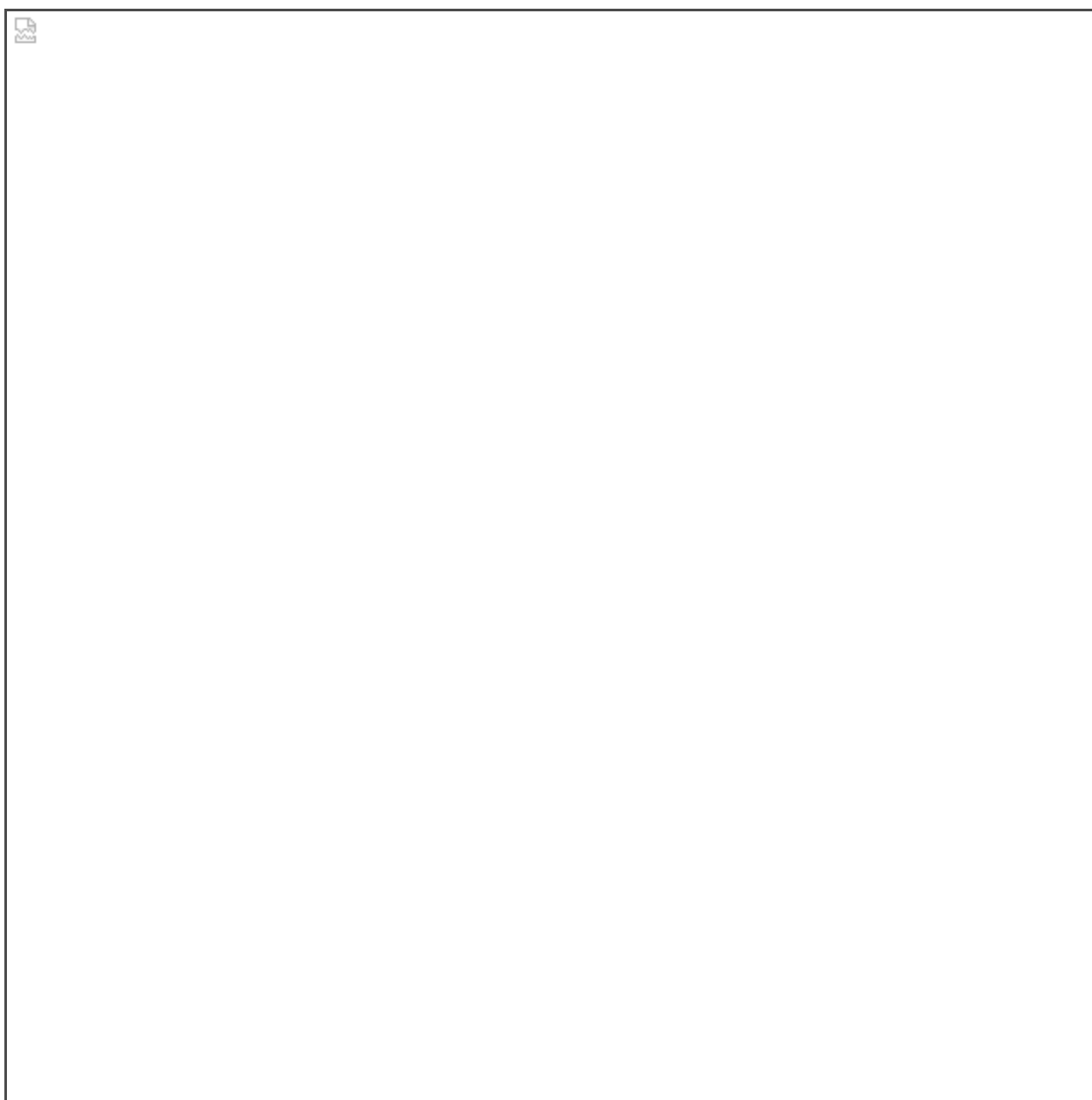




Thabo Mbeki's quietly destructive policy on Zimbabwe



It was the skeleton in the cupboard that successive South African leaders desperately tried to keep locked up. Former presidents Thabo Mbeki, Kgalema Motlanthe and President Jacob Zuma all fought tooth and nail to prevent the release of the Khampepe report on the 2002 elections in Zimbabwe, drawn up by

Constitutional Court judges Dikgang Moseneke and Sisi Khampepe.

Finally, the government ran out of strategies and on 14 November had to release the report to the ***Mail & Guardian*** newspaper. This came after a six-year-long court battle by the newspaper, which culminated in a Constitutional Court finding that rejected the government's successive appeals to overturn earlier court orders for the report to be made public.

The document slams the Zimbabwean electoral process, and says that given the intimidation of the opposition and the redrawing of electoral boundaries to favour the ruling Zanu-PF, the elections were neither free nor fair. This was in contrast with the assessment of a South African election observer mission that was sent there by Mbeki, then president and mediator in Zimbabwe, which found the elections to be 'legitimate'.

The findings of the Khampepe report, and how it undermined South Africa's potential to make a difference in upholding democracy outside its borders, are cited in a new Freedom House report about the impact of 'leading powers' on democracy and human rights worldwide. South Africa's impact is considered 'minimal'.

Morgan Tsvangirai slammed South Africa for scuppering his chances of becoming president ”

Paul Graham, the former executive director of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), is the author of the South African chapter of the Freedom House report. Graham says that if the Khampepe report had been released at the time, it could have had far-reaching implications for Zimbabwe and South Africa.

The Governance, Crime and Justice division of the Institute for

Security Studies hosted a seminar about the Freedom House report in Pretoria last week. At the seminar, Graham said that an earlier solution to the political crisis in Zimbabwe could have meant fewer refugees streaming into South Africa – something that later exacerbated the devastating xenophobic violence in the country.

‘We lost 12 years,’ said Graham, who now serves as the chair of the International Steering Committee of the Community of Democracies NGO process. At the time, Mbeki and the South African government insisted that its ‘quiet diplomacy’ in Zimbabwe, which was often shrouded in secrecy, was effective. ‘The problem is quiet diplomacy can be active and quiet; or it can be quiet and passive – and therefore unnoticed and unjudged. Or it can be, as we’ve now discovered with the Khampepe report, quiet and destructive,’ Graham said.

Asked why Mbeki chose not to criticise President Robert Mugabe and why he did everything possible to keep the Khampepe report under wraps, Graham said he suspects South Africa had ‘bigger fish to fry than Zimbabwe’ at the time, like the founding of the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad), spearheaded by Mbeki and former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo. ‘They were quite happy to appease Mr Mugabe so that he wouldn’t overturn that process.’

“ An earlier solution could have meant fewer refugees streaming into South Africa

Secondly, said Graham, there was a general feeling that while Zanu-PF was ‘not all it should be,’ a government led by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) held a greater risk for South Africa and for Zimbabwe. The MDC’s Morgan Tsvangirai last week slammed South Africa for scuppering his chances of becoming

the president of Zimbabwe, saying the Khampepe report is proof of South Africa 'aiding the subversion of democratic processes in Zimbabwe.'

Following the 2002 election and especially in the run-up to the 2008 poll, repression against the opposition continued and was well documented by local media in Zimbabwe as well as international human rights groups.

The fiasco of the 2008 elections, where Tsvangirai was said to have won the first round and then refused to participate in the run-off due to severe repression against the opposition, plunged the country into an unprecedented political and economic crisis. This was despite the 2008 Global Political Agreement that provided for power sharing between Zanu-PF and the MDC.

Zimbabwe has long been considered Mbeki's blind spot, but the Freedom House report also records other failures of South Africa's foreign policy dating back to the Mbeki era, such as the lack of any progress in nudging Swaziland towards democracy. It also recalls controversial business deals like the selling of a mass surveillance package to former Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi between 2005 and 2008, which was suspected to have been used to spy on citizens.

Although Zuma was initially applauded for playing a more constructive role in Zimbabwe after coming to power in 2009, the report states that South Africa's foreign policy under Zuma 'increasingly appear[s] self-interested and conservative.' South Africa has taken authoritarian regimes like those in Venezuela as allies, which is 'unfortunate,' says Graham.

In documents like the 2011 white paper on foreign policy, South Africa still claims that it wants 'a better Africa' where 'human rights, human dignity, non-racialism and non-sexism' are respected. The Freedom House report states that South Africa has made very little impact in this regard.

Mbeki insisted that 'quiet diplomacy' in Zimbabwe was effective ”

Generally, South Africa refrains from making strong statements about democracy on the continent – except in the case of some coup d'états – and tends to side with the AU Commission, now led by former South African minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. 'Direct democracy support is limited to election observation and the improvement of election processes,' states the report.

According to the report, one exception is the strong stance South Africa has taken on the rights of marginalised groups like the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, both domestically and in Africa – referring to a February 2014 statement by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation. Graham laments the general lack of action on human rights globally by a country that initially created a lot of expectation worldwide following its struggle against apartheid. 'South Africa hasn't worked out a strategy [or] tactics of promoting human rights,' he says. 'We have gone from quiet diplomacy, to just quiet.'

Liesl Louw-Vaudran, ISS Consultant