



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

Hoog, T.A. van der

Citation

Hoog, T. A. van der. (2024, May 7). *North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3753571>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3753571>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

EPILOGUE

PARTY–MILITARY COMPLEX

Contemporary Southern Africa is ruled by a unique political constellation that we may describe as a Party–Military Complex. Since independence, the majority of states are governed by liberation governments that came to power on account of their military wings. When independence was secured, liberation movements were transformed into political parties and their armed wings were incorporated into the national army. Today, both entities remain closely intertwined, as was the case during the years leading up to independence.

If liberation is the fruit, then survival and control were its seeds. For the exiled liberation movements in Africa, forging unity before and after independence was crucial. During the second half of the twentieth century, the ebb and flow of violence that spilled across the region resulted in a military mindset among African political elites who determine much of today's political culture. Throughout this process, African nationalists were inspired by and received practical help from North Korea. In the best traditions of communism, Kim Il Sung presented an example of a successful party-state. However, African interest in North Korea was not fuelled by communist ideology, but by pragmatism.

Just as the Korean War is a foundational myth for North Korea, so is the armed struggle for many African governments. Robert Mugabe said: 'The People's votes and the People's guns are always inseparable twins ... There is no better defender of political power won through the gun than the gun itself'.⁸⁵⁷ This signifies the clearly militaristic discourse that pervades much of Southern Africa today. However, as his rival Joshua Nkomo rightfully pointed out, the Fifth Brigade was 'a ZANU (PF) army and not part of the Zimbabwe National Army'.⁸⁵⁸ North Korea primarily supported parties instead of countries – liberation movements instead of states.

Kim Il Sung offered practical help for African revolutionaries who sought to achieve and consolidate political power, such as the gifting of military hardware and the export of military instructors. Moreover, North Korea presented a certain ideal of how a revolutionary army was embedded in the wider political struggle for self-reliance. It was an idea that resonated with African revolutionaries, who believed that 'the armed struggle is essentially a political struggle by other means'. Similar principles can be discerned in the military doctrines of MK and other liberation armies. 'It is not just a question of picking up a gun. What is paramount are ideas that guide the guns'.⁸⁵⁹ Again, the mythology of the Korean War inspired the African guerrilla.

With today's knowledge, Kim Il Sung did not emerge out of this period as the anti-imperialist hero he claimed to be, but rather as a prince of darkness. Through his military help, North Korea fuelled the authoritarian tendencies of some of the central figures in the freedom struggles of Southern Africa. The *Gukurahundi* genocide in Zimbabwe is the most evident example, but this pattern can be witnessed in several other instances as well.⁸⁶⁰

Importantly, the military relationship between Africans and North Koreans continued into the twenty-first century. To understand this, liberation history is key – contemporary African governments legitimise their enduring rule on account of the glorious revolutions of the past. SWAPO predicted in 1988 that *after* the victory of independence its slogan 'The Struggle Continues' would assume 'a deeper revolutionary significance'.⁸⁶¹ Indeed, the idea that the revolution continues is prevalent among several liberation governments in Southern Africa (see Chapter 13 for more details).

⁸⁵⁷ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: speech Mugabe, 1979.

⁸⁵⁸ Doran 2017, p. 284.

⁸⁵⁹ [MA] ANC London Box 4, SACP, Inkululeko – Freedom, April 1975.

⁸⁶⁰ Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe 1997.

⁸⁶¹ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: SWAPO Educational Political Calendar, 1988.

As such, North Korea helps African liberation governments to maintain their power despite internal opposition and external pressure. Of course, North Korea is now primarily motivated by earning hard foreign currency. The United Nations stated that arms trade remains ‘one of the most profitable revenue sources’ for North Korea.⁸⁶² The UN, the United States, and other actors are trying to curb North Korea’s military earnings through an extensive sanction regime. For a variety of reasons – historical affinity, maintenance dependency, weak enforcement regimes – African states have repeatedly ignored these sanctions in recent years.

The military alliance of North Korea and African states is evidence of diplomatic structures that voluntarily withdraw from the liberal world order. This can lead to ironic results, such as the discovery, in 2017, that Congolese units from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) were armed with North Korean pistols. The weapons were originally owned by the presidential guard of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who received them from North Korea between 2014 and 2015. The pistols, together with shipments of rifles and mines, were used by North Korean military instructors stationed at a military base outside Kinshasa.⁸⁶³ This shows that patterns similar to those in Southern Africa can be discerned in other parts of the continent as well.

⁸⁶² UN PoE S/2014/147.

⁸⁶³ UN PoE S/2017/150.