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

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CONCLUSION POWER TO THE PARTY

The rallying cry of national liberation movements across Southern Africa was *power to the people!* During the struggle for freedom, these words reverberated in liberation camps in exile, they were chanted during protest marches in global capitals and whispered by imprisoned freedom fighters on Robben Island, and they were included in every speech at independence celebrations.¹¹³¹ Today, this slogan has been informally transformed into *power to the party*. From Angola to Zimbabwe, liberation governments, rooted in the anticolonial organisations of the past, desperately cling to power.

A struggle for liberal ideals does not always result in a liberal outcome. African nationalists searched for freedom and eventually found power. In recent times, the once idealistic ANC has not been engaged in a contest over ideas, but in a competition for the spoils that result from political influence. ‘Ideology and programmatic issues have been supplanted by personal support and patronage’, asserts the former ANC operative Raymond Suttner.¹¹³² Similar criticism is applicable to the MPLA (Angola), FRELIMO (Mozambique), SWAPO (Namibia), ZANU (Zimbabwe), and could also be applied to UNIP (Zambia) until the 1990s.

During the twentieth century, people dreamt of decolonisation as a road – it led somewhere. But what if there is no ultimate destination? What if the struggle necessarily carries on into perpetuity? African liberation governments have difficulty shaking the military mindsets from their days of exile and view contemporary politics through a liberation lens. They use the past to legitimise their claim to authority and have concocted the idea of a continuous struggle, which extends into the twenty-first century. In their quest for eternal rule, African liberation governments found an unexpected inspiration: North Korea.

Contrary to existing scholarship, which focuses on North Korean motives for engaging with the outside world, this book examines the question how political elites in Southern Africa benefitted from North Korean support. A focus on African agency reveals that liberation governments utilised diplomatic cooperation, military assistance, and nationalist heritage offered by North Korea to further their own interests – not primarily the interests of the state, but the interests of their own party. Importantly, the relationships that were forged in the early 1960s continue to thrive today. Therefore, this book argues that not the Cold War, but rather liberation itself was the leitmotif for African–North Korean relations.

In the remainder of this conclusion, I will review the three assumptions that were highlighted in the introduction: (1) Southern African political culture is rooted in the liberation struggle; (2) we must shift our analytical focus from states to regimes; and (3) the common periodisation of contemporary history is counter-productive.

Democratic Backsliding

One of the most worrying developments in global politics is a gradual decline of democracy. Larry Bartels et al. show that, in recent years, ‘more countries have moved away from democracy rather than toward it’.¹¹³³ Democratic backsliding is manifested through a range of illiberal measures, including the manipulation of elections, the erosion of public institutions, the repression of political opponents, and the marginalisation of minorities. Ursula Daxecker describes this development as ‘a global threat’.¹¹³⁴

¹¹³¹ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: speech Machel, 20 September 1974; PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: ZANU 1976; speech Mugabe 1 January 1978; PC Angola NLM MPLA: speech Dos Santos, 27 July 1983.

¹¹³² Suttner 2008, p. 137.

¹¹³³ Bartels et al. 2023, p. 1.

¹¹³⁴ Bartels et al. 2023, p. 5.

With regard to the African continent, Leonardo Arriola et al. find that the period of democratisation that swept across the continent in the early 1990s appeared promising, but soon came to a standstill. While a panoramic view of the continent reveals a remarkable stagnation in the level of African democracy, the authors note considerable cross-country variation vis-à-vis democratic progress or decline.¹¹³⁵ However, both a continental approach and methodological nationalism distort our understanding of regional patterns.¹¹³⁶ I would argue for precisely the latter: Southern Africa, as a region dominated by former liberation movements, is experiencing a general trend towards electoral autocracy.¹¹³⁷

When liberation governments were first elected to power, following independence, they won comfortable majorities. However, after several decades of uninterrupted rule, they gradually approach the danger zone of electoral politics. ‘The Western imperialist countries are working hard to reverse the gains of the revolution in Southern Africa’ claimed Utoni Nujoma in 2022, Sam Nujoma’s son who now serves as a high-ranking government minister for SWAPO. He recognised that liberation governments were under threat, citing the examples of Namibia and neighbouring countries.¹¹³⁸ In 2019, SWAPO recorded its lowest vote share ever, losing its two thirds majority in the National Assembly for the first time.¹¹³⁹ In 2021, the ANC – for the first time ever – received under 50% of the votes in local elections.¹¹⁴⁰ In 2022, the MPLA won the Angolan elections with just 51.2% of the votes, the lowest majority in its history.¹¹⁴¹ The comfortable margins of the past are no more.

As summarised in the first assumption of this book, the anti-democratic reflexes of liberation governments are part of a political culture that is rooted in the experiences of the liberation struggle. Samora Machel warned the Mozambican people in 1974 that ‘anyone who deforms our line can expect no tolerance from us. We shall be intransigent on this, as we were during the hard war years’.¹¹⁴² The emphasis on the ‘war years’ is key. The exile dimension of liberation politics resulted in numerous interactions between different movements and a transnational culture in which the importance of unity is a common denominator. Whether it was in diplomacy (discussed in the first part of this book) or in war (discussed in the second part of this book), nationalist parties envisioned themselves as the rightful flag bearers of freedom. This mentality carried on in postcolonial politics.

From the perspective of liberation governments, according to Ian Phimister, their removal from power would ‘constitute a counter-revolutionary victory for reactionary forces’.¹¹⁴³ As such, liberation governments operate ruthlessly in the face of discord. The *Gukurahundi* genocide in Zimbabwe, the crushing of secessionist movements in Namibia and Zimbabwe, the civil wars in Angola and Mozambique: incumbent regimes in Southern Africa were not afraid to meet steel with steel. They had already done the same in exile when dissidents threatened to weaken the unity of their movements.

Like many of his contemporaries, Kenneth Kaunda feared the reintroduction of foreign rule in the years following Zambian independence.¹¹⁴⁴ ‘Once you start on a revolutionary path, you have no alternative’, Kaunda said in 1970. If you stray from this path, ‘you are bound to

¹¹³⁵ Arriola et al. 2022.

¹¹³⁶ Wimmer and Schiller 2003.

¹¹³⁷ Melber 2004; Southall 2013; Blaauw and Zaire 2023.

¹¹³⁸ Speech available via the X (Twitter) account of The Namibian: <https://twitter.com/TheNamibian/status/1574364951438925824>.

¹¹³⁹ Melber 2020; Melber 2021, p. 142.

¹¹⁴⁰ Al Jazeera, 4 November 2021.

¹¹⁴¹ BBC News, 29 August 2022.

¹¹⁴² [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: speech Machel, 20 september 1974.

¹¹⁴³ Phimister 2012, p. 27.

¹¹⁴⁴ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, 1 December 1972.

lose control of the ship and it will sink.’¹¹⁴⁵ Consequently, two years later, Kaunda banned all other political parties in Zambia and proudly announced that ‘parliament will be the midwife to the birth of a one-party participatory democracy’. He feared ‘the reconquest of Zambia ... the re-establishment of foreign rule’ and thus changed the country into a formal one-party state.¹¹⁴⁶ Three decades later, in Zimbabwe, ZANU seemed to lose the parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe in 2000 to the rival Movement for Democratic Change. Robert Mugabe’s government responded with such extensive electoral fraud and political violence that Zimbabwe de facto changed into a one-party state.¹¹⁴⁷

Power reveals character. The president of SWAPO’s youth league said in 2008 that ‘we have a political religion called SWAPO ... and the political hell is where all the other political parties are’.¹¹⁴⁸ In 2022, the SWAPO prime minister predicted that ‘we will not allow SWAPO to be defeated until Jesus comes back’.¹¹⁴⁹ ‘I agree with her’, said a SWAPO governor Laura McLeod-Katjirua at a party event in 2023, ‘because Jesus will not come’. She was dismayed at the opposition against the former liberation movement: ‘freedom and independence we brought, we brought along democracy, that same democracy that people are fighting us with’. If it were possible, the governor continued, she would abolish democracy altogether. McLeod-Katjirua said that ‘power is sweet’, and if another political party were to win the next general election, she ‘will go back into exile’.¹¹⁵⁰

These are the excesses of the ‘limits of liberation’ as described by Henning Melber, a political culture that transcends national boundaries in Southern Africa and conceptualises the party as the beginning and end of the nation state.¹¹⁵¹ Blaauw and Zaire show that, across Southern Africa, the inability of erstwhile liberation movements to accept open contestation ‘is embedded in the history and political culture of these parties-turned-government’.¹¹⁵² In the historical development of this mindset, African nationalists were influenced by North Korea.

Party Building

In their march towards power, African liberation movements claimed the nation and organised themselves as states-in-waiting. ‘SWAPO is the people and the people are SWAPO’, was the message in the case of Namibia.¹¹⁵³ Mugabe believed that ‘the party and the people and the people and the party must have one and the same meaning’.¹¹⁵⁴ For him, this meaning was evident. ‘Long live ZANU, long live Zimbabwe’.¹¹⁵⁵ It is a model widely applied in Southern Africa. ‘Historically, to say FRELIMO was to say Mozambique. To say MPLA was to say Angola ... The names of our organisations signified the purest, most sacred interests of our peoples’, said Machel.¹¹⁵⁶ The amalgamation of statehood and nationhood with the party draws attention to the importance of the development of the latter as an organisation.

As summarised in the second assumption of this book, we must shift our lens from countries to regimes. Rather than focusing on nation building or state building, we should analyse *party building* to properly assess the impact of North Korea in Africa. Pyongyang excelled in assisting the transformation of African liberation movements into liberation

¹¹⁴⁵ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, 7-10 November 1970.

¹¹⁴⁶ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, 1 December 1972; Mushingeh 1993.

¹¹⁴⁷ Kriger 2005.

¹¹⁴⁸ Elijah Ngurare, quoted in Melber 2009, p. 454.

¹¹⁴⁹ The Namibian, 25 April 2022.

¹¹⁵⁰ Namibian Sun, 31 July 2023.

¹¹⁵¹ Melber 2009.

¹¹⁵² Blaauw and Zaire 2023, p. 12.

¹¹⁵³ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: SWAPO Educational Political Calendar, 1988.

¹¹⁵⁴ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: speech Mugabe 1 January 1978.

¹¹⁵⁵ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: ‘Call to all Africans of Zimbabwe’, 19 June 1964.

¹¹⁵⁶ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: speech Machel, 26 April 1984.

governments. North Korea not only exported the necessary tools to African freedom fighters – political pamphlets, cheap guns, and nationalist heritage – but also the idea behind them, a vision of a singular regime that remains in power in perpetuity.

North Korea generally supported African regimes, not states. It is no coincidence that North Korea invested heavily in the training of African youth leagues of political movements.¹¹⁵⁷ Jide Owoeye argued that North Korea constructed ‘party-to-party links’ between the Workers’ Party of Korea and their African counterparts in anticipation of diplomatic ties.¹¹⁵⁸ However, there is evidence that this strategy continued even after formal diplomatic ties were established. In 1988, a Tanzanian delegation visited Kim Il Sung to learn about their ‘experience in building the party’. Party building was the corner stone of any successful revolution, according to Kim, who concluded that ‘our two parties and peoples have a very close relationship’.¹¹⁵⁹ In the same year, an agreement was signed between the WPK and FRELIMO, rather than between the governments of North Korea and Mozambique.¹¹⁶⁰ This lasting fraternity is not inexplicable. North Korea is a true hereditary regime, where power is passed on within a single dynasty. Liberation governments are, in a sense, politically hereditary institutions, where it is simply expected that power stays within a single regime.

The idea that the people ‘must be united into one organisation with one ideology under the guidance of the party and the leader’ is equally applicable to Southern African and North Korean contexts.¹¹⁶¹ In this case the former quote is from Kim Jong Il, but similar sentiments were echoed in Africa. While still in exile, Agostinho Neto relayed a message through Radio Tanzania to his companions in the struggle. ‘The experience of Africa has taught us many things’, Neto confided to those listening in – including ‘the lesson that the party must control the life of the country during every moment. The strength that gave us arms with which to defend ourselves from foreign occupation will also guarantee true independence in the future’. It was 1968 and it would take another few years before Angola would become sovereign. Yet, Neto was already predicting that ‘it is necessary that the party constitute the backbone, the base and the principal element in the life of the nation. Where there is no party’, said the nationalist leader, ‘anarchy enters ... instead of independence we will have neo-colonialism’.¹¹⁶²

Again, the party-centred mindsets of African revolutionaries were carried into postcolonial politics. ‘The party is supreme’, said Kaunda in 1971, and ‘the government is a product and a servant of UNIP. The strength of the government clearly depends upon the strength of UNIP’. In a speech titled ‘a path for the future’, Kaunda emphasised that the fight against colonialism was ongoing, albeit in a ‘more subtle form’. The party that delivered independence was the only one that could be trusted to chart Zambia’s course in the uncertain waters of postcolonial rule. ‘We do not know what the future holds’, said Kaunda, ‘but we do know who holds the future. It is UNIP’.¹¹⁶³

It goes too far to argue that African liberation governments mirror North Korean politics. Nevertheless, there are significant similarities in political strategies. Just as the North Korean political caste, Zimbabwean elites blame the economic ruin and human rights violations on ‘the interference by imperialist agents and the persistent raft of Western sanctions’. Political opponents are branded as ‘agents of the West’ and brutally repressed.¹¹⁶⁴ Both states are increasingly isolated on the international stage. It is not unimaginable that North Korea’s

¹¹⁵⁷ [SNU] 17450.

¹¹⁵⁸ Owoeye 1991, p. 635.

¹¹⁵⁹ Kim 1996, p. 90.

¹¹⁶⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/4124.

¹¹⁶¹ [UNAM] PA4/5/421: No. 40, January 1988.

¹¹⁶² [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: Speech Neto, December 1972.

¹¹⁶³ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech Kaunda, 8 May 1971.

¹¹⁶⁴ See the ‘Cry Freedom: Trends of Repression and Resistance in Five African Countries’ investigative project of ZAM, in particular Malaba 2023.

stubborn persistence in spite of enormous odds commands inspiration from African liberation movements that also feel threatened to give up rule.

Africa is not an exception – North Korea provides inspiration for states across the non-Western world. In 2009, a former Taiwanese national policy advisor argued that Taiwan ‘should model its dealings with China on North Korea’, as Pyongyang’s diplomacy gained maximum benefits without sacrificing North Korean sovereignty.¹¹⁶⁵ In 2023, a former Indonesian president believed that Indonesia ‘should emulate North Korea in building its nuclear capacity’.¹¹⁶⁶ ‘Russia needs to live like North Korea for a certain number of years’, said Russian warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin in one of his famous speeches about the invasion of Ukraine. ‘Close all borders, stop playing nice, bring all our kids back from abroad and work our asses off. Then we’ll see some results’.¹¹⁶⁷

Periodisation

As summarised in the third assumption of this book, the traditional periodisation of the past is counterproductive in the context of African–North Korean relations. A recurring motif throughout this book is the need to rethink the Cold War as a driver of events for South–South cooperation. Pragmatism, not ideology, was the determining factor behind African–North Korean relations.

North Korea deliberately followed its own path and moved away from China and the Soviet Union from the 1970s, but the Western world is late in catching up and persists in viewing the country as ‘communist’ or ‘Stalinist’. Most existing scholarship adopts a Cold War era time frame to study North Korea’s relations with Africa, which suggests that the end of the Cold War in the 1990s signalled the end of the African–North Korean exchanges. As this book shows, this is not the case – just look at the growth of the North Korean heritage industry in Africa to see the evidence.

After the initial honeymoon period of newly installed African liberation governments, political difficulties and economies recessions eroded their mandate and legitimacy.¹¹⁶⁸ Richard Werbner argues that as the postcolonial state ‘transforms from an early period of triumphalism to a current one of widespread disaffection’ the controversies around remembered identity intensify.¹¹⁶⁹ It is therefore imperative for incumbent regimes to implement large-scale memorial policies that favour their own role in the recent past. As such, commemorating the past becomes a political strategy. Again, African liberation movements turned to Pyongyang for advice and help: hence, the proliferation of North Korean heritage in Africa.

North Korea is unique in maintaining its hereditary state system, ‘longer than any other state entity born in the Cold War era’. While most charismatic state personalities of the communist world ‘underwent a dramatic rise and fall’, North Korea remained remarkably resilient, defying the norm found in other revolutionary societies.¹¹⁷⁰ From the perspective of African revolutionaries, North Korea differs from China and the Soviet Union: a former colonised nation, a state that is organised through Juche instead of communism, and finally: a regime that has remained surprisingly stable. Pyongyang was able to maintain consistent relations with African liberation governments – which, as highlighted in this book, also remained remarkably consistent.

While North Korea’s leadership formally changed with the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, the real transformative decade for its state system occurred two decades before, in the 1970s.

¹¹⁶⁵ Taipei Times, 18 August 2009.

¹¹⁶⁶ The Jakarta Post, 13 June 2023.

¹¹⁶⁷ Ukrainska Pravda, 24 May 2023.

¹¹⁶⁸ Blaauw and Zaire 2023,

¹¹⁶⁹ Werbner 1998a, p. 8.

¹¹⁷⁰ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 2-3.

Kwon and Chung show that many of the ‘striking features in today’s North Korean political process took root during that process’.¹¹⁷¹ Viewing these transformations through a Cold War periodisation therefore makes little sense. In short, the tumultuous events of the 1990s were not a turning point but a pivotal point – it altered but did not terminate African–North Korean exchanges. Continuity, not change, is what determines African–North Korean relations.

In the case of African politics, another unhelpful periodisation is the tendency to view African independence as the start of a new political era, while the conduct of liberation governments is, in fact, a continuation of political behaviour that is rooted in the decades before. Liberation governments, like political institutions, are shaped by the African struggles for self-determination in the twentieth century. As their contemporary behaviour is determined by the experiences of exile politics, arguably the founding dates of liberation movements are critical junctures, rather than the dates of independence.¹¹⁷²

The institutional development of liberation governments cuts right through this artificial classification of colonial and postcolonial eras. Borrowing the idea of path dependency, which entails that ‘institutions continue to evolve ... in ways that are constrained by past trajectories’, liberation governments develop their own logic.¹¹⁷³ Over time, these organisations have showcased remarkably consistent political behaviour from their inception until the present. Anti-democratic measures in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and other countries therefore do not fall from the sky but are rather rooted in the pre-independence era. This subscribes to Daxecker’s observation that the current democratic recession ‘takes the form of incremental decline from within rather than outright democratic collapse’.¹¹⁷⁴

Fritz Nganje argues that ‘the choices and behaviour of political actors are mediated by institutions’.¹¹⁷⁵ This compels us to properly assess the character of said institutions, in this case liberation governments. Kathleen Thelen emphasises that institutions are to be understood as ‘enduring legacies of political struggles’.¹¹⁷⁶ For liberation governments, the struggle is an essential and, in some ways, eternal experience. As Walter Kickert and Frans-Bauke van der Meer observe, historical traditions have a ‘conserving influence on current developments ... long-term grown institutional patterns are not easily changed’.¹¹⁷⁷

As discussed at length in this book, the Western world feared that African decolonisation masked a communist uprising. However, most Africans who joined left-leaning liberation movements were not primarily motivated by socialist worldviews, but by a desire for political independence. Ideology was a vehicle towards power. If that is indeed the case, we must focus on who is behind the wheel. The political scientist Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi calls attention to the ‘waning commitment’ of African political elites to the democracy.¹¹⁷⁸ Southern African liberation movements illustrate that oftentimes anti-democratic behaviour of leaders has longer historical roots.

The connections between African liberation governments and North Korea present an alternative history of decolonisation. This era was not wholly guided by the ideological conflict of the Cold War or the interests of powerful colonial empires. It was also driven by smaller

¹¹⁷¹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 127.

¹¹⁷² This section is inspired by the field of historical institutionalism. See Sanders 2009, p. 39 and Erdmann et al. 2011.

¹¹⁷³ Thelen 199, p. 387.

¹¹⁷⁴ Bartels et al. 2023, p. 4-5.

¹¹⁷⁵ Nganje 2016, p. 154, referring to Steinmo.

¹¹⁷⁶ Thelen 1999, p. 388.

¹¹⁷⁷ Kickert and Van der Meer 2011, p. 476-477.

¹¹⁷⁸ Gyimah-Boadi 2015, p. 101.

actors who cultivated ties across geographical and cultural boundaries for their own benefit. It is important to recognise the complexity of this messy history by including more diverse actors and acknowledging their agency.

African leaders deliberately accepted diplomatic invitations to North Korea and largely ignored South Korean offers of aid. They preferred the potential of South–South Cooperation at the Pyongyang Conference of 1987 over the promises of the South Korean–American axis. African leaders deliberately accepted North Korean military support and ignored foreign disapproval of their decisions. When Robert Mugabe contemplated the North Korean training of the Fifth Brigade, diplomats from various corners of the world tumbled over each other to offer him alternatives or threaten him into submission – to no avail. African leaders deliberately hired North Korean art studios to construct nationalist heritage and ignored local and international competitors. The Namibian museum of history is not designed by Namibians, but by North Koreans. In each and every case, African leaders had *options* – and they chose North Korea.

Bound by blood, bullets, and bronze, African liberation governments and North Korea form an overlooked alliance of hereditary political regimes. A brotherhood forged in the previous century during an age of optimism, when African freedom fighters and North Korean communists found each other in an earnest attempt at worldmaking.¹¹⁷⁹ They achieved and consolidated independence but ultimately failed to alter the global order. Now all that is left is a shadow system of semi-legal interactions, motivated by a mutual need for political survival. The prevailing age of cynicism is best captured in the blatant disregard for the United Nations sanctions regime, as evidenced through numerous sanctions violations and the general apathy of African governments towards submitting national implementation reports.¹¹⁸⁰

The existence of African–North Korean relations is a largely unknown part of history. Yet, it has a profound effect on contemporary international relations: North Korea influences the postcolonial trajectories of Southern African states, while African states provide an indispensable source of income for North Korea.

¹¹⁷⁹ Getachew 2019.

¹¹⁸⁰ UN PoE S/2017/150; S/2016/157; S/2010/571.