Twenty years of South Africa's transition: An economic and foreign policy perspective.
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South Africa has made a major transition from apartheid to democracy which is one of the most significant political occurrences of the past 20 years. The flagbearer of this movement was anti-apartheid crusader Nelson Mandela. Through his deep commitment to the cherished ideals of equality he introduced South Africa to the larger world.

The nation’s vision on foreign affairs during this period was based on the tenet that human rights should be at the core of international relations. This period also witnessed the constitution of Truth and Reconciliation Commission to set in place the justice mechanism. South African constitution has also gone through many transformations post the political upheavals in the region since 1996.

Mandela’s tenure from 1994 to 1999 was credited for its emphasis on economic growth through a framework of market economics and encouragement of foreign investment. The former President exercised active, determined leadership in the years following his consolidation of power. There had been sincere attempts to shift to democratic federalist system which had helped in improving the economic welfare of all communities. On the economic front the nation was transitioning from Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) Policy to Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) Policy. This policy accelerated the economic growth of the nation to 3.5%, led to creation of 400,000 Jobs and uplifted the Black Middle class.

Mandela was succeeded by Mbeki’s Presidency. His government was instrumental in establishing intra-continental trade with other African nations which resulted in national exports rising from ZAR 8.6 Billion in 1994 to ZAR 38.8 Billion in 2003 which was a 300% increase. Mbeki’s regime was known for quiet diplomacy; however South Africa’s leadership among African nations was making new strides. The leader’s key emphasis was on finding solutions to Africa’s problems such as reducing poverty levels and helping in establishing stability in African states.
However his foreign policy was criticized for the refusal to express disapproval of Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe’s authoritative rule and gross neglect of human rights abuses. The pursuit of economic development at all cost had implications for the political complexation of the Mbeki presidency as well. Former leader therefore wished the country’s performance to be measured in terms of its acceleration of economic change.

Jacob Zuma succeeded Thabo Mbeki and his economic policy shifted from Mandela’s Growth, Employment and Redistribution to a new macro-economic policy which provided social assistance to 17 million South Africans and ZAR 120 Billion a year on infrastructure projects like Roads, Railways, Ports and electricity supply. During his presidency South Africa also got the distinction of the number one country in the world for extending maximum subsidy for housing. South Africa also became a part of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in 2011 and helped in laying the foundation for BRICS Development Bank in Johannesburg. The country got the chair of IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) and BRICS since 2017.

The appointment of former Vice-President Cyril Ramaphosa as South Africa’s President can be seen as a period achieving stability and taking significant steps towards consolidating its economic and social status in the next four years. His policy formulation is vastly different from his predecessors. South Africa’s perception of foreign relations has remained fairly consistent since the time of late President Nelson Mandela and current President has been the most successful in combining creativity and collaboration with numerous regional groupings taking a lead on matters of foreign policy. The countries GDP per capita over the last twenty years has grown from US$ 3,447 in 1994 to US$ 7,524 (World Bank, 2017). The growth however has been inequitable due to the high rates of unemployment which was estimated to be around 26%.(Statistics office, 2017).

The government recently set the vision for 2030 which is Quality basic education, decent employment through inclusive economic growth and Vibrant, equitable and sustainable rural communities contributing to food security for all. Changes in South Africa’s social structure during the past decades are insufficient to explain the policy changes that took place during Mandela’s period.

Transforming the democratic leadership in South Africa was a process of what’s called dismantling of the old system in a way that simultaneously creates a new foundation for a political system that will lead South Africa to new heights. Nevertheless there are things that draw these leaders together as the political economy of South Africa has found a stable equilibrium with less than maximal
redistributive taxation. The desire to preserve South Africa’s status as a global and a continental power will require small steps beyond the presidency.

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