

South Africa and the Arab Spring: opportunities to match diplomacy goals and strategies

Imad Mansour

What the Arab Spring is remains to be fully understood; yet, its main feature is that it encompasses a wide range of social processes that resulted in revolts against ruling regimes. Many African societies have for over thirty years been engulfed by social protest and/or anti-regime revolts – processes coined the “African Awakening”. This Awakening shares the Arab Spring’s underlying causes: economic marginality, political exclusion, and feelings of dispossession.¹ Africa, thus, is fertile for outbreaks of region-wide militarized violence.

Negative externalities from the Arab Spring, especially the movement of combatants and arms across porous borders, and a demonstration effect that popular revolts can bring down entrenched regimes are very likely to escalate African conflicts. There is a sense of urgency because security instabilities will have a dampening effect on the economic boom which Africa is witnessing: this boom holds the potential for far-reaching positive transformations towards sustained growth and inequality eradication. Africa does not have strong regional security architectures to deal with such externalities. Expectations are high that South Africa will act in such an environment. And Pretoria taking region-wide action is actually in its own interest to help it realize its foreign policy goals.

South Africa’s foreign policy goals have been rather stable since 1994: it sees itself as a regional leader that values safeguarding the sovereignty of African states and also sees the need to achieve regional stability and peace. South

Imad Mansour, is a Visiting Professor at Sciences Po Paris (Campus Moyen-Orient Méditerranée à Menton). His articles appeared in MERIP, Middle East Policy, Afkar/idées, International Journal, and others.

The opinions expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author alone.

ISBN: 978-2-36567-017-3
© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2012



Special thanks to Daniel Douek.

¹ Sokari Ekine and Firoze Manji, eds., *African Awakening: The Emerging Revolutions* (Pambazuka Press, 2011).

Africa seeks to safeguard the norm of sovereignty from infringement, especially by more powerful states. There is also a moral dimension related to respect for human rights and popular empowerment which is very dear to a South Africa proud of its struggle against Apartheid. Strategies to achieve such goals include coordination with African states and other allies, ensuring respect for human rights and through multilateralism and institution-building which guard state sovereignty.²

This paper highlights how the Arab Spring magnified a two-dimensional gap in South Africa's foreign policy. First that South Africa does not have a vision which reconciles demands for achieving the goals of protecting human rights, sovereignty, and multilateralism; second, that its strategies do not meet set goals. The paper then provides tentative explanations to this gap. It ends by elaborating what in the "African Awakening" and in the midst of the Arab Spring are opportunities for South Africa to overcome this gap.

Negative Externalities of the Arab Spring

The recent Tuareg rebellion in Mali exposed legacies of government mal-reactions to similar societal revolts in the past decades, in Mali and in Niger, and to lesser degrees Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, and Nigeria. These legacies include the near absence of organized mass de-mobilization of mercenaries and combatants, economic under-development, and political exclusion. Government reactions to end activism consisted mainly of the use of military force and the appeasement of individual figures through political appointments.³ That mercenaries fed personal militias – such as those which fought with Qaddafi – was part of the Tuareg and other dispossessed groups' predicament of poverty, marginality, and exploitation.

Arab Spring revolts accentuated the flow of arms and mercenaries across poorly-patrolled borders; both factors continue to challenge stabilization efforts in Mali, Libya, Kenya and others. More importantly, this regional instability on a backdrop of rivalries and weak inter-state coordination emboldened militant groups with an Islamic discourse to challenge national governments. The inability and/or absent desire to deal with Somali militants that many, including the African Union (AU), deem as a threat has already weakened – and will continue to under current circumstances – any deterrent against such actors in Mali, Nigeria, and elsewhere. Most attention has been on a Mali that is embroiled in a war between Tuareg fighters, the deposed government, and Islamic groups; yet Nigeria and Kenya are candidates to see more Islamic militancy. "Nigeria and Kenya, the most important economies in West and East Africa respectively, are pillars of the change in Africa as well as having the largest and most easily accessible markets for foreigners."⁴ Both states are rife with domestic inequality and strong perceptions of relative deprivation. Islamic militant groups in these states appeal to masses that have received little welfare benefits, while they have for long shared the costs of military instability,

² See address by President Jacob Zuma at the University of Pretoria (October 13, 2011). See also South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation, "Fundamental Principles and Guidelines for South Africa's Foreign Policy in the Strategic Foreign Policy Document," (November 2005). <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/2005pq/pq1817.htm>

³ "Niger's new leader names Brigi Rafini prime minister," *Reuters* (April 8, 2011).

⁴ Matthew Tostevin, "Could Islamist rebels undermine change in Africa?" *Reuters* (October 28, 2011).

political turmoil, and economic stagnation. Islamic groups in Mali have already complicated the mission for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to counter the Tuareg declaration of statehood. Reports emerge of connections between Mali Islamic groups and the so-called *Boko Haram* in Nigeria. Challenges posed by Tuareg and Islamic groups emerge from similar causes and demand a collective approach. South Africa needs to act, 1) to make good on its leadership claim, 2) to prevent regional insecurity from undermining the strategic benefits of the current boom.

Understanding South Africa's Diplomacy in the Arab Spring

An important critique against South Africa's diplomacy in the Arab Spring is that it failed to capitalize on an opportunity to be a bridge-builder between AU and United Nations (UN) operations/positions.⁵ South Africa's reactions during the Arab Spring did little to reach out to North African states, and its voting on Libya left a bad memory for the Libyan Transitional Council. South Africa eventually voted in favour of UNSC Resolution 1973; and Gabon, Nigeria, and South Africa – all non-permanent UNSC members voted for the no-fly zone. But South Africa, as an aspiring leader, did not clearly come out against Qaddafi's use of force against civilians, while it mounted a more stern position against NATO airstrikes.

Then, South Africa abstained from the October 2011 UNSC vote on Syria, to vote for the February 2012 vote on Syria – the latter was vetoed by its allies China and Russia. The conflict between Russia and the United States and NATO allies over Syria has effectively immobilized the UNSC given their respective veto powers; and action on Syria outside of the Security Council is realistically impossible. Russia and China in effect not vetoing the NATO operation in Libya gave South Africa a clear option to vote with a Resolution. Major power rivalries over Syria, however, allowed Pretoria to be opaque and found an exit by joining the international call for a political settlement. On April 14th South Africa supported UNSCR 2042 to send UN observers to Syria; this decision was itself largely a compromise among major powers. In that, South Africa, like most middle and lesser powers, followed.

Inconsistencies in South African policy towards Syria today are reminiscent of similar behaviours towards Libya, Zimbabwe, and other issues related to stability in its neighbourhood – especially peacekeeping. For example, smaller AU states like Uganda and Burundi contribute more to peacekeeping operations in Somalia and Sudan than South Africa. Pretoria's indifference makes it appear weak even in its backyard – which not only undermines its foreign policy goals, but also its claim for regional leadership. Moreover, the stakes for South Africa today are high, since the region's military instability risks compromising its economic boom.

In retrospect, since 1994 South Africa has had a rather reactive foreign policy: it had little presence in the way of organizing a collective approach to deal with the underlying causes of the African Awakening, and had a marginal presence in dealing

⁵ Dimpho Motsamai, "South Africa's Vision for the AUC Chairperson - the Road to Malawi," *Institute for Security Studies* (29 March 2012).

with security challenges arising in the Arab Spring. South Africa has projected its leadership mainly in southern Africa (a region that encompasses Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Angola, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, and Tanzania, as well as South Africa); beyond that, it hasn't projected its influence very much, aside from mediating an end to the Burundian civil war.⁶ Several factors can help explain South Africa's general behaviour, and especially in the Arab Spring.

South African decision makers are torn by legacies. When the African National Congress (ANC) was a revolutionary movement, it relied on support from Zimbabwe, Libya, Russia, China and others which housed the ANC in exile.⁷ A feature of ANC politics since 1994, former president F. W. de Klerk explains, has been a feeling that debts are owed to those who helped it. He critiques the resistance to change today when such old friendships go wrong and South Africa is hesitant to stand up for its goal of protecting human rights. The latter is also a legacy of the struggle against Apartheid and is an important pillar of South African foreign policy. Pretoria is yet to reconcile its legacies.

Moreover, South African decision makers do not have clear strategies and cannot seem to manage the operational demands of various goals. South Africa's widely critiqued Security Council behaviours on Libya and then Syria are driven by its desire to guard the norm of sovereignty from major power violations; especially since the no-fly zone in Libya turned into an operation for regime-change. But then, South Africa also is driven by ideals of human rights and self-determination, which would demand interventions against grave violations by ruling regimes. In the Libya revolts, Pretoria seems to have developed an innovative approach to bridge both goals; yet, how well-thought out this approach was and what exactly it demanded in terms of strategies and action was never known.⁸ South Africa was not able "to sell its strategy in a coherent manner."⁹ This not only raises doubts about the ability of decision makers to develop strategies to achieve demanding goals with sometimes conflicting requirements, but also signals that Pretoria's diplomacy has a human resources deficit.

Also, South Africa's foreign policy doctrine, which guides strategic choices, is incongruent with desired foreign policy goals. Lukewarm participation in peacekeeping and a general abstention from important regional issues are driven partly by technical constraints which include weapons inappropriate for peacekeeping, and aging and unskilled personnel. However, underlying this "aversion to peacekeeping" is a post-1994 doctrine which focuses South African energies on defending against external aggression: this shared narrative favours an (almost) exclusively defensive posture, with clear implications on willingness and

⁶ Intervention in Burundi stemmed out of South African economic and security interests, as well as by moral and humanitarian values. See "White Paper on South African Participation in International Peace Missions," *South Africa Department of Foreign Affairs* (1998-1999). <http://www.info.gov.za/whitepapers/1999/peacemissions.pdf>

⁷ F.W. de Klerk, *Al Jazeera* (September 30, 2011). <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2011/09/201193092941243169.html>

⁸ See a speech by Ebrahim I. Ebrahim, Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation at the University of Limpopo (March 12, 2012). http://www.diplonews.com/feeds/free/12_March_2012_106.php

⁹ Adam Habib, "Foreign Policy Focus," *South African Foreign Policy Initiative* (March 29, 2012). <http://www.safpi.org/news/article/2012/adam-habib-foreign-policy-focus>

preparedness to partake in regional issues. This doctrine guides investments in weapons systems, and the human resources of South Africa's military. While this doctrine is now under review, some note that a major change in external engagements is not expected.¹⁰

Finally, tense relations with regional powers further undermine South Africa's foreign policy. In West Africa, where ECOWAS is the most effective mechanism to manage the Mali crisis, and help Algeria and Morocco coordinate security policies, Nigeria is the economic and military powerhouse. Nigeria has deep-rooted interests in peace and stability than does South Africa, and a more established record of projecting its influence in that sub-region, such as in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars in the 1990s. South Africa's detachment from that sub-region left its relationship with Nigeria rather lukewarm and laced with ambiguity. Bilateral relations need both parties' participation, and Nigeria might be pushing away. But South Africa is a self-appointed leader with an aspiring foreign policy pillared on outreach and institution-building; its diplomatic practices fall short of its goals.

Constraints and Opportunities Facing South African Foreign Policy

While the Arab Spring aggravates security dislocations across Africa, it also provides opportunities for South Africa to act to realize its foreign policy goals.

To start, mending bilateral relations, especially with regional powerhouses like Nigeria, is important for South Africa's interest in multilateralism. A South African goal is regional institution-building. Africa lacks collective security institutions because of compromised domestic security institutions and the politicization of national militaries. The AU was born with internecine rivalries, security and economic dislocations, and competition from better funded UN bodies with a long history of working in Africa. But something internal to the AU changed markedly, and can support South African activism in regional institution-building: that is the principle of "non-indifference" now guiding the building of regional peace and security.¹¹ The non-indifference clause comes after around half a century of independence and reflects a general regional maturity and desire to be more proactive in positive transformations across Africa. An indicator of transformation is the successful pressure for political reform on Zimbabwe through the South African Development Community (SADC). F.W. De Klerk noted a strategy that made the domestic transition in the 1990s a success and which can be used in South Africa's foreign policy: "getting, on an inclusive basis, all major parties and drawing them into a solution-oriented negotiation process."¹² South Africa can further flex its leadership muscle through similar AU bodies.

¹⁰ "South Africa: paper tiger of African peacekeeping operations," *Integrated Regional Information Networks* (January 6, 2012). <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/94597/Analysis-South-Africa-paper-tiger-of-African-peacekeeping-operations>

¹¹ Non-indifference replaced the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) "non-interference" principle which is widely believed to have impeded the institutional growth of the OAU and its credibility as a capable organization. The OAU was guided by the concerns for post-colonial independence. See statement by Alpha Oumar Konare, Chairperson of the Commission of African Union (January 30, 2005); <http://www.africa-union.org/summit/jan2005/Assembly/SPEECH%20HE%20ALPHA%20OMAR%20KONARE.htm>

¹² F.W. de Klerk, op. cit.

To the extent that African supranational bodies are likely to act to diffuse instability in situations like Kenya, Nigeria, or Mali, is more likely to happen through the AU or, in West African cases, the ECOWAS. With UN backing, ECOWAS already enacted measures to contain the Mali crisis and to avert further regional instability, especially given the rise in Islamic militancy. And threats can be ranked. Tuareg activism might be easier to diffuse than that of Islamic movements. Tuareg do not form a unified group; hence, depending on governments' reactions can either be easily contained, or their diffuse organizational structures might make them more evasive. On the other hand, extremist Islamic groups have a fertile ground in the dispossessed communities across Africa. Like reacting to the Tuareg crisis, dampening radicalizing effects of Islamic movements needs a sustained approach at socio-economic development and political inclusion. And while national integration and dialogue with tribes is needed to better attend to their nationalist demands, introspection and reform cannot be imposed on Muslim communities. This latter process will be rather protracted and will demand more complicated and culturally-appropriate policy reactions. South Africa has as much capital in resisting oppression as it does in dialogue and transitions to inclusionary governance – both of which are attractive strategies to exercise in the AU.

Through the AU South Africa can act on its security-seeking goals to assist Libya, Mali, Morocco, and Algeria stem militarism; that sub-region opened opportunity to that end. Morocco and Algeria converged on their position to reject the declaration of an independent Tuareg state in Mali in April 2012. Both states have a vested interest in seeing the Tuareg state in Mali fail: Morocco does not want to set a precedent given its conflict with the Polisario, and Algeria fears a mobilization of its domestic Tuareg population. Algeria and Morocco have cloaked their positions with a founding principle of the African Union: that no territorial borders should be altered, regardless of the contestation over their legitimacy. Justice to the Tuareg's demands needs attending to. Material and technical support is likely to come from the European Union (EU) which has a long-standing interest in diffusing tensions in that sub-region to end the flow of mercenaries and arms into Europe. And with the decline in EU aid, Pretoria's BRICS allies, with vested interests in African stability, can help.

Yet, complicating South Africa's vision for stability through multilateralism is major power competition. The US is active in the security domain via AFRICOM (the American Command Center for Africa), through bilateral relations with Algeria, and by supporting the AU. Plus the EU has diplomatic and cultural avenues into Africa. All these might be opportunities for South Africa to bring its allies to help in a multi-dimensional strategy to obtain regional stability, and sustainable socio-economic development initiatives. What they demand is a novel approach to strategizing by South Africa.

Finally, how Pretoria acts regarding Syria (or other potential revolts) is important for its own legacy. Its human rights driven foreign policy is not about empty moralizing – but reflects the history of resistance and struggle of South Africans. The problem is not the ideal, but how to accommodate it vis-à-vis protection of sovereignty and

multilateralism. Therefore, it is the skill of South African diplomacy to think of ways to be consistent and proactive in providing solutions. And to be fair, that is no easy feat for states like South Africa.

However, unlike many emerging middle powers – India and Brazil for example – South Africa has the more recent experience with a struggle for self-determination, and lists it as a goal. Which is why the critique, from those who see the current Syrian regime as violating the human rights of its own citizens, against South Africa that its recent history should be present in guiding its foreign policy towards Libya and Syria, is sharpest.