

Has South Africa managed to coordinate SADC's response to Zimbabwe?

Ntshembo Marvel Mathye¹

South Africa wants to contribute to the region as a partner, resisting any pressure or temptation to pursue its own interests at the expense of the rest of Southern Africa
(Nelson Mandela, 1993).¹

The end of apartheid in 1994 through a negotiated settlement ushered in a democratic South Africa; consequently the country was readmitted into global politics after decades of isolation. The experience influenced the country's ambitions to play a meaningful role regionally and internationally. These overtones were succinctly expressed by President Mandela, the very year the country marked the end of separatist development policies. One of the important aspects of this ambition was to contribute by finding peaceful means of ending conflicts and establishing mutually beneficial relationships with countries in Africa, and especially countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. This policy brief seeks to critically examine South Africa's mediation in Zimbabwe under the leadership of President Mbeki, and subsequently that of President Zuma, over the period from 2007 to date.

Introduction

Events in the latter years of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century had a massive impact on Zimbabwe's political landscape. It can be argued that a number of issues led to growing restlessness among Zimbabweans towards the government of President Robert Mugabe. As a means of appeasing his supporters, President Mugabe embarked on a fast-track land redistribution programme. This resulted in widespread violence, largely orchestrated by the War Veterans

Association, supported by the state. Many farmers and their workers lost their lives as a result of the violent campaign to drive them off their land.² The situation was aggravated in 1999 by the rise of opposition voices with the formation of the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangarai. All these issues contributed to the political instability and the socio-economic problems that not only affected Zimbabwe, but were felt in all four corners of the SADC region.

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By 2003, a quarter of Zimbabwe's population of 13 million had fled the dire situation into Botswana, South Africa and Mozambique.³ For Zimbabweans remaining in the country, the conditions became harsher, as many were unable to find employment in the shrinking economy. Furthermore, human rights violations towards ordinary Zimbabweans were on the rise. The appointment of President Thabo Mbeki in March of 2007 as the mediator in the ongoing stalemate signalled an acknowledgement of the severity of the situation and the importance of a strong regional response.

The Mbeki years

One of the qualities that made South Africa a suitable candidate for mediating in Zimbabwe was that South Africa is Zimbabwe's biggest trading partner in the region. Furthermore, the country had both the military and economic might to bring about a speedy resolution to the crisis. However, it became clear that South Africa was not going to take a hard-line stance towards President Mugabe. President Mbeki preferred dealing with the situation in Zimbabwe by encouraging dialogue between the parties. This engagement came to be widely known as 'quiet diplomacy'. This form of engagement is one of the many diplomatic styles that governments can choose to employ in achieving their foreign policy goals, whereby heads of states and government representatives seek to engage other governments through meetings, conferences and face-to-face talks.⁴ Much of the criticism levelled against the mediation efforts of Thabo Mbeki stems from the nature of the engagements, as negotiations are often carried on away from the public arena.

Mbeki's approach held traces of the African solidarity that exists between African leaders. African leaders seldom criticise fellow leaders, as a result of their shared history of exploitation and suffering under European colonial rule. Mugabe is one of the remaining leaders in Africa who fought imperial rule and have a special place among African leaders, and Thabo Mbeki was not immune to this perception. Furthermore, both the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF), Mugabe's ruling party, and the African National Congress (ANC) share a similar history, which reinforces the argument that Mbeki was biased in his mediation.

An example of this is a speech President Mbeki delivered, in which he stated: 'As neighbours and peoples who have shared the same trenches in

the common struggle for freedom, it is natural that we must now work together to build on the victory of the anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle'.⁵ It is such statements that have contributed to the criticism of Mbeki's mediation efforts, the strongest critics being the MDC and the international community at large, arguing that SADC mediation has failed.

There have been numerous incidents that have justified the MDC's concerns over the years. Though the presidential and parliamentary elections on 29 March 2008 were conducted in a relatively peaceful environment, it was the post-election period that exposed South Africa's failure to adequately mediate. The results of the elections of local government, the National Assembly and the parliament were made public at the beginning of April 2008, but a convenient delay in announcing the presidential results ensued. The initial results indicated significant support for the MDC, which threatened the ruling party's grip on power. Indications that the ruling party did not take kindly to losing its power were the several court challenges by Zanu-PF of the election results announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).

The delay in releasing the results of the presidential election further demonstrated the reluctance of the SADC-led mediation to ensure credible election results. The SADC should be criticised for its failure to exert more pressure on the ZEC to release the results on time, and to ensure the environment was conducive for all parties to take part in the run-off in June 2008. This period witnessed high levels of violence through 'judicial murders, systematic use of torture, widespread displacements, and a general campaign of terror'.⁶ This culminated in the leader of the opposition MDC-T's not partaking in the run-off.

South Africa can, however, be credited with continued efforts to find peaceful means of bringing the Zimbabwean impasse to an end. In this case, the mediation resulted in a brokered power-sharing agreement that resulted in the three main protagonists, President Mugabe of Zanu-PF, Morgan Tsvangarai of the MDC-T and Arthur Mutambara of the MDC-M, forming a government of national unity (GNU). This was the second-best option for ending the Zimbabwean impasse, since the tactical goal of ending the conflict through the 2008 harmonised elections had failed to achieve the desired goals.⁷ The parties agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on 21 July 2008, which paved the way for the Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed on 15 September 2008.

President Mbeki preferred dealing with the situation in Zimbabwe by encouraging dialogue between the parties

This is an indication that South Africa achieved some level of success through the mediation efforts of President Mbeki.

President Zuma's mediation

The resignation of President Thabo Mbeki in September 2008 after brokering the power-sharing agreement presented a challenge for his successor. President Jacob Zuma has, however, demonstrated his capabilities in taking responsibility for the successful implementation of the GPA. One of the difficult issues he had to deal with as mediator was President Mugabe's continued undermining of other principal parties to the agreement. Clear examples of this were the unilateral decisions taken on key government positions. The MDC raised serious concerns over the assignment of highly contested portfolios, including those of Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Agriculture, Mines and Justice.⁸ On the other hand, Mugabe raised concerns over the Western sanctions imposed on many of his senior members of government and over the pirate radio stations supporting the MDC.

These concerns exposed the ambiguities in South Africa's mediation efforts. Zuma put pressure on Mugabe to honour his commitments to the GPA. On the other hand, Zuma demonstrated solidarity with Mugabe by calling for the unconditional lifting of the sanctions, just as he did when he endorsed the SADC resolution in September of 2009.⁹ This was at a time when the threats of violence and arrest towards the opposition were still rife.

However, despite serious challenges that plagued the implementation process of the GPA, President Zuma was steadfast in ensuring that the process was completed. The most important aspect of this implementation process was for the principals to agree to the drafting of the new constitution and road map that would lead the country to hold peaceful and fair elections. Zuma's mediation efforts have, however, come under serious criticism with regard to the limited authority over institutions such as the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC).¹⁰ This was the result of the lack of an outside body responsible for monitoring the work of JOMIC and taking it to task when it faltered.

Constitution and elections

President Mugabe made numerous attempts to call for early elections although the full implementation of the GPA and the draft constitution had not been finalised. The SADC report of June 2011 criticised the continuous backtracking and lack of implementation, while also rejecting President Mugabe's call for early elections.¹¹ This hard-line stance towards Mugabe ensured that the Constitutional Parliamentary Select Committee (COPAC) was able to finalise the drafting of the new constitution, as mandated by article six of the GPA. The draft constitution was finalised by COPAC on 13 January 2013. After being approved by a referendum vote on 16 March 2013, the process was finalised with approval by parliament on 9 May 2013. One could regard this as a success of the SADC facilitation team led by President Zuma, as the goal was to find solutions that Zimbabweans would regard as their own.

The final assignment that President Zuma had to deal with was the issue of harmonised elections on 31 July 2013, a date declared by President Mugabe, who took advantage of a presidential decree to call for the elections, having bypassed parliament in the process. This clearly presented a challenge for the SADC, because electoral, security and media reforms had not yet been fully implemented. The summit held in Mozambique in June was evidence that the SADC leaders were not pleased with this decision. One could argue that Zuma failed to exert enough pressure on Mugabe to postpone the elections. Such postponement would have permitted all outstanding issues concerning the reforms to be addressed, and eliminated the reservations about the credibility of the elections on 31 July 2013.

Conclusion and recommendations

South Africa's facilitation in Zimbabwe has broadly managed to meet the objectives of the mandate set out by the leaders of the SADC. The primary goal for the facilitation team was to seek a solution through a negotiated settlement which the Zimbabwean people could call their own. This was crucial, in that the parties would take ownership of agreements reached and take responsibility for any breakdown thereof. Though President Mbeki has been heavily criticised for the way in which he handled his mediation in Zimbabwe, the signing of the GPA and the formation of the GNU are proof of his successes. Mbeki argued that the Zimbabwean people would

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find solutions on their own terms, and both the GPA and the GNU are products of the three conflicting parties.

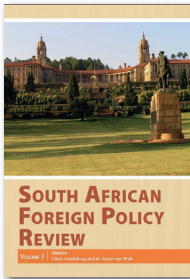
President Zuma was able to move away from the soft approach to a more vocal and confrontational approach. He did this without dictating what the Zimbabwean people should do, but instead made sure that provisions were made for the parties to find their own solutions. The result has been a draft constitution that was finalised by COPAC and accepted by the Zimbabwean people through a referendum. This ultimately led to the elections on the 31 July 2013, with hopefully the majority of the Zimbabwean people re-electing President Mugabe to lead the nation.

Several lessons have come out of South Africa's mediation in Zimbabwe for future engagements in the region:

- President Mbeki's facilitation highlighted the need for a collective approach to mediation through an SADC body that will be responsible for all mediation. Respected former presidents should head this body, with the support of a team consisting of members from different states.
- There is a need for a monitoring body within the SADC whose responsibility will be to oversee the full implementation of agreements, as self-monitoring by JOMIC and COPAC during this mediation was ineffective. This team should be on the ground in the relevant country and not rely on second-hand information.
- The situation in Zimbabwe has highlighted the need for the SADC to set up a fund to which member states contribute; this will ensure that members are able to request assistance in times of elections to ensure that credible elections are held.

Notes and references

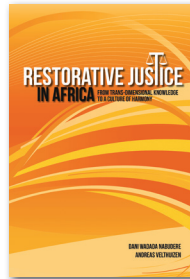
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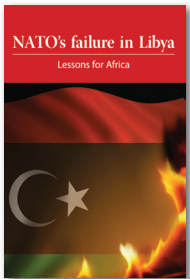
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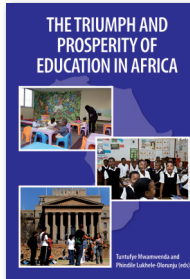
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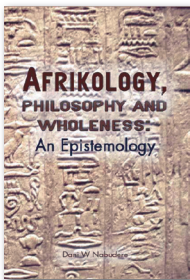
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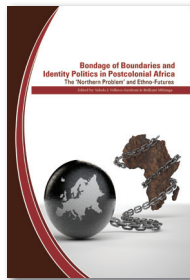
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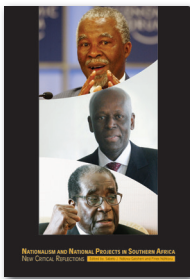
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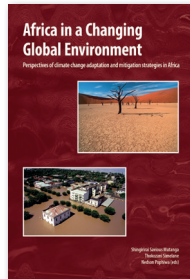
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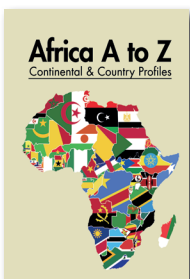
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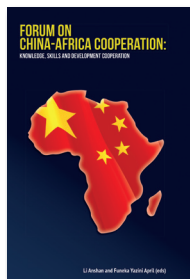
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