



Issues in South African Foreign Policy

The African Renaissance

Moeletsi Mbeki

In his now famous April 1997 speech to a gathering of American investors and leaders of the Southern African Development Community, Deputy President Thabo Mbeki predicted the rebirth of Africa in the 21st century. "Those who have eyes to see, let them see. The African Renaissance is upon us. As we peer through the looking glass darkly, this may not be obvious. But it is upon us."¹

The optimistic picture he painted and the grounding he gave to that picture in Africa's unhappy past instantly captured the world's imagination, including the imagination of the ever-skeptical Western and South African mass media.

"Hope is Africa's rarest commodity. Yet, buried though it is amid the despair that haunts the continent, there is more optimism today than in decades." This was how *Time* magazine described the coming, if not the arrival, of the African Renaissance.²

This message of hope about Africa's future was amplified by U.S. President Bill Clinton in his address to the South African Parliament on 26 March 1998:

I also hope we can build together to meet the persistent problems and fulfill the remarkable promise of the African continent. Yes, Africa remains the world's greatest development challenge, still plagued in places by poverty, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy and unemployment. Yes, terrible conflicts continue to tear at the heart of the continent, as I saw yesterday in Rwanda.

But from Cape Town to Kampala, from Dar es Salaam to Dakar, democracy is gaining strength, business is growing, peace is making progress. We are seeing what Deputy President Mbeki has called an African Renaissance,

declared Clinton to thunderous applause.³

The African Renaissance: Mbeki's Definition

But what is The African Renaissance? In the few months that this concept has gained popularity, it has come to mean many things. To President Clinton, for example, it means the spread of democracy, economic growth, and peace.

The concept of the African Renaissance was originally developed in an unpublished departmental paper entitled "The African Renaissance: A Workable Dream." According to this paper, the African Renaissance is broader than all these specific characteristics. The African Renaissance is "the third moment" in Africa's contemporary historical cycle that is dated from the 1950s, and more specifically from Ghana's independence forty-one years ago.

The third moment has however not yet arrived, but it is coming. "The third wave of rebirth in our continent can only, in reality, begin to show its full potential in the context of our preparation and entry into the 21st century. It is not the 20th, but rather the 21st century which is likely to be the historical era of the African Renaissance."

Mbeki has identified two moments in Africa's rebirth after years of colonialism and exploitation by foreign powers. The first moment was the liberation struggles of the immediate post-Second World War years, which culminated in the continent's political liberation.

The second moment he dated to the end of the Cold War in 1989, a result of the collapse of the socialist community of states. The end of the Cold War and the "surge of more open political and economic interaction on a world scale" has, he argued, manifested itself in campaigns for democratization in independent African countries. The political liberation of South Africa in April 1994 was one of the high points of Africa's second moment.

Important as they were in Africa's rebirth, the first and second moments served as

"dress rehearsals" for the African Renaissance, which has a far broader and deeper agenda than political liberation and democracy. The agenda of the African Renaissance is to restore Africa as a contributor to, as well as a beneficiary of, the achievements of human civilization.

The *raison d'être* for a renaissance in the African continent is the need to empower African peoples to deliver themselves from the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism and to situate themselves on the global stage as equal and respected contributors to, as well as beneficiaries of all the achievements of human civilization. Just as the continent was once the cradle of humanity and an important contributor to civilization, this renaissance should empower it to help the world rediscover the oneness of the human race.

One of the most fundamental elements which constitutes the content of this renewal is the construction of a growing and sustainable economy capable of assimilating the best characteristics, contribute to and take advantage of the real flows of economic activities around the world.

For the African Renaissance to happen, Mbeki identified several necessary pre-conditions. He identified the emergence of a new, unionized "proletariat class" that is not only concerned with traditional issues such as working condition and wages, but that is also involved in ownership and enterprise management as one of those pre-conditions. He also identified the emergence of a large urban professional and entrepreneurial middle class that is property-owning and is an active participant in the development of small and medium enterprises as the second pre-condition. All these and more are important factors that will make the renaissance happen.

He stressed, however, that these phenomena will happen irrespective of subjective inten-

tions by governments. "A renaissance is an historical moment whose many elements will develop independently, irrespective of our subjective intentions. It cannot simply be decreed or conjured up like a spell but will arise on the basis of a certain minimum of factors. However, without an integrated programme of action to build upon those minimum factors, the dream of the renaissance shall forever be deferred or remain a romantic idealistic concept."

In the paper, Mbeki listed some of the actions that could be taken to help the African Renaissance along. Among these were the emancipation of women, the emergence of a more able political leadership, a revolution in education, better managed and more effective health care services, and greater African unity. This, however, was the least developed part of the formulation. This was not altogether surprising given the South African government's reluctance to appear to be prescribing to other African governments.

As originally enunciated in "The African Renaissance: A Workable Dream," the African Renaissance is therefore not a policy, or a prescription. Rather it is a description of the coming epoch in Africa's history and of the emerging socio-economic conditions that will bring this epoch about.

In later speeches made during his tour of Asia in April 1998, Mbeki began to also stress the importance of democracy in the African Renaissance.

Like others throughout the world, we too are engaged in the struggle to give real meaning to such concepts as transparency and accountability in governance as part of the offensive directed against corruption and abuse of power.

What we are arguing therefore is that in the political sphere, the African Renaissance has begun. Our history demands that we do everything in our power to defend the gains that have been achieved, to encourage all other

countries in our continent to move in the same direction, according to which the people shall govern, and to enhance the capacity of the OAU to act as an effective instrument for peace and the promotion of human and people's rights to which we are committed.⁴

South Africa's Foreign Policy

It was during the closing months of 1997 that the African Renaissance began to be described as South Africa's foreign policy. In a discussion document prepared for the ANC national conference held at Mafikeng in December 1997 entitled "Developing and Strategic Perspective on South African Foreign Policy," the African Renaissance was described as "the main pillar of our international policy not only relating to Africa but in all our international relations globally."

The authors of this document adopted a more activist definition of the African Renaissance called "the key elements" of the African Renaissance as the following:

- A. The recovery of the African continent as a whole.
- B. The establishment of political democracy on the continent.
- C. The need to break neo-colonial relations between Africa and the world's economic power.
- D. The mobilization of the people of Africa to take their destiny into their own hands, thus preventing the continent being a place for the attainment of geo-political and strategic interests of the world's most powerful countries.
- E. Fast development of people-driven and people-centered economic growth and development aimed at meeting the basic needs of the people.

What is not clear from these documents is whether South Africa is expected to intervene

to help bring about these five clearly desirable outcomes.

The ANC document already referred to seems to indicate that many people in South Africa, and elsewhere, would like to see South Africa do more than merely diagnose the coming rebirth of Africa.

President Clinton, as we have seen, has already thrown the challenge to South Africa to work with his administration to turn Africa's hopes into reality. Deputy President Mbeki himself in the concluding paragraph of "A Workable Dream" suggested a need for action by South Africa when he wrote: "We are a generation caught in an historical conjuncture which privileges us with the possibility to seize the moment and become the midwives of the African Renaissance."

Two questions, however, immediately come to mind. Is the South African government ready and willing to play midwife—perhaps even father—to the African Renaissance? Secondly, is the rest of Africa interested to see South Africa playing such a role?

South Africa's Africa Policy

Let me start by making a general observation about what I call a triumphalist syndrome that afflicts newly liberated African countries. In the 1970s this syndrome afflicted Samora Machel's Mozambique, in the 1980s it afflicted Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe and today it afflicts South Africa.

Newly liberated countries tend to forget that post-colonial Africa already has a history and has developed institutions and practices that by definition must pre-date the newly liberated country's independence. We in South Africa, it seems to me, have walked into the trap of forgetting this fact with potentially disastrous results for South Africa. While we tout an African renewal many of our Africa policy moves place us in diplomatic conflict with other African states.

Let me illustrate my point.

The Organization of African Unity and the UN Economic Commission for Africa created the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern African states, now known as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, COMESA. PTA/COMESA was created to be one of the instruments for achieving the African Common Market by the year 2000. The West on the other hand, through the agency of Botswana, sponsored the establishment of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference, since renamed the Southern African Development Community, SADC. SADC was created to be a spanner in the works of the envisaged African Common Market by competing in the sub-region against COMESA.

Between 1980 and 1994, all Southern African countries except Botswana were members of both SADC and COMESA. After South Africa's liberation in April 1994, Africa's expectation was that it would follow the example of the rest of Southern Africa and join both SADC and COMESA. This was especially so because the ANC and PAC as liberation movements had been full members of COMESA while they were only observers in SADC.

This did not happen. In spite of appeals from Uganda's Yoweri Museveni and Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi, among others, South Africa ignored COMESA and joined only SADC. This was our first break with African traditions.

The second break occurred when we took the lead at the Auckland Commonwealth Summit and called on the West to impose economic sanctions against the Nigerian military regime for executing Ken Saro Wiwa and other Ogoni activists. The government's diplomatic stance was followed by street demonstrations outside the Nigerian consulate in Johannesburg organized by the then ANC Secretary General, Cyril Ramaphosa,

and his deputy, Cheryl Carolus, and supported by the Congress of South African Trade Unions, COSATU.

Further afield, South Africa's embrace of Taiwan after April 1997 must have set alarm bells ringing in many African capitals. The People's Republic of China had made an enormous contribution to the defeat of Portuguese colonialism and white domination of South Africa. To help break Rhodesia's and Apartheid South Africa's stranglehold over landlocked Southern African countries, China had financed and built at great cost the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, TAZARA. China had also trained and equipped the liberation armies of Mozambique and Zimbabwe as well as Tanzania's own army. Since its independence in 1962 Tanzania had acted as a rear base to Southern African liberation movements, including the ANC and PAC.

Africa was appreciative of China's role in the liberation of Southern Africa and had therefore actively campaigned for China to take its seat at the United Nations. Africa's support for China cost the current OAU Secretary General, Salim Ahmed Salim, the secretary generalship of the UN and delayed for many years Africa's turn to lead the UN. Most African countries must therefore have been surprised to see newly liberated South Africa continuing to have diplomatic relations with Taiwan and only breaking those relations when threatened by China.

Our closeness to the United States is another example of our break with African traditions. Only a handful of African countries have been as close to the U.S. as South Africa is today and all of those were frowned upon by the rest of the continent. In North Africa these were Anwar Sadat's Egypt and King Hassan's Morocco. In sub-Saharan Africa they were Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire, and Daniel Arap Moi's Kenya.

A rather ironic situation is thus emerging in our relations with the rest of Africa. The

South African government says it sees Africa's revival as the lynchpin of its foreign policy. We therefore see ourselves as the spokesmen for Africa in international forums and in the diplomatic circuit.

African countries on the other hand are becoming nervous about South Africa as they see us riding roughshod on their sensibilities.

Two recent events seem to highlight this growing African antipathy towards South Africa. Several, if not most, African delegates to the International Olympic Committee did not support Cape Town's bid to host the 2004 Olympics. Secondly, the ongoing squabble about the chairmanship of SADC's Security Organ suggests that some African countries are reluctant to entrust South Africa with a sharp object. If this trend continues, I do not expect that Africa will support South Africa's bid to become a permanent member of the expanded UN Security Council.

To be fair to the South African government, one should acknowledge that it is new in the business and is therefore inexperienced. Managing in today's multi-polar environment demands a great deal more expertise and experience than middle-sized powers like South Africa were called upon to have during the Cold War.

Finally, I do not get the impression that our government leaders and our diplomats have really begun to make the effort to understand the character of the social structures that are now in place in African countries and how these affect Africa's possible revival in the post-Cold War environment. Let us take the case of Nigeria, for instance. The precarious hold of democracy in that country is inextricably bound up with the skewed influence of the Northern oligarchy over Nigeria's armed forces. What needs to be done to loosen this grip? I am not aware that the government is supporting in-depth research into this issue or similar intractable issues such as the ethnic conflict in the Great Lakes region.

Secondly, I do not get the impression that our leaders see the pervasive influence of the West in African economies and in African economic-policy making as a fundamentally undesirable obstacles to the continent's ability to forge its own economic identity.

In South Africa and throughout Africa, we are therefore seeing the sale of state corporations to foreigners and their management by non-Africans. This seems to me to signify a resignation by Africa's leaders that despite many words to the contrary, they feel Africans are not capable, in the foreseeable future, of running their countries' economies, nor of being able to master modern technology and management.

Conclusion

From the foregoing it seems unlikely that the South African government will be in a position to play a leading role in bringing the African Renaissance into being in the rest of Africa. The neo-liberal policies that are being pursued by an increasing number of African governments, including our own, seems to suggest that the "new African leaders" no longer see the state as an important vehicle for bringing about socio-economic change on the continent. One must therefore concur with Deputy President Mbeki that the African Renaissance will be brought about more by the actions of emerging social forces in Africa rather than by activities of governments. These new forces are non-governmental organizations, the trade unions, professional associations, universities, and above all the indigenous private corporations.

Up to the mid-1980s, Africa, including South Africa, was a marginal player in the world of business. Today South Africa has several corporations that are ranked in the world's top 500 companies. Leading South African businesspeople such as Nigeria's Chief Moshood Abiola, now languishing in

prison, have built significant business organizations that are capable of operating in several countries. Perhaps it is to these new players, rather than to governments that we should look for leadership of the African Renaissance!

This change of society's leadership in Africa from politicians is not going to be a painless process, however. Africa's politicians remain tied with an apparently unbreakable umbilical cord to the West. The new players have no such attachments and what is more, their growth depends on their severing that umbilical cord and dealing with the West as equals.

This brings us to an important aspect of the African Renaissance—and indeed of all renaissances—that is often overlooked. A renaissance is a period of spiritual liberation which frees the creative energies of society. It is therefore a period of great optimism. A renaissance also frees enormous forces which it is unable to contain.

Europe's renaissance was followed by the great conflicts of the 16th and 17th centuries. Ahead of us, it seems to me, is also the period of great ethnic, religious, and class struggles. We are already seeing the beginnings of some of these struggles in Somalia, Sudan, the Great Lakes region, Kenya, and Algeria.

Notes

Reprinted by permission from *South African Yearbook of International Affairs*, 1998/9, (Johannesburg: The South African Institute of International Affairs, Jan Smuts House, 1998).

1. Address by Executive Deputy President Thabo Mbeki to Corporate Council on Africa's "Attracting Capital to Africa" Summit, April 19-22, 1997, Chantilly, Virginia, USA.

2. Johanna McGeary and Marguerite Michaels, "Africa Rising," *Time*, March 30, 1998, pp. 39-48.

3. "America Needs a Strong South Africa," Text of Bill Clinton's address to the Great Hall of Parliament, *The Star*, Johannesburg, March 27, 1998.

4. "The African Renaissance: South Africa and the World," address of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, April 9, 1998, at the United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan.