



NOTES FROM AFRICA

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Reflections on a trip to Africa

In June 2009, three Young Fabians joined a delegation to southern Africa organised by Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA). Working for peace, democracy and development across the region, ACTSA is the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and campaigns with the people of Southern Africa as they strive to build a better future.

The delegates visited South Africa and Swaziland and met youth and student leaders from the two countries and also Zimbabwe. They learnt more about how the struggles of the past have brought these countries to the struggles of the present and also met with representatives from the South Africa government, the British government, the EU, and the UN, as well as seeing the work of NGOs and civil society in the region.

STAYING IN SWAZILAND

Swaziland, it turns out, is something of a problem for the aid-giving world. Economically it ranks as a middle-income country and so does not qualify for direct aid. The economy is relatively diversified, and as a member of the Southern African Customs Union, Swaziland is part of a

large free trade area.

Despite this, 69% of the population lives below the poverty line, and Swaziland is experiencing the highest rate of HIV infection in the world, with 26.1% of adults infected, and 38.8% of tested pregnant women infected with HIV.

From our time in Swaziland, meeting trade unionists, student leaders and other opposition groups, united under the name of Swaziland United Democratic Front, the overwhelming conclusion is that the dire economic and health situation is due in the main to the bad governance which is endemic throughout the country.

Swaziland is ruled by Africa's last absolute Monarch, King Mswati III. The Swazi Parliament, with many members appointed by the King, acts merely as a rubber stamp for the wishes of the King.

In this way, in April 2009 Swaziland spent around US\$4million on an event to celebrate the 40th anniversary of independence and the King's 40th birthday. In 2004, the King asked for US\$15million to redecorate his three Royal Palaces. As recently as May this year he bought 20 armoured Mercedes Benz at a cost of US\$300,000 each.

The last of these is just one of several requests for armour and arms that

causes concern to the Swaziland United Democratic Front. At our time of meeting, two of their leaders were being held in jail for 'acts of sedition', under anti-terrorism legislation enacted by the King.

So it may be a surprise to know that Britain in 2005 closed its Embassy in the Swazi capital Mbabane, leaving the nation with UK representation working out of the British High Commission in Pretoria, South Africa.

For a country so troubled, and with historical ties to the UK, it seems unconscionable that the UK should have no representation directly involved in everyday Swazi politics, and raises questions about our commitment to smaller nations that have little impact on our own national interests.

The problem may be that Swaziland is not a particularly fashionable country to talk about. Relatively small, with around 1.2 million people, there is virtually no reporting from the country, aside from the odd article about the King's fanciful spending.

Though an Embassy in Swaziland would perhaps be nothing more than a token, the British Government having very little influence over the Government due to the lack of direct aid, it would be received as a gesture of confidence by the fledgling democratic movement.

If democracy is to come to Swaziland,

YOUNG FABIAN NEWS AND EVENTS

more important and effective would be the positive engagement of South Africa under President Zuma. Sadly, President Zuma, though making encouraging speeches during his electoral campaign, appears to have rowed back on the issue; as an ethnic Zulu, like King Mswati, President Zuma is seen now to be sympathetic to King Mswati's position. Furthermore, President Zuma, who already has four wives and various fiancés, has indicated his intention to marry a sister of the King, who is a fellow polygamist.

It is perhaps interesting to note that of the three nations from which Britain withdrew embassies in 2005, Swaziland has severe problems, Lesotho experienced an attempted coup and Madagascar saw its Government overthrown by the military this year.

If as a country with a Labour Government we wish to promulgate democracy and encourage equality and good governance, it would seem prudent to have a fixed and active presence in all those countries that would benefit from our support, regardless of size or influence.

Steve Race

THE RAINBOW NATION

Fifteen years since the end of apartheid and Mandela's vision of a 'Rainbow Nation', I was keen to see the reality on the ground. I wanted to understand how past injustices were being rectified whilst ensuring that South Africa remained an inclusive and vibrant democracy. Avoiding destabilising factors associated with post-colonial and post-conflict countries, such as neighbouring Zimbabwe.

In conversations with young people in South Africa, civil society organisations, and institutions such as the UN, DFID, FCO and the South African Human Rights Commission I gained a relatively broad but brief insight into the reality of the Young South Africa, its hopes, aspirations and impediments.

Working for the Equality and Human Rights Commission, one stark but refreshing comparison with the UK was the extent to which people talked proudly about their human rights and the constitution of their country.

This was brought to life wandering around Constitutional Hill in Johannesburg where cases of the highest order are heard in the animal print decorated constitutional court, next to the eerie Old Fort Prison complex. This has been turned into a museum but historically was a site of hideous racial degradation. Our guide told us that this juxtaposition ensured that the judiciary and others never forgot the past in making judgements about the future of South Africa. Moving stuff.

However, the 'xenophobia exhibition' next door which photographically documented the 2008 attacks on Zimbabwean refugees and undocumented migrants in which 62 people were killed revealed the fragility of these norms and rhetoric.

Poverty remains an acute problem in South Africa, where unemployment stands intransigent at approximately 25%. As we have seen with the rising popularity of the BNP, a lack of opportunity often mitigates people's generosity and tolerance of the other.

It is in this context that the people tired of Mbeki and assisted by the powerful

Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) brought Zuma to power to make the ANC vision developed during apartheid, a promise and reality. Indubitably the Economic Development of South Africa over the last 15 years has been essential to stability and sustaining certain benefits, such as free housing as well as wider development in the region through the South African Development Community (SADC).

However for most people the Black Economic Empowerment strategy has not succeeded fast enough. Voluntary agreements for White landowners to sell some of their land back to the state for redistribution has had low take up. It remains to be seen what Zuma's approach will be.

From a short trip it was hard to form conclusive opinions about many things, particularly the degree to which the racial barriers physically and psychologically constructed by apartheid have dissipated in South Africa. Communities forcibly segregated by the apartheid regime remain. However, it was heartening to hear about continued efforts to open opportunities and make South Africa's institutions more representative. Such as the elite and formerly White University of Cape Town's 'equity marking' system and re-allocation of school funding.

It is important that the past is not forgotten and continued efforts in the name of social justice are made. I was similarly encouraged to read a newspaper article by a 16-year old girl with a mixed group of friends, confused and bemoaning her literature teacher's obsession with race. The post 1994 generation may well be the best test-bed for the progress of the modern





South Africa.

Preth Rao

CHALLENGING MEDIUM

Whilst South Africa has had free and fair elections for 15 years now, Swaziland remains under the control and whim of its King. Despite the gulf in democratic development, each society has a fight still to be won on human rights. The English language papers I read reflected the different worlds that exist within, and between, the two neighbouring countries.

Tweet Tweet – it’s snowing!

Given our own predilection for talking about the weather it was amusing to see South Africa’s *The Times* carry a front page picture of partially-snow-covered fields, under the heading, ‘Send us your cold weather picture’. It was apparent from this tabloid (pitched somewhere between our red tops and broadsheets) quite how similar the daily read is to our own.

There were stories on swine flu, the latest Apple technology, and the obligatory centre page spread on the rise of Twitter. And readers know what they’re getting with the BBK in the house column: ‘His reputation precedes him, controversy is sure to follow’. Football, inevitably, had a lot of coverage on TV and in the press. South Africa’s oldest

newspaper, *The Star*, a broadsheet, bumped the start of the Confederations Cup up into its main news, and *The Times* counted down the days to World Cup 2010. The pressure that exists on a distinctly average national team was immense and drew clear comparison with the hype and expectation that surrounds England’s appearances in international tournaments.

Perhaps this tells us something about globalisation and convergence of identity? Probably not. Whilst Twitter is triumphed and swine flu exaggerated, these are at the bottom of the list of concerns for much of South Africa’s population. A population with a high HIV/AIDS prevalence (18.1% of the adult population according to a UNAIDS/WHO report in 2008), many of whom have extremely sub-standard housing, has different worries and struggles to the typical *Guardian* or *Metro* reader in the UK. Democracy is aided by a free and aspirational media but true freedom for South Africans comes only with further development.

Serving the nation?

Swaziland has two newspapers – privately-owned *Times of Swaziland* and state-controlled *Swazi Observer* (“We serve the nation” its banner proudly declares). Given King Mswati III’s control over the one-party political system and his misappropriation of the country’s financial

resources, the distinction is significant. However, the language in each seemed controlled. Interest is as much in the stories chosen as any explicit editorial comment. On the day I picked up a copy of each, ToS choose to highlight a somewhat heated dispute between two Cabinet members in parliament, whilst its counterpart led with ‘King tours Robben Island: HMK hailed for Swaziland’s contribution to ending apartheid’. Each paper carried different stories on the Swaziland National Association of Teachers – one implicitly critical, the other more sympathetic to the union. *Swazi Observer*’s article “‘Being gay is a human right’”, which quotes UN staff, is not directly critical but one may infer the view is leftfield.

The newspapers convey an aspirational angle demonstrated by their front-page photos of big winners in the ‘Top Million’ lottery. But the aspirations of the nation are somewhat hampered by the absolute monarchy. The population can very crudely be split into three. Those close to the royal family, perhaps have a government job, and are well looked after; those active in the pro-democracy movement; and those who know of no better life than the poverty and ill-health they live with whilst unable to exercise properly their democratic rights. The real limitations ToS faces, exemplifies one of the problems the pro-democracy movement, led by the Swaziland United Democratic Front – a fragile but forceful coalition of unionists and PUDEMO (the banned opposition party) – that of actually communicating the benefits in itself of a multi-party system, but also communicating the benefits that that may deliver to the whole population.

Challenge

South Africa and Swaziland face very different challenges. What role the media can play in overcoming the real difficulties of each remains to be seen.

Adrian Prandle

More information on ACTSA’s work can be found at www.actsa.org. If you are interested in taking part in their youth and student delegation in 2010, please contact Adrian Prandle, Young Fabian International Officer, aprandle@youngfabians.org.uk, in the first instance.