



## **The Dearth of Democracy in Southern Africa**

**Hussein Solomon**

University of the Free State, South Africa

To the casual observer, the plethora of elections southern Africa has been going through bodes well for the democracy in the region. However, a closer examination of trends underline the fact that freedom is on the retreat whilst authoritarianism is on the rise across the region.

Windhoek, the Namibian capital, is synonymous with press freedom. It was the city which lent its name to the Windhoek Declaration which inaugurated World Press Freedom Day 24 years ago. The Windhoek Declaration emphasised the importance of press freedom for the health of all liberal democracies. The Declaration emerged from a country which had just achieved independence from apartheid South Africa and the country's leadership was at pains to emphasise its democratic credentials. The mood of Namibian journalists in recent years, however, is far more sombre. The country's journalists lament that government departments often ignore written requests from journalists for information thereby undermining transparency and accountability. Where journalists highlight weaknesses in service delivery or neglect of duty, the government responds with hostility towards the media. Yet Namibia is one of southern Africa's better performing countries when it comes to press freedom. In other countries of this blighted region, journalists have been intimidated, harassed, taken to court and in some instances killed.

Issues of press freedom however cannot be separated from other freedoms like the freedom of association or assembly and ultimately is related to the relative dearth of democracy in Southern Africa. Indeed, the region is a classic example of what Fareed Zakaria referred to as 'illiberal democracies' where regimes have the trappings of democracy such as going through an election but the regimes are fundamentally illiberal in their hostility to a free press, civil society and the political opposition (Zakaria 1997). Indeed, these regimes are fundamentally authoritarian in nature. Zimbabwe is perhaps the quintessential example of such an illiberal democracy at work - despite the charade of hosting an election. According to Amnesty International's deputy regional director for Southern Africa, Noel Kutuwa, "Zimbabwe is a very sophisticated state and uses sophisticated methods of repression to punish those who stand against it, and the crisis has internalised within ZANU-PF while factions fight for power" (Nicolson 2015). The fact that Zimbabwe's President, Robert Mugabe, currently heads both the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) (Nicolson 2015) beggars belief and is a scant reminder that his African peers demonstrate total disregard for his actions which has brutalised his own people and has brought his country into penury.

Yet the situation in Zimbabwe is far from unique. The Amnesty International report on Southern Africa demonstrates systematic abuse on the part of governments against those who espouse the freedoms of expression, association and assembly. The brute force of the state, in other words, is used to crush legitimate dissent. The litany of such abuse captured in the report makes depressing reading. The report exposes how force was

*...used on peaceful demonstrators and unlawful killings of those challenging President Eduardo do Santos in Angola. Swaziland experienced ongoing violence, arrests and prosecutions against those advocating for human rights and political reform. Sexual minorities have been targeted in Zambia, and thousands of people have been forcefully evicted from their homes in a number of countries (Nicolson 2015).*

In Zambia, meanwhile, the ruling party has made use of the draconian Public Order Act as a means to intimidate and harass opposition political parties (Freedom House 2015).

In South Africa, the regional hegemon, democracy has suffered blow after blow with creeping politicization of the state security apparatus and the justice system. Further, according to Human Rights Watch we have over the past year witnessed increasing incidents of police violence in South Africa from Mthunzi in the Western Cape, North West province to Relela in Kgapane, Limpopo Province to Bekkersdal in Gauteng Province (Human Rights Watch 2015). Neither is this unique to South Africa. In Tanzania, there has been a growing trend of extra-judicial violence on the part of the security forces (Freedom House 2015).

Under the circumstances, it is imperative for academic and policy-makers to re-examine prospects for democratic consolidation in Southern Africa. It is in this spirit, that this issue of the journal is being offered to our readership. Given the centrality of leaders and how they shape their respective polities, Leon Hartwell provides a critical comparison between the leadership styles of Nelson Mandela and Robert Mugabe. Whilst both had a similar childhood, education and both played key roles in establishing military wings for their respective liberation movements, their style of governance differed enormously. Whilst the Mandela Presidency was characterised by reconciliation and openness, Mugabe's rule has been characterised by human rights abuses. Understanding the choices made by these two presidents is crucial if we wish to come to grips with the dearth of democracy in the region.

Maximilian Mainza, in his penetrating study of the Zambian polity, explores the relationship between political competition and political instability. Mainza critically explores the popular perception that political competition should improve government responsiveness in the same way that competitive economic markets yield benefits to consumers. From the perspective of various governance and fragility indicators Mainza demonstrates that political instability in Zambia has risen due to the increased political competition.

On a more positive note, Singh and Ngubane examine Mozambique's democratic consolidation since the signing of the Rome General Peace Accords in 1992. For more than two decades, the country has been making steady progress at democratic consolidation. Interestingly, progress in the political sphere has mirrored advances in the economic realm. Indeed, since the ending of its civil war, Mozambique has achieving sustained economic growth with attendant levels of poverty reduction. This, in turn, raises the intriguing question

of whether proponents of democracy should not also pay equal attention to economic growth and poverty reduction as a means towards political stability. After all democratic consolidation theory cogently argues that a liberal democracy is unattainable in the absence of a sizeable middle class – once more highlighting the interface between politics and economics.

In the final article, Virgil Hawkins explores media coverage – specifically that of the *New York Times* - of the Angolan peace process. One of his most important findings was that the conflict in Angola did not lead whether in the violent phase or the post-violence phase, and that coverage was quantitatively low and sporadic. This is all the more significant given the fact the United States was actively involved in the Angolan “civil war”. From the perspective of democratic consolidation, this dearth of international media coverage is a problem since it does not bring to the attention of the world the excesses of the likes of Mswati III and Mugabe. Indeed, even in the context of coverage of Africa, southern Africa plays a distant second fiddle to Boko Haram and Al Shabaab. In the absence of an international media focusing a spotlight on their growing authoritarianism; Southern African ‘leaders’ continue to brutalise their hapless citizens.

## References

- Zakaria, F. (1997) ‘The Rise of Illiberal Democracy’, *Foreign Affairs* 76(6): 22-43.
- Freedom House (2015) ‘Freedom in the World 2014’ <<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files-Sub-Saharan%20Africa%Fact%Sheet%.pdf>>, accessed May 2015.
- Nicolson, G. (2015) ‘Amnesty International: Not a good time for human rights’, *Daily Maverick* 27 February 2015 <<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-02-27-amnesty-international-not-a-good-time-for-human-rights/>>, accessed May 2015.
- Human Rights Watch (2015) ‘Southern Africa: A Year of Little Rights Progress’ 29 January 2015 <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/29/southern-africa-year-little-rights-progress>>, accessed May 2015.