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# The Jacob Zuma Era: South Africa's Foreign Policy towards Zimbabwe (2009-2018)

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#### **Abstract**

At the domestic level, Jacob Zuma's time as the president of South Africa has been described, most notably by his successor Cyril Ramaphosa, as "nine wasted years". Whether this characterisation of Zuma's reign is warranted or not is a subject beyond the scope of the present article. However, given the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign policy, such characterisation necessitates an inquiry into the performance of the Zuma administration in the foreign policy sphere. Given the impracticality of revisiting the Zuma administration's foreign policy in its entirety in an article of this nature,

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Zimbabwe is used as a reference point. Additionally, assessing the Zuma administration's foreign policy in its general or broad form may not produce specific findings. Therefore, in an effort to minimise vagueness, this article chose to restrain its focus to the assessment of the Zuma administration's foreign policy towards neighbouring Zimbabwe. Methodologically, the article relied on document review and discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate that in its early interactions with Zimbabwe, the Zuma government adopted a more confrontational approach. However, as time went on, this approach was replaced by one reminiscent of the Thabo Mbeki administration's foreign policy approach towards Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Jacob Zuma, Afrocentricity, South Africa, Zimbabwe, foreign policy

#### Introduction

Notably, different South African administrations have emphasised, at least rhetorically, the centrality of Africa, and Southern Africa specifically, in the country's foreign policy. The Jacob Zuma administration did not deviate from what is now evidently a norm. Considering the above, it is compelling to assess, through a case study, whether Southern African countries occupy a place as important in South Africa's foreign policy as the country's foreign policy documents suggest. One country that has experienced continuous and recurrent economic and political instability in the region since the beginning of the 21st century is Zimbabwe. This is one of the reasons why the country is used as a case study to reflect on South Africa's foreign policy under Jacob Zuma. Importantly, this article does not dwell on Zimbabwe's common problems as these are well documented. Theoretically, the article adopted Afrocentricity as its theoretical framework. Methodologically, the article employed document review and discourse analysis. Structurally, the article first provides a brief overview of the theory of Afrocentricity. Secondly, the article discusses some of the principles that guided the Zuma administration's foreign policy in general. Lastly, the article specifically and extensively dissects the Zuma administration's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe.

#### Theoretical Basis

As Zulu (2008: 79) correctly posits, Molefi Kete Asante is the founder of the theory of Afrocentricity. The most elaborate account of Afrocentricity was given by Asante (2003: 2) himself when he stated that

"Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the centre of any analysis of African phenomena." Put differently, Afrocentricity is the interrogation of ideas and events from the standpoint of African people as key players rather than peripherals (Mazama, 2001: 388). The theory of Afrocentricity implores us to actualise the reassertion of African agency (Monteiro-Ferreira, 2009: 334).

Studies that have been carried out on the subject matter of this article mainly operationalise conventional International Relations (IR) theories such as realism, idealism, and Marxism. The utilisation of Afrocentricity thus enables the present article to provide an alternative and non-Western perspective on the subject matter. Additionally, when one studies African phenomena, logic should dictate the application of Africa-centred theories. This is because, although they suppose universal usability, the conventional and West-centred IR theories may not provide suitable tools of analysis. However, due to their dominance in academia, and possibly limited availability of alternatives, these theories have found themselves being used to analyse African phenomena, with the context differences being ignored. Therefore, Afrocentricity, with its insistence on the importance of the 'African experience' in the analysis of African phenomena, provides the present study with an Africa-centred tool in the analysis of an African phenomenon.

## The Cornerstones of the Zuma Administration's Foreign Policy

The Zuma administration's 'official' foreign policy rested on multiple pillars and was similarly guided by a number of principles. This section briefly dissects some of these pillars and principles. One such pillar is human rights, which have featured prominently in discussions relating to democratic South Africa's foreign policy. In a contribution which indicated how democratic South Africa was going to conduct itself in the international arena, democratic South Africa's first president Nelson Mandela (1993: 87-88) notes that the struggle against apartheid was in part an opposition to the deprivation of black people of their human rights, and as such "...South Africa will not be indifferent to the rights of others. Human rights will be the light that guides our foreign affairs."

Despite Mandela's conviction, van der Westhuizen and Smith (2015) submit that due to South Africa's interest in championing the agenda of the global South as well as asserting its African identity, human rights have been relegated to a lower position in the principles that guide the

country's foreign policy. Importantly, Fritz (2018) adds that South Africa's underwhelming support for human rights has been a result of two factors: the first is when the country embraces regional or continental positions even when these contradict its own policy; the second is when Pretoria takes a position which it deems as constituting a stride towards the creation of a more equitable and representative international governance structure. South Africa's 2016 attempt to withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was in 2017 halted by the country's High Court on the basis of invalidity and unconstitutionality, serves as an example particularly because the ICC has been, in the past, accused of selective prosecution. Another example would be the 2010 suspension and 2012 subsequent curtailing of the mandate of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Tribunal.

Both the ICC and the SADC Tribunal play(ed) a role in the protection of human rights. The ICC has the responsibility of prosecuting perpetrators of crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes. On the other hand, the SADC Tribunal in its original form served as an alternative and last resort for individuals who felt that their domestic legal systems were unable or unwilling to protect their human rights (Cowell, 2013). It must be noted that on 11 December 2018, Zuma's role in the emasculation of the Tribunal was declared "unconstitutional, unlawful and irrational" by the South African Constitutional Court, in a ruling which corresponded with a similar one by the North Gauteng High Court (Nicolson, 2018). As per instruction of the Constitutional Court, Zuma's successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, officially withdrew South Africa's signature from the SADC protocol which restricted the powers of the SADC Tribunal at the 39th Ordinary Summit of the Heads of State and Government of SADC which was held in Tanzania in August 2019 (Ngatane, 2019).

The relegation of human rights in the country's approach to relations with other countries signaled an elevation of other pillars in the hierarchy. Resultantly, the Zuma administration prioritised South-South cooperation, multilateralism and economic diplomacy (Langa & Shai, 2019: 120). South Africa's admission, which occurred in December 2010, into the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping symbolised the country's embracement of the agenda of the global South. As Mpungose (2018) argues, South Africa's admission into the grouping acted as substantiation of the country's stated commitment to South-South cooperation. The joining of groupings such as BRICS also served as an indication of Pretoria's commitment to multilateralism as

they provide an alternative platform to the 'traditional' and Western-dominated international organisations such as the United Nations in which international phenomena, particularly those that affect member states may be dissected. Such an approach to international relations is in sync with Asante's (2002: 104) advice that Afrocentrists "...must be engaged in the contemporary world, must examine the social and economic plight of African people today, and must question all forms of oppression. But we must do this on the terms of our own agency."

While the different pillars that were given the position of centrality by the Zuma administration in South Africa's foreign policy were targeted at achieving different goals, many of them are interrelated. One point at which they intersect is in how they potentially contribute to the country's efforts targeted at the realisation of change in the global governance architecture. Principles such as South-South cooperation, multilateralism and the centrality of Africa in South Africa's foreign policy all have the potential to contribute to the restructuring of the global governance system. The Zuma administration held the view that the present structure of global governance is outdated and unable to address the challenges that bedevil the present world, hence there is a need to transform it from being power-based to being rules-based (DIRCO, 2011). It is within this context that Qobo and Dube (2015) argue that South Africa's appreciation of its deficiency in economic and other forms of power in comparison to more powerful actors within the international system influences its support for multilateralism. Multilateralism ensures that not only the powerful states are able to influence global phenomena as the current global governance system dictates. Similarly, the establishment of institutions meant to advance the interests of the global South indicates that members of these institutions have come to appreciate that heavily Western-influenced international organisations on their own may not be adequate for pushing the agenda of the global South. The centrality of Africa in the reconfiguration of the global governance architecture stems from the fact that South Africa aims to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), a dream which is highly unlikely to become a realty without the support of the rest of the African continent. The UNSC in its current form contradicts the Afrocentric call for Africans to exercise their agency as African countries can only become non-permanent members.

## The Zuma Administration's Foreign Policy Approach towards Zimbabwe

When Mbeki stepped down as the president of South Africa, he was replaced by Kgalema Motlanthe who is largely considered a caretaker president. Motlanthe's administration had limited time to project fundamental policy changes at either the domestic or international level. As such, his administration simply affirmed the mandate of his predecessor. It is within this context that following the 2009 general elections in South Africa, Jacob Zuma was elected as the president of the country and immediate successor of Motlanthe.

Soon after taking office, Zuma became the main mediator in Zimbabwe and despite paying less attention to detail, he largely continued with Mbeki's policies (Curtis, 2018: 80). Noting that the Government of National Unity (GNU) never enjoyed popular support from the onset, van Nieuwkerk (2012: 91) contends that by 2010, it had become clear that it (the GNU) had reached a stage of futility. It is important to note that the unworkability of the GNU in 2010 should not be solely attributed to Mbeki or Zuma but also to the inability of the Zimbabwean political parties that formed part of the power-sharing agreement to put aside their differences and work towards the betterment of the country. Zuma can, however, be said to have showed early signs of failing to convince these political parties to work together in order to rebuild the country. It must be remembered that Zuma's first term as the president of South Africa began in April 2009.

Mbeki played a central role in the realisation of the GNU. In the run up to the June 2008 Zimbabwean presidential run-off elections, the Robert Mugabe government unleashed high levels of violence, particularly against the opposition, which led to opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, withdrawing his candidacy (Moore, 2010: 752). The run-off elections were a follow up to the March 2008 elections, which failed to produce an outright presidential winner. The Mugabe-led Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change – Tsvangirai (MDC-T), and Arthur Mutambara's Movement for Democratic Change – Mutambara (MDC-M) then signed a global political agreement (GPA) on 15 September 2008 to form a GNU, with Tsvangirai serving as prime minister, while Mutambara of MDC-M and Thokozani Khupe of MDC-T served as deputy prime ministers (Mzumara, 2012: 143), and Mugabe as the president. Curtis (2018: 79) states that this power-sharing

agreement, which came into effect in February 2009, was brokered by Mbeki under the auspices of SADC.

Although the GNU experienced contestations between the different political parties, mainly for the control of the state and its resources (Moore, 2010: 752; van Nieuwkerk, 2012: 91), it helped to create an environment conducive to economic recovery and growth (Sims, 2015: 174). As a result, in 2009, the Zimbabwean economy grew by 5.4 per cent, this figure increased to 9.6 per cent in 2010, while in 2011 it reached 10.6 per cent, before falling to 4.4 per cent in 2012 (Sibanda & Makwata, 2017: 4). It is therefore important to give some credit to Mbeki for having brokered the global political agreement. However, Mhango (2012: 16) cautions that we must not give all credit to the Mbeki administration's quiet diplomacy strategy. Notwithstanding Mhango's caution, one is left to wonder if the GPA would have been a reality had the Mbeki administration acceded to international pressure, sidelined SADC, and taken a unilateral decision to coerce Zimbabwe into the resolution of its internal problems.

In its early days, the Zuma government committed itself to contributing to the promotion of peace, security and stability, as well as assisting 'post-conflict' countries such as Zimbabwe in reconstruction and development initiatives (Landsberg, 2012: 84-88). In line with the reconstruction agenda, the short-lived stability that followed the coming into effect of the GNU opened opportunities for South African companies to get involved in reconstruction, including taking over or replacing Zimbabwean companies (Lipton, 2009: 339). Furthermore, a number of roundtable conferences were held between representatives of both South African and Zimbabwean governments and businesses, with one roundtable discussion in 2011 suggesting that Pretoria could devote more energy to encouraging its private sector to invest more in Zimbabwe (Sachikonye, 2018: 167). The fact that in 2016 bilateral trade between the two countries reached R35 billion, compared to the R23 billion recorded in 2012, could be a result of this suggestion (Sachikonye, 2018: 167). The marginal growth in bilateral trade between Zimbabwe and South Africa, among other things, demonstrates the commitment of the Zuma administration to the reconstruction and rebuilding of the Zimbabwean economy. The foregoing submission should not be confused with the attribution of the growth in trade solely to the Zuma administration's reconstruction agenda.

Landsberg (2012: 87) notes that according to the then Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) director-general, Ayanda Ntsaluba, Zuma had vowed to work with all parties involved in

the GNU to resolve their differences in order to ensure the optimal functioning of the Zimbabwean government. In March 2011, at a SADC meeting held in Livingstone, Zambia, the Organ for Politics, Defence and Security requested permission to send three members to work with the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC) in order to improve its oversight role over the GPA, but the officers (only two) were sent a year later, and the ZANU-PF argued that this amounted to interference in Zimbabwe's internal affairs (International Crisis Group, 2012: 17). At the same meeting, Zuma, in his report as SADC's mediator, accused Mugabe and his ZANU-PF of intentionally defaulting on the implementation of the reforms stipulated in the GPA, leading to Mugabe stating that his party had the right to reject Zuma's mediation should the 'interference' persist (International Crisis Group, 2012: 17). This marked one of the few times in which the South African government criticised Mugabe, and can be interpreted as Zuma trying to assume a neutral position between the members of the GNU in order to avoid the criticism that Mbeki was subjected to for his quiet diplomacy and supposed protection of Mugabe. Adebajo (2018: 17) notes that at this summit, other regional leaders were critical of state-instigated violence and intimidation in Zimbabwe. Apart from isolated cases, this was again one of the few times in which the Mugabe-led government was criticised by its fellow Southern African governments.

As the preceding paragraph demonstrates, there is a need for African countries and leaders to normalise holding one another accountable. Without a culture of speaking truth to one another, accountability will continue to remain a foreign concept. Additionally, the failure to hold one another accountable for despicable political practices against fellow Africans is an invitation for non-African intervention in African affairs, which may be motivated by ulterior motives. Interventions of such nature deprive Africans of their agency, of which Afrocentricity is a proponent, and renders concepts such as 'African solutions to African problems' mere rhetoric. Moreover, sovereignty must not be used to shield wrongdoing by African leaders. As such, highly entrenched principles within the African continent such as non-interference in the internal affairs of one another need to be reviewed in order to ensure that they serve the majority rather than political elites. Once such changes are effected, we will not have situations where leaders such as Mugabe use these principles to hold on to power. Furthermore, we will cease to witness the tagging of other Africans who call for change as agents of imperialism or the West as correcting one another would have been normalised.

been normalised.

#### The 2013 Zimbabwean Elections in Perspective

Moore (2014a: 110) opines that in the build up to the 2013 Zimbabwean elections, Lindiwe Zulu, who was serving as the leader of the South African facilitation team, took a pro-democracy stance in questioning the preparations to the extent that Mugabe "told Jacob Zuma to shut his 'street woman' (Zulu) up". Still expressing concern over the preparations and the date chosen for the poll, Zulu revealed that Zuma had called Mugabe to register his dissatisfaction with the build up to the elections, to this Mugabe responded by stating that "an ordinary woman says 'no you can't have elections on July 31'. Really, did such a person think we, as a country, would take heed of this street woman's utterances?" and threatened to withdraw from SADC if it "decides to do stupid things" (Raftopoulos, 2013: 8). Subsequently, the South African presidency denied that Zuma called Mugabe and distanced itself from Zulu's utterances (Raftopoulos, 2013: 8). Whether Zuma called Mugabe or not, one would expect Pretoria to at least unequivocally condemn Mugabe's degrading remarks about Zulu. The soft approach towards Mugabe could have been an indication of the Zuma administration's newly-found appreciation of the influence that Mugabe wielded within the region.

With the help of populism, tricks, coercion and regional peers' 'collusion', the Mugabe-led ZANU-PF won 61 per cent of the presidential vote and 197 parliamentary seats while Tsvangirai's MDC-T got 34 per cent of the presidential vote and 70 seats in parliament (Moore, 2014a: 102; Moore, 2014b: 47). This was an impressive comeback by the ZANU-PF from the GNU. However, like in most Zimbabwean elections in the 21st century, reports of irregularities soon surfaced. The Research and Advocacy Unit (2016: 8) advances that "all empirical analysis reported multiple sources of possible rigging, manipulations of the voters' roll, assisted voting, huge numbers of voters being turned away, unknown number of voters using 'voters slips', and enormous numbers of security personnel voting in unmonitored ways". The AU and SADC observer groups, although stating that they had their reservations, proclaimed the elections fair and credible, while Zuma congratulated Mugabe and stated that the result was a reflection of the will of the people of Zimbabwe (Southall, 2013: 136).

While the obvious argument would be that the Zuma administration, in its congratulatory message to Mugabe, should have at least proclaimed its acknowledgement of some of the reported irregularities, the reality is that the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries is well entrenched within the African continent. This should be

understood within the context that Mugabe had previously interpreted criticism as interference in Zimbabwe's domestic affairs. Furthermore, despite reporting reservations, the AU and SADC observer groups endorsed the elections. Therefore, in recognition of the collective will of these organisations, South Africa had to endorse the elections or risk acting delinquently and tainting its 'African identity'. One should understand the above submission by acknowledging the fact that the country needs the support of SADC and the AU in its pursuit of UNSC permanent membership, should it become available to African countries.

There are key cases which have necessitated that South Africa adheres to the collective decisions of fellow African countries as far as possible. One such case is Mandela's unsuccessful call for the imposition of sanctions against Nigeria after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni minority-rights activists in 1995 by President Sani Abacha (Youla, 2009: 48). In addition to not being heeded by Western countries, the call proved embarrassing for South Africa as the majority of African countries remained behind Nigeria. One other case is the Zuma administration's vote in favour of resolution 1973 of the UNSC in 2011, which produced catastrophic results including the killing of Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, and the entrenchment of ceaseless instability in that country. These cases and others put a burden on South Africa to constantly prove its solidarity with other African countries. The need to adhere to regional or continental positions also demonstrates the limitations of South Africa's supposed leadership position in the African continent. It also demonstrates the centrality of Africa in South Africa's foreign policy.

## The Zimbabwean Military Coup in Retrospect

In November 2017 when Mugabe faced a 'peaceful removal' that many described as a bloodless coup by the Zimbabwean army, Zuma, in his capacity as the chair of SADC, sent a special envoy, which was led by South African Defence and Military Veterans Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula and then State Security Minister Bongani Bongo, to Zimbabwe (Madia, 2017; Gerber, 2017). Prior to the completion of the supposed coup, Munusamy (2017) argued that the situation in Zimbabwe would require 'absolute trust in mediators', which is something that South Africa lacked under the Zuma administration. The fact that this argument largely draws from South Africa's internal politics poses an important question. Did Zuma's domestic performance hurt South Africa's international image more than Mbeki's quiet diplomacy towards

Zimbabwe? While Munusamy's argument suggests that the answer to this question is yes, the question requires a more in-depth analysis, which is beyond the scope of the present article.

Interestingly, Mbofana (2018) observes that SADC and the AU not only endorsed but also praised the removal of Mugabe, and thereby violated their own principles of rejecting the unconstitutional removal of governments. The violation of this principle can be interpreted as an indication that these two organisations tend to support the government of the day, regardless of how it came into power. It can also be interpreted as another case of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. The latter interpretation acknowledges the argument advanced by various observers that Zimbabwe should be allowed to resolve its own problems.

#### Conclusion

What is discernible from Zimbabwe-South Africa relations is that in the first few years of Zuma's presidency, his administration adopted a critical and, to some extent, confrontational approach towards Mugabe and his party. This was most likely influenced by the criticism that Mbeki faced for adopting a soft approach towards Zimbabwe. It might have also been influenced by the Zuma administration's desire to establish its own path and distinguish itself from its predecessor. However, in the middle of Zuma's two terms, his administration adopted an approach that was much more similar to the one employed by the Mbeki administration. This is likely to have been influenced by experience on the Southern African terrain and recognition of the influence that Mugabe had in the region.

It is also clear that the Mbeki government was much more active in Zimbabwe than the Zuma administration. However, this is largely due to the fact that when Mbeki was in power, the Zimbabwean crisis was both in its early and more destructive stages. It is therefore unsurprising that Mbeki devoted more time to resolving political conflicts while Zuma managed to also devote time to 'rebuilding' Zimbabwe's economy and strengthening economic ties between Pretoria and Harare. It is also important to note that relations between South Africa and Zimbabwe in the post-2009 era have largely been dictated by Pretoria due to the unequal power dynamics between the two countries. Despite this, Harare was still able to exert a fair amount of resistance against South African pressures by exploiting the anti-imperial rhetoric and the highly

enshrined traditional principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states.

The interrogation of South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe corroborates Pretoria's contention that Southern Africa, or at least Zimbabwe, occupies a central position in its foreign policy. Evidently, the magnitude of attention that the Zuma administration devoted to the restoration of long-term political stability and economic prosperity in Zimbabwe cannot be characterised as a loss. Therefore, the Zuma administration's performance in the foreign policy sphere, at least in as far as Zimbabwe is concerned, cannot be characterised as "nine wasted years".

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