

11 SOUTH AFRICA: “THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM”

By Jeremy Kinsman, 2008

INTRODUCTION

South Africa’s struggle for democracy penetrated global consciousness as no other, engaging generations of international humanists, persons of conscience and democratic governments the world over. The uniquely pernicious racial assertions of apartheid conveyed an almost universal sense of offence. Because of its inherent immorality and what Nelson Mandela described as “the ruthlessness of the state in protecting it,” the South African apartheid regime was singular in the extent to which it was regarded as illegitimate. But the struggle to overturn it was borne by South Africans themselves.

Ending apartheid peacefully and establishing democracy in a unitary state would be only part of their battle. The challenges of governance and development for a majority whose skills levels had been deliberately suppressed were formidable. Africans knew this. Mandela (1994) has written that the Freedom Charter of 1955, setting out the requirements of a free and democratic country, anticipated that “changes envisioned would not be achieved without radically altering the economic and political structure of South Africa.”

That the non-white majority acceded to power 40 years later in a country with established institutions was not in itself an advantage. As Mandela (1994) wrote, “Working as a lawyer in South Africa meant operating under a debased system of justice, a code of law that did not enshrine equality, but its opposite.”

A successful revolution occurred. But it is widely judged to have been a “negotiated revolution,” essentially non-violent. The victory belonged to the people who had been protesting the apartheid laws since the Defiance Campaign of 1952. During the 1970s, a wide array of more or less organized groups and initiatives emerged in support of the construction of a popular civil society and in opposition to the apartheid state. By 1983, these groups had become fairly coherently allied in

A DIPLOMAT'S HANDBOOK FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

the UDF, a working coalition of trade unions, student and youth groups, women's groups, cultural organizations and professionals whose members, taken as a body, acquired increasing credibility and legitimacy as the civil alternative to the apartheid regime.

During those hard years, there had been many historic junctions on the "long road to freedom." Several of these are associated with cruel violence, such as the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, or the Soweto uprising in 1976. Faced with the regime's ruthlessness, in 1962, the ANC decided to desert 50 years' belief in non-violence, accepting the option of organized violence. But as Allister Sparks (1996) later wrote, Mandela "never had any illusions it could win a military victory."

He was firmly "in the negotiation camp." In eventual negotiations, beginning in the late 1980s, the government side sought to oblige the ANC to renounce having opted for organized violence. The ANC committed to a future peaceful process but would not renounce its history.

In a sense, this became the pattern for the negotiated outcome. The National Peace Accord of 1991 aimed at a vast conflict resolution. With memories inhabited by an almost unendurable history, it was necessary to exorcise the past. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission would provide amnesty for deeds committed under apartheid in exchange for truth about them. This negotiated solution did not propose that apartheid's victims forget the past, but did enable all South Africans to go forward according to a formula in which blacks had to give up the pursuit of justice for crimes against them, and whites had to give up their monopoly on power.

Violence between black Africans, and notably Inkatha and the ANC, subsided with difficulty, taking the lives of as many as 25,000 in the 1990s, and criminal violence continues in South Africa to this day at unacceptable levels. But the "South African bloodbath" so widely feared and predicted was held at bay, at least as far as violence between whites and blacks was concerned.

The 1994 elections produced majority rule in a unitary state, but without the domination of the white minority by the majority in any punitive sense. The successfully negotiated peaceful transfer of power was a mighty outcome to the struggle of South Africans over more than 50 years.

Looking back at the April 1990 Wembley Stadium concert in celebration of Nelson Mandela and his people's struggle, when he thanked the world's anti-apartheid forces for the "support and solidarity they had shown the oppressed people of South Africa," Susan Collin Marks (2000) reflected on "how easy it had been to cheer Mandela and how hard it would be to remake the nation." That struggle endures, but South Africa's gifts to the world, through its history of a successfully negotiated revolution to effect a multiracial and pluralistic democratic society, also endure as a model and a hope for many.

THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Once South African governments adopted institutionalized apartheid in the years following World War II, it was obvious that there would be a collision with the rest of a changing world. From the time Ghana received its independence in 1957, the white regime in South Africa would find itself increasingly isolated by the “winds of change” sweeping over the continent, with reinforcement only from Rhodesia and the still-enduring Portuguese colonies.

Foreign support for the anti-apartheid struggle came from civil society — trade unions, church organizations, Parliaments and a multitude of NGOs — in many democracies, and, it should be acknowledged, support came from socialist countries allied with the Soviet Union as well. Outside South Africa, universities, research centres, NGOs and supportive citizens helped to sustain and train South African peace activists in exile, until they could return to participate freely in the process of democratic change.

International Diplomatic Activity

Diplomatic pressure over decades may have had only an uneven effect on the insulated apartheid regime’s repressive laws, but it undoubtedly helped to support the credibility of the ANC as an indispensable ingredient of any South African solution by the time ANC leader Oliver Tambo met with US Secretary of State George P. Shultz in 1987.

The international diplomatic community began to pronounce on the South African situation as early as 1960, when the UN Security Council condemned the killing of 69 demonstrators at Sharpeville. South African issues were always on UN agendas thereafter.

That same year, African solidarity was extended to the ANC when Nelson Mandela visited and won the support of the great African figures of that time, including Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, Tanzania’s President Julius Nyerere, Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba, Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella, Guinean President Ahmed Sékou Touré, and Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Such core African support was instrumental in persuading the Commonwealth of Nations to take activist positions against the apartheid regime, whose exit as a member of the Commonwealth had been steered shortly after the whites voted to declare South Africa a republic in the 1950s. By the 1985 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Nassau, the members of the Commonwealth were able to adopt a program of sanctions against South Africa, despite long-standing reservations on the part of UK Prime Minister Thatcher.

The Appeal for Sanctions and Boycotts

The ANC urged governments to ally together to introduce sanctions against South Africa. The purpose of sanctions was to induce behavioural change by imposing the psychological and economic costs of isolation on the apartheid regime. International sports and cultural groups halted South African tours and excluded South African teams. Universities disinvested South African holdings from portfolios for moral reasons, while multinational corporations relocated from South Africa for reasons of corporate strategy. Financial institutions reconsidered lending practices to the South African state and its institutions. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches suspended the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa.

The imposition of sanctions was not without controversy. Apart from the impact on the economic interests of investors in South Africa, there was concern that sanctions would primarily hurt the economic livelihood of the black and coloured population, a warning endorsed by such a democratic activist as South African opposition MP Helen Suzman. But the fact that targeted sanctions had the full support of the ANC, which believed they were essential to the struggle, was judged to be decisive.

The South African state authorities estimated that the economic sanctions were “hurting but survivable.” Taken alone, perhaps they were, though the growing isolation of South African whites from the rest of the world added a psychological toll that eroded their willingness to support the extremist state authorities to the bitter end. That there would be a certain end was overwhelmingly due to the brave perseverance of non-white South Africans and their allies among the white population who, over generations, worked to obtain the justice of a democratic outcome.

International Popular Opinion and Support

Public opinion around the world grew to be massively supportive, stimulated in part by the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Albert Luthuli who led the ANC at the time it was first “banned.” In 1984, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was a major force in forming the UDF, won the Nobel Peace Prize again in the name of the South African struggle for justice.

During the intervening years, tens of thousands ANC, Pan African Congress and other democracy activists had been banned and imprisoned but would not be abandoned by the world’s attention. Night-long church vigils and “Free Mandela” events were frequent, often directed at fundraising for the ANC and for NGOs operating in South Africa. Funding for South African democracy activists and NGOs had begun as early as the 1960s when Danish, Norwegian and Swedish trade unions and church groups launched the first programs in support of those involved in the struggle. Before long, foundations and governments from many democracies joined them in funding NGOs and reformers, often with an emphasis on preparing for governance. External funding was important to help political organizations to finance the sorts of identity-cementing activities such as newspapers and events on which the struggle depended to sustain popular support over successive generations.

CASE STUDY 11 – SOUTH AFRICA: “THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM”

By 1983, this popular support pulled together under the loose grouping of the UDF, collecting trade unions, church and youth groups, cultural organizations and a variety of locally based civic bodies under one roof. In the circumstances when the ANC had been banned, the UDF was able to become the main instrument for organizing popular protests and boycotts meant to counter the increasingly hardline series of repressive laws and crackdowns associated with frequent states of emergency suspending rights and leading to mass arrests.

Change at Last

The position of the apartheid regime gradually unravelled as any remaining support from the international environment deteriorated. Zimbabwe had emerged in place of the racist allied regime of Rhodesia, and along with other frontline states, the newly independent Angola, Mozambique and Botswana became locales for ANC training camps, and a platform for cross-border raids. The retaliatory effectiveness of the South African Defence Force (SADF) was increasingly handicapped by re-equipment difficulties because of sanctions, and the conflict's costs began to drain South Africa's treasury and the population's support.

Once glasnost had transformed the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, it became much more difficult for the South African regime to continue to convince the white public the ANC was part of a communist conspiracy to take over South Africa, which the authorities had been alleging since the Rivonia trials of ANC leaders in the early 1960s.

Something had to give, and by the mid-1980s, contacts encouraged by outside mediators were taking place in Mells Park in the UK. In 1987, with funding from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa organized discussions in Dakar between the ANC under Thabo Mbeki and groups of white South Africans who were convinced of the need of a negotiated settlement, including the once hardline Afrikaner Broederbond.

Negotiating Democracy

By 1989, the writing on the wall was clear for most to see. The new South African government leadership under F. W. de Klerk accelerated the process and South Africa entered the phase of negotiation and preparation of majority rule.

The world's democracies played a significant role in helping the ANC and other South Africans to prepare for positions of governance through conferences, courses and other forms of training. Jurists were trained through The Aspen Institute, economists via the macroeconomic research group set up following Mandela's visit to Canada shortly after his release in 1990 and journalists via Harvard's Nieman Foundation fellowships. With the help of public broadcasters from Commonwealth countries, Australia initiated a major program for the cultural and organizational transformation of the propagandistic South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).

Foreign experts also converged on South Africa to provide support for the preparation and observation of the democratic elections that would bring majority rule. As conflict mediator Susan Collin Marks (2000) has observed, they and other committed international helpers “gave an increased sense of security” to democracy activists “confirming the eyes of the world were on their plight.” They also “gave some real security as the police and army behaved with restraint in their presence” (ibid.).

In the end, after a successful election and peaceful handover of power, it was South Africa’s turn to show the world what a negotiated revolution looked like, in the South African form of a multi-ethnic, multiracial and multicultural society which could serve as a partial model for the bridging challenges faced in the Balkans, the Middle East or elsewhere in Africa.

DIPLOMATIC RESOURCES IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THEIR APPLICATIONS IN SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY

Assets

The diplomatic community resident in South Africa was not large, in part because the newly independent African countries did not have relations with the apartheid regime. Of the democratic countries present, those working informally and proactively together to support democratic activists and human rights defenders were relatively few in the 1960s and 1970s, but their numbers increased in the 1980s and were especially reinforced in the later 1980s when the United States became decisively committed to a democratic solution for South Africa.

South African authorities complained fairly regularly about diplomats’ activities. South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha made a widely publicized speech in 1987 warning diplomats “not to meddle” in what he judged were South African internal affairs and threatening curbs on diplomats’ movements. He complained specifically about foreign funding for a trip by South African anti-apartheid activists to meet ANC personnel in Dakar.

The authorities tried to intimidate diplomats, sometimes with rather brutal methods. Political Counselor of the US Embassy Robert C. Frasure (later killed on duty in Bosnia) tracked cross-border military movements of the SADF. Former UK Ambassador Robin Renwick recalled in a personal interview that the SADF retaliated by “terrorizing his wife and children during his absences from home, to such an extent Frasure had to be withdrawn.”

More classically, John Schram, a senior Canadian diplomat, was shown in Foreign Ministry photos at rallies and anti-apartheid events not just observing, but actively participating, including joining in praying and marching. He was threatened with expulsion, but countered that the only result would be to reduce the numbers at

CASE STUDY 11 – SOUTH AFRICA: “THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM”

the South African Embassy in Ottawa and to damage South Africa’s image abroad. Schram was able to do this effectively because it was clear the embassy enjoyed the great asset of complete backing from his minister and government at home. He was also able to play to the interest South African authorities had in diminishing if possible the international shunning which was solidifying around the world.

The fact that the world community was organizing its leverage against the apartheid regime was a helpful frame of reference for diplomats on the ground in reinforcing the legitimacy of their activity. The declarations of Commonwealth Heads of Government Conferences, Summits of the European Community and the G7, or resolutions of the UN Security Council, General Assembly and its subsidiary bodies helped to cohere a common sense of purpose among affected diplomats in South Africa.



Nelson Mandela and wife Winnie, walking hand in hand, raise clenched fists upon his release from Victor prison, Cape Town, on February 11, 1990. The ANC leader had served over 27 years in detention. (AP Photo)

They often represented countries whose own histories had been propelled by democracy activists to which ANC members and others looked to for encouragement and examples: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and later Lech Walesa, and democracy activists in the Philippines, were inspirations for the struggle, as were anti-colonialist leaders from Africa and leftist liberationists from Latin America.

A DIPLOMAT'S HANDBOOK FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

Unquestionably, the funds that embassies had at their disposal for small, fast-disbursing local grants were important assets, especially as many of the beneficiaries had no funds of their own.

APPLICATIONS

The Golden Rules

Though there was worldwide dismay over the repression of the struggle for democracy in South Africa, it was most important to **respect** that it was indeed a struggle conducted often at personal risk by South Africans on behalf of their country's future, however universal the themes. As UK Ambassador Renwick phrased it, "The most that any Embassy could do was to try to help as a **facilitator** — and then let South Africans get on with a process in which too much foreign involvement was positively undesirable" (emphasis added).

Of course, some embassies leant considerably farther forward than others in such facilitation, no doubt reflecting the clear support they had at home, but it was always a problem for local diplomats when outside trainers in negotiation or mediation skills lost sight of why they were there to help. As Susan Collin Marks (2000) writes, "Suspicion grew that many [foreign trainers] were driven by personal agendas, so that they were in it for what they could get out of it, not for what they could give... training in South Africa, a conflict hot spot, gave credibility that enhanced their image elsewhere. Many of them would come into the country, give the training, and leave." It was up to embassies to try to steer outside assistance to support continuity, but in cooperation with and in deference to the international NGO community, which was closer to the ground and to the grief of the struggle.

Sharing among embassies was fundamental, especially the most like-minded such as the Australian, Dutch, Canadian and Swedish who met frequently, in part to ensure their respective funding was not at cross purposes, and that funds were distributed across a variety of needy organizations. Sharing of tasks also helped to ensure that an array of representatives was usually present at trials, funerals and demonstrations, effectively communicating the opprobrium of the wider world for the apartheid doctrine and regime, and encouragement for the non-violent struggle for justice.

Getting to the Truth

Most democratic embassies ensured that **reporting** was candid and precise, and benefitted from the contacts of what one ambassador called his "township attaches." By 1985, the South African situation had achieved a profile that meant reporting from embassies was avidly followed in capitals.

Of course, the situation was also covered by the foreign press, whose investigative reporting annoyed the authorities who, in a two-year period in the 1980s, expelled

CASE STUDY 11 – SOUTH AFRICA: “THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM”

12 correspondents from democratic countries’ news outlets, including *The New York Times*, the BBC, ITN and CBS. This placed a greater onus on diplomats to play an **informing** role with their own home country news media to ensure the real story was getting out, as well as issuing information bulletins within South Africa, particularly to counter government-inspired slander. Former US Ambassador Princeton Lyman (2002) described how a predecessor, Edward Perkins, had “utilized the press to get his message across to the white population that the government of South Africa would never again have the opportunity to deal with people of the quality of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Thabo Mbeki.”

A vital embassy service was support for independent media. A number of embassies, such as Canada, had a specific fund (“the anti-censorship fund”) to help finance independent media such as the *Daily Mail*, including subsidizing subscriptions and advertising, as well as editorial and operating expenditures.

The SABC had long served as a propaganda arm of the apartheid regime by the time that the negotiation of a constitution got underway in 1992. (Over the years, the SABC helped to account for polling results such as a 1982 poll revealing that 80 percent of whites believed that communism was at the root of a struggle waged against the interests of a basically contented black population). Yet, the SABC radio audience numbered at least 15 million and the transformation of the corporation into an objective news and information service became identified as a top priority by embassies, achieved with the help of public broadcasting services from Australia, Britain and Canada. Upgrading the skills of South African journalists also became a priority through the work of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, founded by Allister Sparks, and the creation of many exchanges and fellowships.

Working with the Government

Prior to 1989, there was little sincere opportunity for working with the South African government on human rights issues, though some countries professed support for “constructive dialogue” and it could be argued that it did help to bring about a negotiated independence for Namibia. Embassies played an **advising** role in steering democracies to the means for helping a democratizing South Africa after 1989 to strengthen its capacities in the area of judicial training, constitutional advice, economic policy preparation, particularly via the macro-economic research group and also in supporting assistance to South Africa in disabling its emerging capability for nuclear weapons.

A particular contribution was made by Chile, which was able to advise the new South Africa on the Chilean experience in creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission once democracy had been restored.

Several ambassadors and missions sustained **dialogues** with South African authorities. The UK and US ambassadors believed their governments’ reticence about sanctions served as carrots in moderating behaviour. Ambassadors of the major democracies also claimed an “invisible mediation” role with the South African

A DIPLOMAT'S HANDBOOK FOR DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT

government once internal negotiations began, privately counselling the authorities as to where the “red lines” were for the international community’s expectations.

But the most effective **demarches** to the South African authorities were often those that ensured that they knew their activities were being closely scrutinized internationally, especially in the anticipation of responses to demonstration and popular protest. Demarches were frequently made on behalf of democracy activists charged under the state with political and other crimes, including conveying the pleas for clemency for the lives of Nelson Mandela and fellow defendants in the “Rivonia” trials in 1964 by the leaders of the USSR and the US, among others.

Reaching Out

Connecting to civil society in South Africa and assisting its connections to NGOs and supportive institutions abroad was a critical ongoing responsibility of diplomats. Scanning for opportunities to connect African jurists to the Aspen seminars, or journalists to the Nieman fellowships, benefitted from the close contacts democratic embassies maintained with lawyers’ associations and journalists. The Canadian government created an exceptionally autonomous embassy-administered fund called the “Dialogue Fund” meant to promote connections with anti-apartheid groups of all sorts inside South Africa, and funded a variety of legal and independent media defence organizations in particular.

Such connections were put to use by embassies and diplomats to **convene** activists and reformers together under a safe roof and then activists and opponents together. Jurist Richard Goldstone recalled his first meeting with representatives of the ANC at the Canadian Embassy at a critical turning point for South Africa, when he had been appointed chairperson of the Commission on Public Violence and Intimidation. Black and coloured entrepreneurs and economists were introduced to visiting businesspeople around embassy tables. Embassy personnel also made connections to South African security organizations.

Facilitating contacts was an essential service of democratic embassies, but helping with communications within South Africa and to the outside was another way they could help, as certain diplomats noted of their experience.

Targeted connections enabled embassies to pinpoint **financing** assistance such as USAID funds, which paid for the defence costs of democracy activists and human rights defenders placed on trial. The value to South African NGOs, of even small but instant embassy grants that financed the costs of publicity for demonstrations and identity-reinforcing tools such as newsletters and T-shirts, was very high.

Diplomats **showcased** applicable models of social and economic policy from home, and embassy assistance programs tried to create public events, which enabled democracy activists and representatives of civil society to participate as visible counterparts. Some aspects of governance from democracies had to be reconsidered in light of internal debate in South Africa, such as federal solutions and multiculturalism, both of which were seen as ways in which the ascent to democratic power by the black majority would be diluted.

CASE STUDY 11 – SOUTH AFRICA: “THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM”

Showcasing could also occur in an inverse direction. As long ago as 1975, Australian diplomat Diane Johnstone invited black artist Michael Muapola to her apartment to enable him to show his drawings to her guests and to help publicize and validate the strength of local culture. Within days, vengeful forces of apartheid had her evicted from her apartment, which had first been ransacked, and authorities harassed Muapola for years — but the episode was widely appreciated by the black population.

Defending Democrats

Demonstrating such solidarity with the struggle was at the core of the new public diplomacy for democratic embassies, engaging embassies in field visits and visits to the offices of human rights defenders. John Schram recounts that “the importance of putting across the message to those in the struggle that they had essential international support.” As US Ambassador Lyman (2002) wrote of his predecessor Edward Perkins, the first African American ambassador to South Africa, “he stood out in the crowd attending the all too frequent funerals of activists slain during the state of emergency in the late 1980s.” He was not, of course, alone. Describing the funeral for 17 activists killed in four days of rioting, Alan Cowell (1986) of *The New York Times* noted, among the 25,000 in attendance, “diplomats from the US, Britain, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, West Germany and France.”

It had its honourable risks. After Botha announced the banning of the UDF in 1988, a peaceful protest march on Parliament was broken up violently by riot police who arrested among many, many Africans, Bishop Tutu, Dutch Reformed Church cleric and activist Allan Boesak, a BBC crew and the wife of Canadian Ambassador Ron MacLean.

Verifying the trials of anti-apartheid activists had been a duty of democratic embassies from the time of the 1963 Rivonia Trial, which co-accused ANC leader Nelson Mandela said was attended by “dozens of representatives of foreign governments.” Countless trials were witnessed, both as a caution to the authorities and as a form of **protection** to the defendants. Embassies made numerous demands of the government for independent investigations of the use of force against anti-apartheid protestors.

“Anti-apartheid organization members sometimes asked representatives to be present at police sites to witness and/or prevent violence” (Lyman, 2002). Protecting democrats from the ruthless power of the state was sadly not possible for the thousands who were abused, but diplomats were able in demonstrations and protests to “put themselves between the police and the protestors, and may have helped to mitigate some of the violence and prevent violence against demonstrators” (ibid.).

CONCLUSION

The words of President Mandela at his inauguration on May 10, 1994 remain an ideal for all:

“We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity.”

That diplomats were able to support the South Africans' struggle for democracy is a record and precedent of great merit for their profession. The South African struggle continues today, for development, security and opportunity, and the need of South Africans for the support of democratic friends is undiminished.

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