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## **‘We Met the Enemy and He is Us’: Domestic Politics and South Africa’s Role in Promoting African Democracy**

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### **Abstract**

South Africa’s post-apartheid foreign policy has disappointed scholars and activists who expected the post-apartheid state to promote democracy and human rights in Africa and the world, and who complain that it has failed to fulfill that promise.

This paper examines South Africa’s role in democracy promotion since 1994 and, in particular, the argument that it intended to promote rights and freedoms in Africa but was forced to change its approach by power realities on the continent. It finds this explanation wanting and argues that the core goal of foreign policy of the post-apartheid government was not to promote democracy, but rather, merely to prove white racism wrong.

Since 1994, the African National Congress-led government has been aware that much of white opinion, at home and abroad, expects majority ruled African societies to fail. Its prime concern, therefore, has been to refute the prejudice that black Africans cannot run successful societies. It is this concern which has underpinned foreign policy: the aim has been to project Africa as a continent whose states are measuring up to the Northern model of a successful society. Hence, democracy promotion has been only a means to that end, and this is the major factor responsible for its uneven and sporadic application.

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### Résumé

La politique étrangère postapartheid de l'Afrique du Sud a déçu les universitaires et les activistes qui s'attendaient à ce que l'État postapartheid fasse la promotion de la démocratie et des droits de l'homme en Afrique et dans le monde, et qui se plaignent qu'il n'ait pas réussi à tenir cette promesse.

Cet article examine le rôle de l'Afrique du Sud dans la promotion de la démocratie depuis 1994 et, en particulier, l'argument selon lequel elle avait l'objectif de promouvoir les droits et les libertés en Afrique, mais qu'elle a été contrainte de changer son approche par les réalités du pouvoir sur le continent. L'article défend que cette explication se révèle insuffisante, et soutient que l'objectif essentiel de la politique étrangère du gouvernement postapartheid n'était pas de promouvoir la démocratie, mais plutôt de simplement prouver que le racisme blanc avait tort.

Depuis 1994, le gouvernement dirigé par le Congrès national africain (ANC) est conscient du fait que la plupart des blancs, au pays et à l'étranger, s'attendent à ce que les sociétés africaines gouvernées par une majorité noire sont vouées à l'échec. Son premier souci a donc été de réfuter les préjugés selon lesquels les Africains noirs sont incapables de diriger leurs sociétés avec succès. C'est cette préoccupation qui a sous-tendu la politique étrangère: l'objectif a été de projeter l'Afrique comme un continent dont les États sont à la hauteur du modèle de société prospère du Nord. Par conséquent, la promotion de la démocratie a été seulement un moyen à cette fin, et c'est le principal facteur responsable de son application inégale et sporadique.

### Introduction

Expectations that a democratic South Africa would promote democracy and stability in Africa were articulated within minutes of democracy's achievement on May 10, 1994.

The inauguration of Nelson Mandela as first President was attended by then United States Vice-president Al Gore who is said to have taken him aside and requested his minutes-old government to send peacekeepers to Rwanda (Adebajo 2006). The United States was to make further appeals to the new government to play a leading role in stabilising Africa – raising inevitable objections that it saw South Africa as a useful means of deflecting pressures for engagement in messy conflicts: 'To more cynical observers, it was a way of letting the international community, and particularly the West, off the African hook' (Barber 2004:85-86). While the goal was ostensibly to end conflicts, democratisation was an implied concern – then US secretary of state Warren Christopher raised the Nigerian junta and a coup in Burundi as potential areas for intervention in 1996 (US Department of State 1996). And expecta-

tions – within the country and among international actors – that South Africa would become a force for democratisation in Africa were strong (Seymour 1996). A new democracy, seen by many as a miraculous expression of the democratic ethos, was expected to seek to export it to the rest of the continent, and perhaps beyond.

South African democratising efforts have fallen significantly short of expectations (van Aardt 1996) – even allowing for the reality that what is expected from an iconic new government will far exceed the possible. While it may claim some successes, gains have been far less visible than we might expect from a state whose economy dwarfs all others on the continent and whose political capital as the product of Africa's successful fight against apartheid should give it moral weight. And perhaps the most important challenge to its democratising intent and capacity, its response to Zimbabwe, has been a conspicuous failure (Sachikonye 2005) which has also tarnished its moral lustre and reduced its credibility. While it is unfair to say that South Africa has done nothing to meet the expectations, it has not exerted the influence its assets seemed to give it.

This article, in particular, takes issue with explanations which see the limitations of South African democratisation as a case of an 'idealist' foreign policy adjusting to external realities (Barber 2004; Lodge n.d.). While acknowledging that promoting democracy elsewhere is difficult and that attempts by South Africa to do this in Africa are particularly so, it challenges the assumption of a South Africa eager to spread freedom and an African reality determined to resist it. It argues, rather, that South African policy has been ambiguous since 1994 and remains so. It seeks to show that these ambiguities are rooted in a domestic reality in which conflicting visions of democracy and its promotion contend – and that the complexities of South Africa's own efforts to democratise play a crucial role in shaping its responses to African democratisation. This suggests a need for analyses of international democracy promotion to examine how complexities in democracy promoting states affect their capacity to spread democracy.

### **Post-Apartheid South Africa and Democracy Promotion**

South Africa's democracy promotion experience can be divided into three phases: while there is a rough chronology, one does not follow another in strict date order. This seeming progression in policy and action is, however, thrown into disarray by an apparent anomaly – its policy towards Zimbabwe.

### ***Dashed Expectations***

The newly-elected African National Congress government was partly responsible for encouraging the expectation that it would energetically promote democracy.

A 1993 article by Nelson Mandela in *Foreign Affairs* which declared that 'human rights should be the core concern of foreign policy' after apartheid (Mandela 1993) was often cited immediately after the ANC took office as evidence of a commitment to encourage democracy abroad. A statement of foreign policy intentions at the end of 1994, when the ANC became the government, declared that 'South Africa will devote its energies to the accomplishment of democratic ideals throughout the world'. Although this was qualified by a passage noting the tension between democracy promotion and sovereignty, it promised: 'Grateful for the international solidarity which supported the anti-apartheid cause, a democratic South Africa will be in solidarity with all those whose struggle continues' (ANC 1994).

This expression of foreign policy 'idealism' (Barber 2004:92) was often contrasted with the 'realism' of the apartheid-era foreign policy establishment and its intellectual camp-followers, who tended to see foreign policy as a means of maximising economic advantage (Evans 1993). Concern for democracy and human rights was thus associated with the new order's foreign policy orientation. The most vigorous post-apartheid foreign policy debate was not the interchange between government and opposition but that between the Department of Foreign Affairs, the parliamentary foreign affairs committee dominated by the now governing ANC and scholars and activists who had worked closely with the new establishment and hoped to shape its policy. And a key issue was the new government's perceived failure to support the fight for democracy in Africa and the world (Diescho 1996:7; Daniel 1995).

The post-apartheid government was charged with sins of omission and commission. On the first score, with failing to take the democratic lead which its provenance demanded: 'the world expects more from a democratic South Africa ... After a long struggle for human rights in this country, our new democracy is viewed as a natural leader...' (Seymour 1996:1). On the second, of feting dictators who were economically useful – Indonesia's Suharto's 1997 state visit was still being cited as a reproach to Mandela three years later (*Sunday Times* 30/1/2000) – or of co-operating with African autocrats, such as Nigeria's Abacha junta. The

government insisted that a key aspect of its foreign policy was 'universality' – it would deal with all countries whatever it thought of their 'internal or external policies' (Barber 2004:92). But critics noted that the claim that contact with an undemocratic government did not mean endorsement were repeatedly made by those who retained links to the apartheid government (du Preez 2007).

In this phase, the government's commitment to promoting democracy elsewhere seems matched neither by vigorous action nor by credibility among advocates of an active role.

#### ***Derring-Do In Nigeria and Lesotho, Speaking Loudly in SADC***

The initial expectation that the ANC in government would carry the democratic torch through Africa and the world were inevitably exaggerated. But so too was the claim that it had turned its back on promoting democracy: as early as 1994, it intervened in Mozambique to support an electoral process in difficulty (Barber 2004:100). Some eighteen months after democracy was achieved, Mandela took an unprecedented stand on a human rights issue – the execution, in late 1995, of the Nigerian activist and author Ken Saro-Wiwa (Human Rights Watch 1996). He reacted angrily, calling for sanctions against the Nigerian junta and its expulsion from the Commonwealth – a response which was said to have 'pitched South Africa way ahead of the position of any other African government' on Nigeria (*Mail and Guardian* 24/11/1995).

Since post-independence African heads of government tended to rally together, Mandela's intervention prompting anger from other governments on the continent. The Organisation of African Unity described the call for sanctions as 'not an African way' of dealing with a problem (Vale and Maseko 1998:272) while Liberia urged '...other African countries to prevail on President Mandela not to allow South Africa to be used in the division and undermining of African solidarity' (Venter 1996:2). Mandela was seen, it was claimed, to be acting in the 'white man's way', following a 'Western' approach (Diescho 1996:9). Vigorous action against Nigeria by African states did not ensue and South Africa seems to have decided that discretion was the better part of valour: in an address to parliament in May 1996, then deputy president Thabo Mbeki argued that South Africa did not have the leverage to dictate to Nigeria. He suggested that Mandela had been set up for failure by western leaders, some of whom were protecting oil profits and Nigerian assets in their countries (Adebajo 2006).

This experience did not deter South Africa from an aggressive and very risky intervention to protect an elected neighbouring government which seemed under threat from a military coup. In September 1998, South Africa and Botswana, acting formally on behalf of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), despatched troops to the neighbouring kingdom of Lesotho after its elected prime minister, Pakalitha Mosilisi, requested help because he feared a coup. The incursion initially appeared disastrous and encountered widespread criticism: the troops faced armed resistance and intervention prompted widespread looting. In the fullness of time, however, it could be said to have been justified by democracy's restoration in Lesotho: academic critics of the action labelled the intervention an 'unlikely success' after elections in 2002 (Southall 2003).

Nor were Mandela and Mbeki discouraged from supporting democracy in the SADC region and further afield. In late 1997, after events in Southern Africa created fears of a retreat from democracy, Mandela used his office as chair of SADC to raise concerns:

At some point therefore, we, as a regional organisation, must reflect on how far we support the democratic process and respect for human rights. Can we continue to give comfort to member states whose actions go so diametrically against the values and principles we hold so dear and for which we struggled so long and so hard? Where we have, as we sadly do, instances of member states denying their citizens ... basic rights, what should we as an organisation do or say? (Mandela 1997)

Months later, Mbeki was as blunt, satirising governance ills on the continent, including ballot-box stuffing (Mbeki 1998). Neither seemed to have been cowed by the disapproval of their peers (which was said to have greeted these interventions too) or to have been seduced into silence by expediency.

While this phase is usually associated primarily with the Mandela administration, and in particular its later period, one aspect endured into the Mbeki presidency: twice, in Zambia and Malawi, he intervened to dissuade presidents from seeking a third term in office in the face of mobilised public opposition (Lodge n.d).

In this phase, South Africa is doing much of what first phase critics want it to do – energetically pursuing democracy, even if this means clashing with autocrats. Advocates of democracy promotion now accepted

that it shared their interest (Solomon 1997). But assertive, public, democracy promotion was giving way to a more modest approach.

### *Speaking (Largely) in Code*

In the third phase, which continues into the present, South Africa continues to play a role in democracy promotion but influence and intervention is tailored not to confront African leaders and is justified on grounds other than democracy's merits.

First, interventions are presented not as democracy promotion but as contributions to conflict resolution. They are pursued within a context in which South Africa seeks to assist other societies in applying the inclusive negotiated settlement model which ended apartheid:

The most consistent thread in South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy forays lay in its efforts to 'export' its model of conflict resolution to other situations: this consisted of painstaking compromise and consensus-building and the assimilation of rivals into new, democratic systems ... Pretoria tried this in Mozambique, the former Zaire, Nigeria, Angola and Lesotho (Marais 1999).

This approach has also been applied to two major international conflicts, Northern Ireland and Palestine. While the most impact may have been achieved not in Africa but in Northern Ireland, where Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams insists that engagement with the ANC helped persuade his movement to abandon violence and pursue a political settlement (Adams 2005), continuing attempts to broker peace in Democratic Republic of Congo (Department of Foreign Affairs 2006) and Burundi (*SABC News* 17/6/2006) have produced processes which could yield inclusive democratic orders. A key element is participation in peacekeeping: 'overall South African peacekeeping deployments in African countries total 2,800 personnel' (Lodge n.d.).

These interventions, since they entail an attempt to include all political actors in the process and are meant to produce a free and fair election, are attempts to democratise as well as to prevent violence. But they are presented not as democracy promotion exercises, but as attempts to settle conflicts.

Second, an attempt to channel democratising influences through multi-lateral, continental, institutions. Thus, South Africa has played a key role in establishing the African Union (AU) and developing its New Partnership for African Development (Nepad). Nepad, adopted in 2002, includes a declaration which commits African governments to:

The rule of law, the equality of all citizens before the law and the liberty of the individual, individual and collective freedoms, including the right to form political parties and trade unions... (NEPAD Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance, Section 7).

The AU has also adopted the OAU's proposal to establish an African Peer Review Mechanism in which civil society is to participate and which tests, among other issues, the state of democracy (OAU 2002). South Africa has sought to act as an example by submitting itself to peer review. This approach is consistent with an oft-stated South African concern for multi-lateralism as a means of settling disputes which, in the view of some scholars, is evidence of its status as an actual or aspiring 'middle power' (Wood 1998:1).

Third, a democratising influence is exerted through instruments which purport to have another purpose. Thus, Nepad is concerned to promote development and 'good governance'. Its democracy promoting elements are phrased almost as technical aspects of 'good governance' which are required if the continent is to achieve growth, modernity – and foreign aid: its Democracy and Political Governance Initiative is presented as a means to 'contribute to strengthening the political and administrative framework of participating countries... It is strengthened by and supports the Economic Governance Initiative, with which it shares key features' (Nepad 2001:17). The Peer Review Mechanism is not presented as a measure of democratic achievement, but of a more general commitment to the growth-oriented and developmental goals of Nepad:

The primary purpose of the APRM is to foster the adoption of policies, standards and practices that lead to political stability, high economic growth, sustainable development and accelerated sub-regional and continental economic integration... (OAU 2002:2).

In this phase, South Africa has continued to play a role in supporting democracy promotion, but one performed almost by stealth. Its role is less open to challenge, and less threatening to power holders. But its impact is greatly reduced by the need to move at the pace of actors who may be resistant to democracy.

### ***The Fatal Flaw? Zimbabwe***

If South Africa's response to the challenge of democracy promotion had stopped at the examples cited thus far, its role could be judged to be benign if sometimes ineffectual. Lodge points out that it has assisted



electoral processes, supported 'politically negotiated conflict resolution' in which civil society participation has been encouraged and persuaded reluctant presidents to observe term limits' (Lodge n.d.). But this relatively positive evaluation must be greatly modified by its failure to meet the moral and strategic challenge of its most conspicuous foreign policy test: Zimbabwe.

The events which began when President Robert Mugabe's government lost a constitutional referendum in 2000, in which attempts to defeat him at the polls have been beaten back by a sustained and often violent authoritarian onslaught, have been exhaustively analysed (McKinley 2006). Suffice it to say here that South Africa has, during the tenure of former President Mbeki, offered substantial aid and comfort to the Zimbabwean regime by sending official delegations which endorsed elections regarded by independent sources as fraudulent, often ignoring the opposition, seeking to temper international action against Mugabe and remaining silent on human rights abuses.

South Africa has insisted through much of the conflict that it is adopting an even-handed approach which relies on 'quiet diplomacy' and is seeking an inclusive negotiated settlement (Sachikonye 2005). But, since Zimbabwean democracy has continued to decline throughout this period and South Africa has appeared to condone this, claims of neutrality have lacked credibility. As a Zimbabwean civil society activist said of official claims that South Africa was avoiding unproductive 'megaphone diplomacy' – 'You *are* engaged in megaphone diplomacy. But you are pointing the megaphone in the wrong direction.' (Round-table, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria 2003).

Critics who insist that South Africa has not exerted the pressure it could on Zimbabwe include not only the Zimbabwean opposition but former President Mbeki's brother Moeletsi, deputy chair of the SA International Affairs, who has consistently urged a more assertive stance (Lodge n.d.), as well as civil society organisations in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Even if the complaint that South Africa has supported a sustained attempt by an illegitimate government to crush opposition is rejected in favour of the government view that it has been trying to resolve a difficult problem in the only possible way, Zimbabwe remains a notable failure because Mbeki and his government insisted that they were trying to reach a settlement and none is in sight.

More importantly, the South African response to Zimbabwe has severely tarnished the effectiveness of its promotion of democracy. It has

created an impression of inconsistency and thus expediency (du Preez 2007) – South Africa may well not be able, after Zimbabwe, to return to more vigorous promotions of democracy of the sort it attempted in the second phase, even if circumstances seemed to warrant it, because this would raise obvious questions about why abuses were permitted in Zimbabwe but not elsewhere. In effect, the Zimbabwean response may have ensured that South African democratisation efforts will remain limited and conducted by stealth.

It is also possible that, because the response has been justified as a strategy to achieve an inclusive settlement, it may have damaged the credibility of this strategy too. If inclusive negotiation means condoning anything power holders do to the powerless, it is unclear what constraints it places on the former and what hope it offers the latter. While the inclusive style may still enjoy credibility in cases such as Burundi and DRC, where both power holders and challengers have access to arms and the one cannot be considered to be at the mercy of the other, they may now be discredited in cases in which citizens require protection from power holders who hold a monopoly on coercion. It may also weaken South Africa's already limited influence within the AU and SADC. A key weakness of the multi-lateral instruments South Africa has helped to shape is that they have never been used against Zimbabwe – they have, in reality, never been used against an incumbent government and have seemed to be designed to protect incumbents.<sup>1</sup> The impression that they are cosmetic or a means of shoring up existing power relations not only reduces their credibility among actors working for democracy, but among power holders who do not expect to be held to account by them.

Zimbabwe is, therefore, not simply a limited stain on South Africa's democratisation record. It severely compromises the credibility and strategic viability of its role as a democratiser. In essence, it appears to confirm that South Africa's role as a promoter of democracy is now largely limited to doing what power-holders will allow it to do.

### **The Manacled Giant? Explaining the Limits**

What are we to make of this experience?

One influential strain of analysis sees it as a reminder of the limits which face democracy promotion ambitions (Barber 2004; Lodge n.d.). In this view, the new South Africa made an energetic attempt to spread democracy but was then forced by reality to retreat into a more nuanced

stance which acknowledged the limits of foreign policy 'idealism', making significant concessions to a more sober 'realism'.

The evidence for this shift is said to be contained in a 1997 ANC discussion document (ANC 1997) tabled at its conference that year. While it repeated 'idealist' intentions, it placed 'at the top of the international agenda' developing a just and equitable world order and also added opposition to colonialism and neo-colonialism as a goal. This was seen as a dilution of the human rights commitment (Barber 2004:119). The document also, it is argued, scaled down the ANC's human rights ambitions, arguing that South Africa should not 'overestimate ourselves as a middle income country'. It cited the Nigerian case as an example of the dangers of acting alone and argued for action through multi-lateral bodies. This change, with an agreement on foreign arms purchases '(which) signalled new recognition ... of the importance of military capability if South Africa was to exercise pan-African influence' signalled, it is argued, the emergence of a foreign policy which began to acquire consistent characteristics that were to endure into Mbeki's administration. Key features are a stress on multi-lateralism consistent with an embrace of a role as a 'middle power' and a 'self effacing posture on the continent' (Lodge n.d.).

Two aspects are crucial to this view. First, an assumed unity of purpose within the ANC. While divisions are at times mentioned in passing (Barber 2004:120), consensus on the need for the promotion of democracy and human rights is assumed. Second, policy is seen to evolve in response to external constraints. The chief obstacle to a more assertive and effective policy is external reality which moderates an 'idealist' consensus as an eager but inexperienced new government comes to learn that the world is not necessarily hospitable to energetic intervention in support of democracy.

In fairness, the pursuit of democracy in other countries is not purely an act of will: intervention faces daunting obstacles, generally and in Africa in particular. But, in South Africa's case, the domestic dimension was more important in shaping willingness to promote democracy and in limiting the inclination to do so more generally and vigorously. The ANC's commitment to democracy promotion was not unambiguous and nor was there necessarily consensus on its desirability. Because it locates the limits on democracy promotion purely in the external environment, the view discussed here misreads the dynamics which shaped South Africa's

policy and action. It cannot explain why responses which were widely seen as 'expedient' contradictions of the ANC's democracy and human rights commitment were evident before the Nigerian crisis indicated the limits of 'idealist intervention' – or why these approaches were also pursued in Asia where South Africa had never tried to promote democracy and can therefore not have abandoned idealism in the face of reality.

In Asia, the 'universality' which prompted Mandela to fete Suharto could hardly have been prompted by a chastening encounter with reality. Nor, although it followed the Nigerian events, could the decision in 1996 to recognise the People's Republic of China, which was not a democracy, rather than Taiwan, which had just become one. The ANC hoped to deal with both countries, but neither's democratic credentials were at issue: since Taiwan had contributed generously to the ANC's election expenses and the post-apartheid government's reconstruction programme, debate centred around the economic merits of the two relationships – where principle was raised in Taiwan's support, the rationale was again 'universality', not democracy (Barber 2004:106-108).

The account is further undermined by the fact that 'idealist' interventions such as Mandela's 1997 speech to SADC, Mbeki's 1998 speech satirising African autocrats and interventions to dissuade neighbouring presidents from seeking third terms followed the Nigerian events and that two of these interventions were attempted after the 1997 discussion document.

Nor, finally, do these analyses allow for diversity within the ANC on the merits of democracy promotion itself. Within Africa, the period before Saro-Wiwa's execution was marked by a sympathetic South African attitude to the military government – its foreign minister, Chief Tom Ikimi, was invited to visit Pretoria (Barber 2004:109) and used his time to lobby for his government. Delegations of 'academics' linked to the junta were hosted by the foreign affairs department.<sup>2</sup> This enthusiasm for 'constructive engagement' or tacit support for the junta did not emanate from Mandela – he was said to have been embarrassed by it (*Mail and Guardian* 22/11/1995). The architect, circumstantial evidence suggested, was Mbeki. He had been the ANC representative in Nigeria (Barber 2004:16) where he is said to have had contact with Abacha and other military figures. He took a lively interest in foreign affairs and was often seen by insiders as the 'real' foreign minister. And it was he who delivered the 1996 speech suggesting that Mandela had been 'set up' by the West. Policy on Nigeria was clearly not unanimous.

Despite this, the 1997 document is presented as a unified ANC response to external complexity. A closer look invites a different view. Unlike other ANC and government documents on this question it offers a left-wing analysis of international realities, albeit a pragmatic one. While welcoming some consequences of the end of the Cold War, it adds:

the collapse of the Soviet Union had the effect of reducing international support for national liberation struggles, as well as the absence of space and support for developing countries to develop alternative economic and political policies relatively independently from the ideas set out by the Western capitalist countries (ANC 1997).

It sees a 'need to break neo-colonial relations between Africa and the world's economic powers'. And, while endorsing multi-party democracy, it observes that 'multi-party systems have been introduced in Africa in circumstances where other conditions have had the effect of weakening the capacity of governments to stop the explosion of ethnic war' (ANC 1997). It is of some importance that, when the document was drafted, the chair of the ANC National Executive's International Affairs committee was SA Communist Party general secretary Blade Nzimande (ANC 1997b).

This does not mean that the document was the ANC left's attempt to take over foreign policy. It could not have been published if the ANC leadership did not want it circulated and Nzimande was not the only person responsible for international policy. There are many continuities between it and other government and ANC policy pronouncements. And it does foreshadow some later foreign policy directions – a more active role in championing Southern concerns in world trade negotiations and a part in designing the AU.

But parts of the document take a stance unusual for ANC foreign policy documents before or after it. It is the one document at the time to warn of limits to multi-party democracy, and some of the approaches it advocates, such as 'the strengthening of party-to-party relations with progressive parties in the region and the continent' or 'cementing solidarity amongst the progressive forces in the world based on the principles of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and a democratic world order' have not been adopted. This suggests that it was not an announcement of a new direction but a proposal, some of which was ignored. This makes it the product of wrestling within the ANC, not only between sections of the movement but within them, not over how to promote democracy but

over whether this should be a priority at all. And the fact that parts of it have proved influential and parts have not may be a product of the extent to which ANC thinking on these issues is fraught with ambiguities on whether to promote democracy as well as on how to do it.

Democracy promotion is an uncertain and complex undertaking (Carothers 1999) – in Africa, particularly so. It can invite resistance from threatened power holders (Carothers 2006). And, even where those in power do not overtly oppose it, they may be able to employ effective stratagems to ensure that ‘democratisation’ does not threaten them. Since democracy promotion inevitably entails incursions into Westphalian understandings of sovereignty, governing elites can insist that they are being subjected to the imperial attentions of meddling foreigners. They are helped by the reality that the line between democracy promotion and imperial imposition can be exceedingly thin (Kurlantzick 2004). Even where democracy promotion has the active consent of the governing elite, crafting appropriate interventions may often require an intricate understanding of local complexities well beyond those undertaking the intervention (Reitzes and Friedman 2001).

In Africa, these complexities are enhanced. Despite a seemingly dramatic movement towards democracy – 49 of its 52 countries held competitive elections between 1989 and 1997 (Bratton and van de Walle 1997) – substantive progress towards democratic regimes is uncertain. Electoral competition is often accompanied by authoritarian features: many of the continent’s elites are adept at offering a semblance of democratic appearance while abrogating its substance (Joseph 1998). In several important cases, states remain fractured by deep-rooted conflicts – in some cases after elections whose results are disputed. And, in many African countries, the state is weak and largely insulated from the social pressures which might keep elites accountable to citizens (Mkandiwire and Soludo 1999; Clapham 1999). In these cases, plausible domestic partners able to advance democratisation are difficult to locate. South Africa’s efforts have, therefore, been constrained by the complexities of the environment within which democracy promotion must be pursued.

For post-apartheid South Africa, intervention in support of democracy is particularly complex. The support of other African states was a key resource for the ANC during the ‘struggle’ period – states such as Nigeria lavishly supported the ANC’s 1994 election campaign, prompting charges by the opposition that foreign policy was shaped by the ANC’s ‘electoral debts’ (Sampson 1999:560). During this engagement, links

were forged with African governing elites, making ANC leaders reluctant to do battle against leaders with whom they had worked for years. The fact that democracy was achieved by a negotiated transition rather than a military defeat of the *apartheid* order also offered autocrats a handy means of deflecting South African appeals to democratise by insisting that the post-apartheid government was a puppet of white interests: 'The bitter Nigerian response envisaged Mandela as the black leader of a white state – implying that his white officials ... had led him by the nose...' (Barber 2004:115). Vulnerability to being portrayed as a servant of the white establishment may explain why, in the last year of the Mandela administration, Mugabe was able to isolate South Africa within the SADC when he felt threatened by it (Field 2003:360).

Some scholars and diplomats suggest that post-apartheid South Africa found itself in much the same position as Germany and Japan after World War Two – its democratisation did not outweigh its neighbours' memories of it as a domineering, expansionist, power. While there were expectations that the newly democratic state would play a benign role in the lives of its neighbours, energetic intervention would be portrayed as an attempt to revive past hegemony. This factor, coupled with fears of South African economic power, limit South African influence in Africa (Vale and Maseko 1998) – on democracy as well as on other issues. But, as important as these external constraints were, the key obstacles to effective democracy promotion by South Africa were domestic.

### **The Trojan Horse: Domestic Constraints**

Democracy promotion, like other foreign policy goals, is inevitably filtered through a domestic political lens which constrains and shapes policy.

The 'realist' notion that states always seek to act in their own interests (Walz 1959) has, therefore, been criticised for viewing the state as a 'unitary' actor which harbours only one conception of its interests. By contrast, models such as Robert Putnam's theory of the two-level game (Putnam 1998), which analyses international bargaining as the outcome of an interplay between the domestic and the external, stress the role of domestic interest group conflict on international behaviour. This is not the place to discuss models for understanding the domestic dimension of foreign policy (Friedman 2005). Suffice it to say that there is a vital domestic dimension to democracy promotion which often makes it the subject of heated contest in democracy promoting countries (Youngs 2006). Accounts of democracy promotion which ignore the crucial role

of ambiguity and contest in the democracy-promoting country – and therefore assume a coherence and consensus on what is to be done if not on how to do it – are likely to offer a misleading picture. The South African case illustrates this.

### ***Promoting What?***

Contrary to conventional wisdom, ensuring that Africa becomes democratic is not a core concern of the post-apartheid government.

This does not mean that the ANC in government has turned its back on its ‘freedom struggle’. It has remained true to it, for the fight against *apartheid* was not primarily a struggle for democracy but for majority rule: a seminal history is, appropriately, not called an account of the ‘Black Man’s Struggle for Democracy’ (Roux 1964). The ANC and its allies were not unsympathetic to democracy. But the primary rationale of the ‘struggle’ was ‘national liberation’ – the freeing of black people from racial minority rule (Johnson 2003). Democracy and human rights were invaluable tools in that ‘struggle’ and this ensured a more enthusiastic commitment to democracy than might have been expected after a brutal conflict. But they were means, not ends. Similarly, South African democracy is not a product of a fight for democratic freedoms but of a balance of power which ensured that majority rule would be achieved by negotiating a liberal democratic constitution (Friedman 1995).

This concern with racial subjugation did not end when apartheid fell. Post-apartheid politics have been underpinned by a pervasive theme often not stated overtly: whites expect a black government to fail and the leaders of that government know they do.<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, a key preoccupation of much of the new governing elite to show that black people can govern an industrialised society (Friedman 1993; Friedman 2004). The chief concern of post-apartheid governance has not been to deepen democracy or pursue growth but to prove white prejudices wrong by showing that black people can govern.

This also clearly underpins understanding of engagement with the rest of Africa. Mbeki’s 1998 speech poking fun at Africa’s failure to get its house in order looks at the continent through the eyes of the citizens of Dead Man’s Creek, Mississippi, who are told that an African Renaissance has begun, removing them from the obligation to pay for intervention in Africa, but discover, through news bulletins, that nothing on the continent had changed (Mbeki 1998). African leaders are thus behaving in ways which ensure that white, Western people have a low opin-



ion of them. The key objective of South African strategy in Africa is a continent which can win respect by becoming the kind of place which bigots believe it can never be: democracy is embraced as a means to this end. It is significant for example that the Nepad document devotes only two pages out of 59 to discussing the details of its democracy and political governance initiative (Nepad 2001:17-19).

This explains the patterns described here far more plausibly than the notion of an enthusiastic democratiser running up against unpleasant realities. If South Africa's democracy promotion is situated within a concern to refute international prejudice, some of the ambiguity and unevenness can be understood. Is the goal better served by ignoring or defending democratic deficits in Africa because they can only enhance white Western prejudice – or by highlighting them in the hope of changing them? The answer is both, depending on circumstances and context. In Zimbabwe, the former prevails, for the conflict is the only one discussed here in which criticisms of government behaviour are closely tied to race; Europe and America are often accused of highlighting violations in Zimbabwe because white farmers have been among the victims in that country (Nzimande 2006). It is far easier to see criticism of Mugabe as a pandering to bigotry than a similar response to Nigeria or Lesotho.

Nor should the tendency to cloak democratisation in developmental and technical garb – or to present it as a by-product of conflict resolution – be seen purely as a manoeuvre to seduce authoritarians into democratisation. South Africa promotes inclusive settlements and urges the adoption of democracy as part of a wider attempt to enhance the effectiveness and international credibility of African states because it sees democracy as a means to a wider end. The approach is less a response to external realities as an expression of the South African governing elite's understanding of Africa's needs and challenges.

The attempt to 'export' the South African model of conflict resolution and democratisation is also consistent with this concern. One symptom of the desire to refute prejudice is an elite preoccupation with South Africa as a source of 'world class' contributions which demonstrate Africans' ability to enrich humanity – anything from the post-1994 constitution to financial services may be presented as 'world class' to show what the country has to offer (Friedman 2005b). Exporting a model of conflict resolution is one further way of demonstrating 'world class' status.

That South Africa's desire to encourage democracy is part of a wider concern to restore black African self-esteem does not devalue it. But it

does introduce dilemmas, ambiguities and contradictions which explain the different trajectories it has taken and the varying perspectives towards it within the ruling elite. At times, differing strategies and views have existed side-by-side – in the same policy documents or in the approaches of the same politicians. This has less to do with confusion than with the reality that the pursuit of democracy has to be weighed against other goals to which it is subordinate.

A full understanding of South African democracy promotion requires that this factor be combined with the paradoxical insularity of South Africa's international interventions.

### Promoting or Projecting?

Assumptions that South Africa is committed to a coherent project of promoting democracy elsewhere are also partly based on a misapprehension of its elite's relation to the world.

For decades, the contending forces in South Africa were locked in a battle which was often played out in the world arena: winning world support was a key component in the strategies of the *apartheid* government and the ANC (Thomas 1996). The negotiation process which ended *apartheid* was, during much of the first two years of the 1990s, playing as much to a foreign audience as a domestic one. International influence was significant in shaping negotiating positions (Landsberg 1995). This dynamic forced the ANC into a diplomatic role which it performed with great effect, raising expectations that foreign policy would be the arena in which it would perform most proficiently in government.

But the concern for engagement with the world during the *apartheid* era was, in an important sense, illusory: relations with other states and actors was about *apartheid* and nothing else. A key preoccupation of the *apartheid* government was winning international legitimacy (Mills and Baynham 1994). The ANC's international role was to deny it that: so central was this focus that, for much of the exile period, guerrilla war, dubbed 'armed propaganda' by the ANC leadership, was designed more as a diplomatic weapon than an instrument to overthrow the white-ruled state (Lodge 1984). As its campaign to win support for the anti-apartheid 'struggle' gathered momentum in the West, this required that it remain fairly bland on international issues for fear of antagonising major powers.

While the international context was strongly embedded in the consciousness of whites and blacks, it was so only in the context of *apar-*

*heid*. Within the resistance tradition of which the ANC was part, world opinion was seen, excessively at times, as a key to freedom. One of the earliest responses to segregation by the Western educated leaders who founded the ANC was to send a delegation to London to request the British king to intervene on behalf of his black subjects (Roux 1964:110); petitioning the colonial authorities was a central theme in ANC strategy until the 1940s. Nor was reliance on external influence restricted to the elite: in 1921, Wellington Buthezi, a herbalist and preacher, rallied a mass movement by promising that black Americans would arrive in aeroplanes to free black South Africans (Roux 1964:140-141). The reliance on external intervention was an expression of real or perceived powerlessness which remained a crucial element of resistance strategy into the 1990s. In exile, the ANC established diplomatic missions throughout the world and was afforded a presence in significantly more countries than the *apartheid* government (Evans 1996). Its aim, however, was single-minded – to win support for the fight against *apartheid*.

There was, therefore, much interaction with the world – but the goal was not to establish what South Africa could do for the world but what the world could do for South Africa. 'This forced the ANC ... to develop a narrow and highly parochial view of the world' (Diescho 1996:11-12). The oft-stated expectation that a movement which had made human rights virtually its *raison d'être* during the *apartheid* period would champion this cause vigorously after defeating the system might have made good polemics, but was faulty analysis. A stress on seeking resources to sustain the post-*apartheid* order was a continuity, not an inexplicable departure from tradition.

Again, this explains key aspects of the democracy promotion agenda, in particular the complaints of expediency. 'Universality' can also be traced back to a desire to get on with anyone who has anything to offer South Africa, whatever their human rights record. Asked in 1990 for his response to human rights abuses in other countries, Mandela replied: 'Our attitude to any country is determined by (its) attitude .... towards our struggle' (ABC *Nightline* 21/6/1990). For the ANC, *apartheid* was not simply a human rights issue – it was *the* human rights issue. The highest form of human rights commitment was, therefore, opposition to *apartheid*. Domestic human rights performance was, in comparison, unimportant.

This raises the possibility that one spur for democracy promotion was not 'idealist' concern but a desire to impress trading partners and

sources of investment. Certainly, an emphasis on 'selling' the new democracy to investors and trading partners – one foreign service cadet complained that he felt he was being trained to become a 'global hamburger salesman (Exchange, Foreign Service Institute 1995) – was a key feature of early post-apartheid foreign relations. The inward looking nature of outward relations made it possible to view a scramble to persuade anyone with money to direct it towards a new South Africa not as a compromise with democracy but a means of promoting it since the growth of post-apartheid South Africa was the ultimate contribution to democracy and human rights. Democracy promotion could be, partly, another means to that end.

As the end of apartheid has become distant, this influence may seem to have diminished – 'self-effacing' democracy promotion is unlikely to help investment. But the domestic focus persists, most notably in responses to Zimbabwe. The conflict is one between a 'liberation' party which is seen to have won independence for its country and a trade union-led civil society movement. While the ANC leadership has achieved electoral dominance, a significant check on its power and challenge to its leadership is the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu), ironically an ANC ally, and a range of civil society organisations (Friedman 1999). While speculation that Cosatu might form a worker's party to challenge the ANC is unlikely to be vindicated (Harvey 2002), this possibility clearly weighs on the minds of ANC leaders. It is, therefore, perhaps significant that, when a senior official in the Presidency was asked at a confidential meeting why South Africa seemed cool towards the Zimbabwean opposition, he replied that it was led by trade unionists who were never equipped to run countries (Discussion March 2004). The obvious implication is that the Mbeki administration saw the idea of a trade union-led civil society coalition unseating a 'liberation' party as a precedent unhelpful to South Africa's development. What the Zimbabwean conflict may say about South Africa was far more important than what South Africa might say about the conflict.

This issue would not arise if the future of South African democracy seemed largely settled. Inevitably, it is not. Only fifteen years after a severe conflict in which none of the parties saw democracy as an end in itself, its future and merits are still in doubt. This, with South Africa's 'inward outwardness', means that promoting democracy elsewhere will inevitably be filtered through a response which keeps a weather eye on the implications for South Africa's own prospects. And it may well be

that a 'self effacing' approach, in which the democratisation burden can be shared and subsumed into other objectives, best fits the circumstances of a new elite uncertain of the future of the society which it governs. If South Africa's current power holders were more certain of its prospects, they may have clearer ideas of what they would like to promote elsewhere.

### **Conclusion: What can be Learnt?**

Does South Africa's experience say anything about the circumstances of one country at one time or does it have a more general application?

While the case has unusual features, it does have more general application. It warns against expecting a coherent approach from states whose democracy is far from established and who will inevitably filter their role abroad through their own ambivalence and uncertainty about their future. But, more generally, it warns against too sanguine a view of the capacity of states to promote democracy elsewhere – not only because the external constraints are very real but also because the attempt will be filtered through domestic concerns which ensure that democracy promotion may say as much about the frailties, ambiguities and dilemmas of the promoting country as it does about those among whom it is to be promoted.

This does not mean that claims by states, including those which are newly democratic, to be promoting democracy in other states should be discounted – even South Africa's modest, sometimes incoherent and often ineffective strategy has achieved democracy in Lesotho and the possibility of inclusive government in Burundi and DRC. And its influence on Nepad and the AU, while not apparent in concrete action yet, may still bear fruit, subtly constraining autocrats. But it does mean that the already sobering realisation that democracy promoting countries may be constrained from effectiveness by inadequate knowledge and a need to co-exist with 'targeted' governments must be complemented by a recognition of the key role of domestic preoccupations in further limiting the possibilities of democracy promotion.

### **Notes**

1. In 2002, the AU initially refused to recognise Madagascar's President, Marc Ravalomanana, who defeated incumbent Didier Ratsiraka after the Supreme Court declared him the lawful winner. His opponents insisted that this manner of winning was 'unconstitutional' and therefore violated the AU's ban on recognising governments who attain power unconstitutionally. Even after his

victory was recognised by all parties, the AU ban stood. While it was later lifted, it was seen as evidence that provisions which appeared to entrench democratic principle were being used to protect incumbents. Afrol News 'Madagascar returns to normalcy without Africa' 11/7/2002 [http://www.afrol.com/News2002/mad042\\_au\\_reconciliation.htm](http://www.afrol.com/News2002/mad042_au_reconciliation.htm)

2. The author was director of a research institute at the time. It was contacted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and asked to meet a delegation from a Nigerian research institute. Most members of the delegation held military rank and we were informed by Nigerian exiles that they were closely linked to the Abacha government.
- 3 The attitude is not restricted to South African whites. A (white) mining executive tells of visiting fund managers in North America and Western Europe in an attempt to raise investment capital. His and his colleagues' pitch consisted largely of references to healthy economic fundamentals and progress in resolving conflicts. 'But you have a black government' many of his audiences responded. Discussion, senior mining executive, 1995.

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