugabe regime, which has continued to consolidate its control and persecute political opponents.

## PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

South Africa has a good record of support for international democracy promotion, particularly in African organizations where it has influence. However, its voting record in defense of democracy and human rights in international institutions is riddled with inconsistencies.

Since 1994, South Africa has played an important role in efforts to integrate democracy promotion in the structures of African organizations. For example, during the OAU summit in July 1997, Mandela was instrumental in pushing for a strong OAU declaration in favor of democracy throughout Africa. At the Algiers summit of the OAU in 2000, President Mbeki actively supported the resolution that denounced coups and barred military leaders from future summits.<sup>11</sup> On the international level, South Africa has played a leading role in shaping the Community of Democracies, an intergovernmental association of established and emerging democracies



dedicated to promoting democracy.

In southern Africa, despite treading carefully to avoid the impression of hegemony, South Africa has used both governmental and non-governmental institutions as vehicles for a public discourse on democracy. These institutions have been the fulcrum for experiments with democracy building and tools for inculcating the values and practices of democratic governance. For example, South Africa has used institutions such as SADC's Parliamentary Forum and SADC's Electoral Commission Forum to underscore the importance of democracy for political stability.<sup>12</sup>

South Africa has also supported efforts designed to transform the Commonwealth into an institution that respects human rights, adheres to the rule of law, and shuns military regimes. Since 1995, these efforts have led to the Commonwealth policy of suspending the memberships of military dictatorships and to the emergence of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) as the core actor in policing human rights codes and the rights of political opposition. During the Commonwealth Heads of State meetings in Edinburgh in 1997 and Durban in 1999, South Africa was part of the group that expanded the mandate of the CMAG from dealing not just with military coups, but also with the protection and promotion of democracy.

### **POLICY TOWARD ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS**

South Africa has pursued pragmatic policies toward most entrenched dictatorships, opting to maintain economic and diplomatic links with them and failing to criticize their domestic policies. The only exception to this rule was Mandela's policy toward the Nigerian dictatorship of Sani Abacha. Although South Africa initially engaged the Abacha government in intense dialogue as a means of returning Nigeria to democracy, it later reversed this position and spearheaded diplomatic efforts to isolate the military government within the Commonwealth. These initiatives gathered momentum when Abacha, in defiance of world opinion, executed the leader of the marginalized Ogoni people, Ken Saro-Wiwa. Following Saro-Wiwa's death, Mandela rallied the Commonwealth to impose punitive economic sanctions and to expel Nigeria from the Commonwealth in 1995. South Africa also temporarily recalled its envoy from Lagos and withdrew an invitation to Nigeria to participate in a football tournament in Johannesburg. As a member

of the CMAG, South Africa exerted diplomatic pressure on the government to move to release political prisoners and launch a genuine transition program. After Abacha's death in 1998, both Mandela and Mbeki played critical diplomatic roles in nudging the military to introduce democratic elections, release political prisoners, and recognize political parties.<sup>13</sup> In UN General Assembly votes regarding the human rights situation in Nigeria between 1995 and 1997, South Africa voted with countries that favored strong condemnation of the military regime.

Many entrenched dictatorships, including China, Cuba, Iraq, and Libya, were staunch supporters of the exiled-ANC in its struggle against apartheid. Despite pressure from opposition parties and civil society, the ANC government has shown reluctance to isolate these regimes either through soft measures such as condemnation of human rights abuses, or harsher ones such as economic sanctions or military blockades. The warm relations Pretoria maintains with most of these regimes exemplifies the deficit in South African promotion of democracy abroad.

For instance, Mandela employed quiet diplomacy towards Libya, a policy that its proponents credit with unlocking the impasse over Lockerbie when South Africa mediated the handing over of two suspects in the bombing to the Scottish courts for trial in 1999. Similarly, Mandela embraced Cuba, charging decades of victimization of the Fidel Castro regime by the United States. Furthermore, one of Mandela's first acts as president was to establish formal relations with Cuba, and, since 1994, South Africa has consistently voted against all UN General Assembly resolutions condemning human rights violations in Cuba.

South Africa established its immediate post-apartheid policy on China by severing diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Since then, with the expansion of trade relations, South Africa has been cautious in responding to human rights violations in China. Both Mandela and Mbeki have pursued pragmatic economic and cultural links; in addition, South Africa has abstained from key votes in international organizations that specifically condemn China's record on human rights.

Equally significant, despite voting for UN General Assembly reports condemning human rights violations in Sudan between 1994 and 1999, South Africa has been less willing to stand up against the Khartoum government in Africa. Instead it has supported regional peace efforts to find a settlement



to the civil war.

Given its limited influence in international institutions, South Africa's policy toward entrenched dictatorships is not surprising. Its ambivalent voting record on human rights and democracy protocols largely reflects the domestic tensions between policymakers who defend South Africa's Third World, nationalist, and non-aligned status and those who regard South Africa as a model of universal democratic values in Africa. For the most part, the

policy on dictatorships represents the continuity of South Africa's non-aligned posture. On the other hand, defenders of the 'universal values' position decry South Africa's fence-sitting policies on dictatorships, preferring instead, policies that are more in tune with the new South Africa. Resolving these conflicts will be a major test for the future credibility of South Africa's democracy promotion policies.

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  - 3 "South Africa and the Intervention in Lesotho." The Star 29 Nov. 2000.
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  - 9 Raftopoulos, Brian. "Briefing: Zimbabwe's 2002 Presidential Elections." African Affairs No. 100 (2002): 413-26.
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