



South Africa and the world

The see-no-evil foreign policy

JOHANNESBURG

Why post-apartheid South Africa, once a shining beacon of human rights, is cosying up to nasty regimes around the world

AMOTHER African summit, another disappointment. Any hope that the change of leadership in South Africa might bring change across the border in Zimbabwe has proved in vain. The new president, Kgalema Motlanthe, may sound tougher than his ever-appeasing predecessor, Thabo Mbeki. But he seems no more willing to turn the screws on his errant northern neighbour, Robert Mugabe.

Regional leaders meeting on November 9th all but kowtowed to Mr Mugabe over the terms of September's power-sharing deal with the opposition. This was intended to arrest the country's political and economic collapse but has foundered, particularly over who should run the interior ministry, and by extension the police. Morgan Tsvangirai, who won more votes than Mr Mugabe in the presidential poll in March, says his Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) should be in charge, given that the ruling ZANU-PF controls the army and intelligence organs.

Mr Tsvangirai has good reason to be wary. Human-rights groups report that Mr Mugabe's henchmen are still persecuting MDC supporters (pictured above); and riot policemen have been back on the streets to break up anti-government protests. Yet leaders of the Southern African Development Community (see map on next page), say the interior ministry should be shared—an unworkable proposal rejected

by Mr Tsvangirai. Mr Mugabe seems ready to appoint a cabinet regardless.

The MDC, long critical of Mr Mbeki's mediation, has been calling for others to step in. It is not alone. South Africa's handling of the Zimbabwean crisis has drawn sharp criticism from many corners. Indeed, among the international human-rights fraternity post-apartheid South Africa—the democratic, multicultural "rainbow nation" forged by Nelson Mandela—is once again regarded as something of a pariah. Its gentle treatment of Mr Mugabe, once justified by fear of instability on South Africa's borders, has become part of a wider pattern of alignment with some of the world's least savoury regimes.

In the UN Security Council, South Africa has voted against imposing sanctions not only on Zimbabwe but also on Myanmar's military junta (after last year's crackdown on peaceful protesters) and Iran (for violating nuclear safeguards). It is now leading efforts to suspend the International Criminal Court's prosecution of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's president, for alleged genocide in Darfur.

Its record in the UN Human Rights Council is no better. It has voted to stop monitoring human rights in Uzbekistan, despite widespread torture there, and in Iran, where executions, including those of juvenile offenders, have soared. "Never in my wildest dreams did I believe South Af-

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rica would play such a negative role," says Steve Crawshaw of Human Rights Watch, an international monitoring group.

Shortly before taking over as South Africa's first democratically elected president in 1994, Mr Mandela vowed that "human rights will be the light that guides our foreign affairs." After decades of isolation under an apartheid government, Africa's richest country would return to the world stage as a "beacon of hope" for the oppressed. And it all seemed to begin so well. At home, the new government brought in one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, prohibiting every kind of discrimination and guaranteeing not only the classic civil liberties but also a right to adequate housing, reproductive health care and even to "have the environment protected". The death penalty was abolished; the abandonment of nuclear weapons confirmed.

Abroad, South Africa launched itself as one of the region's leading peacemakers, mediating in conflicts across Africa and sending troops into Darfur, Burundi, the Central African Republic and Congo. It was also the leading light behind the New Partnership for Africa's Development, with an African peer-review system to promote democracy and good governance. Along with Brazil, China, India and Mexico, South Africa is now one of five emerging countries regularly invited to meetings of the OPEC group of the world's richest states. And whenever reform of the UN Security Council comes up, its name is always among those mooted for a possible new permanent seat.

But in recent years, Mr Mandela's promised beacon has begun to look decidedly dim. Since 2006, when South Africa secured a (non-permanent) seat on the Security Council for the first time, it has been

> chumming up with China, Russia and other authoritarian regimes to water down or block virtually every resolution touching on human rights. It argues that the Security Council (dominated by the five veto-wielding permanent members) should not concern itself with such issues, leaving them to the Human Rights Council (on which developing countries have a controlling majority). But that body has proved as ineffectual as its predecessor, stifling-with South Africa's help-criticism of the world's worst tyrants.

Why has democratic South Africa done so much to squander its once acclaimed moral leadership? In truth, the ruling African National Congress has always been cosy with some dictators, such as Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Cuba's Fidel Castro, even under Mr Mandela-largely out of gratitude for past help during the struggle against white rule.

Another reason for its actions can be found in Mr Mandela's experience in 1995, when he found little support in Africa for action against Nigeria's former military junta. A bigger reason lies in South Africa's ambivalent sense of identity, with one foot in the rich world, where its main economic interests continue to lie, and the other in the poor one, with which many of its people identify. Even after the end of white rule, some of South Africa's neighbours regard it as something of a Trojan horse for the West. Hence its desire constantly to affirm its African credentials while playing down any hegemonic ambitions.

South Africa has never sought to define itself as a great force for good in the world, says Aziz Pahad, deputy foreign minister until his resignation in September. Like almost every other country, its foreign policy is based not on morality but primarily on its own national interest. And that, says Mr Pahad, lies in creating a new and more equitable world order.

Thus South Africa's earlier talk about setting Africa's house in order has given way to pushing for more representation of poorer countries in multilateral institutions such as the UN Security Council, the IMF and the World Bank. South Africa's ambition to gain a greater voice means making common cause not just with its African neighbours but also with the rest of the poor world, democratic or not.

Many South Africans say that rich countries' strictures on democracy and human rights will carry little moral force until poorer countries have a bigger say in running the affairs of the world. Not all agree. Turning a blind eye to oppression abroad is "a betrayal of our own noble past", argues Desmond Tutu, a Nobel peace-prize winner and a hero of the struggle against white rule. "If others had used the arguments we are using today when we asked them for their support against apartheid we might still have been unfree," he says. ■