

The branding game: the role of sport in South African foreign policy

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Sport is not commonly regarded as an instrument of foreign policy. However, South Africa's strategic use of big sporting events has become a major feature of its attempts to 'punch above its weight' in world affairs.

The fact that the rugby and cricket world cups of 1995 and 2003 were among the first major sporting events hosted by South Africa after its return to the international sporting arena could, in part, be regarded as a consequence of the strength of those sporting codes under apartheid. By the same token, securing the right to host the 2010 Football World Cup can be seen as a recognition of South Africa's transition to an inclusive democracy, reflected in the tournament's status as a multicultural and truly global sporting event. In this sense, South Africa's hosting of the Football World Cup symbolises the development of a new relationship with Africa and the world community.

After re-entering the sporting world in the early 1990s, South Africa was faced with an awkward dilemma. On the one hand, the new government quickly realised that sports and sporting events presented it with a golden opportunity to elevate the country's profile internationally, and (re-)brand the 'new' South Africa. Given its historical competitiveness in rugby and cricket, these appeared to be the most likely sports codes in which early international success could be achieved. On the other, domestic rugby and cricket structures had to be thoroughly reformed before they would allow greater participation by black South Africans.

Cosmetics of transformation

The limited status given to sports during the constitutional negotiations effectively ensured the perpetuation of existing inequalities and power structures after isolation, firstly by adapting to globalisation pressures and returning to international competition rather hastily; and secondly, by not introducing effective measures to deal with inequality in sport. Although the cosmetics of transformation were put in place with a fairly robust discourse on racial redress – with not all that much, yet, to underpin it – the negotiations did not yield well-defined parameters for sport in a democratic South Africa. Politicians and administrators were caught between wanting to act expeditiously and the knowledge that South African sport could only be truly transformed through long-term reform at the grass roots.

South Africa's changing society had to be projected to the international community, and the country therefore participated in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and the 1992 Cricket World Cup while on the brink of its political transition. Its proclivity for both participating in and hosting international sports events was on the rise, and, through a rekindling of 'imperial' ties, and before its first democratic elections, it secured the rights to host the 1995 Rugby World Cup and 2003 Cricket World Cup. This was largely due to an accepting international

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community as well as Nelson Mandela's iconic appeal, which overrode various constraints on South Africa's actual capacity to host major international events. Ironically, South Africa drew upon the two sports that were regarded as icons of Afrikanerdom and British imperialism – rugby and cricket – to announce the arrival of a democratic state.

Cathartic event

The 1995 Rugby World Cup was a cathartic event which allowed the nation to be galvanised via the 'one team, one nation' slogan. This slogan – which extended into the re-branding of South Africa as the 'rainbow nation' – became a cornerstone of Mandela's presidency. Journalists waxed lyrical, sparking an avalanche of nation-building rhetoric. The event was a great success, and seemed to capture the imagination of the nation and provide a focal point for the country's multiracial aspirations. The Rugby World Cup was indeed a textbook case of the potentially liberating nature of sports events, drawing on their powerful symbolic appeal. It confirmed that such events could be used to strengthen South African national unity and boost the legitimacy of its new, still fragile, political order.

Following this, South Africa's political and corporate elites seized the opportunity to host various pan-African events, such as the African Cup of Nations and the All-Africa Games. These events were also meant to flag and consolidate South Africa's emergent African identity, following decades of white rule under apartheid.

South Africa successfully hosted, and won, the 1996 African Cup of Nations amid the kind of euphoria that had marked the Rugby World Cup. It lost the bids for the 2004 Olympics and the 2006 Football World Cup; however, these were valuable learning experiences, and had these events been awarded at the time, they might well have been too big a bone to chew.

The regionally hosted 2003 Cricket World Cup, with South Africa as primary host and Zimbabwe and Kenya as secondary ones, affirmed the former's African identity, and fitted in well with the foreign policy initiatives of Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki. The event was closely tied to Mbeki's notion of an African renaissance, and its 'African safari' motif sought to give a game bequeathed by British imperialism to its former colonies an 'Africanised' character, and broaden its cultural base. This implicit attempt to remake the image of a sport

associated with the 'civilising' mission of the British Empire made the Cricket World Cup all the more interesting. By 'Africanising' the event, South Africa was trying to reconfigure not only the hegemonic order of international cricket, but also the broader inequalities between the Anglo-Saxon world and Africa.

Although Zimbabwe's involvement led to unnecessary political tensions, particularly within the cricket-playing Commonwealth, South Africa successfully dispelled the 'myth' that Africa was an unsuitable venue for these sorts of events. Its appropriation of the tournament, coupled with the way in which it was punted by the state, business elites, and the media, revealed South Africa's continental and international aspirations.

These were well capped by South Africa's successful bid for the 2010 Football World Cup, which was largely motivated as an African bid, and tied to this country's 'ten years of democracy' celebrations. After narrowly losing the bid for the 2006 tournament, South Africa rejuvenated its quest to host 'the beautiful game' via the slogan 'Its Africa's turn'. The optimism paid off, and South Africa was awarded the 2010 event amid great jubilation.

It will doubtlessly continue the trend started by the 2003 Cricket World Cup of promoting an African identity through such events – not least because of the overwhelming popularity of the sport in Africa, as opposed to cricket and rugby, which their detractors often characterise as elitist 'white' sports.

Nation-building exercises

Given the political and historical junctures at which South Africa hosted the previous events, they were used as nation-building exercises, and also to project new messages about the country. South Africa's image as a conflict-ridden country marked by human rights abuses and racial oppression had to be overwritten with new messages of political, social, and economic revival – as well as more grandiose ones of the revitalisation of the continent as a whole. Building on these foundations, 2010 will provide South Africa's elites with a spectacular vehicle for affirming the African renaissance.

What emerges from this brief review is that South Africa's politicians and sports administrators have commonly drawn on the country's political experiences, particularly its 'miraculous' transition to democracy, as their moral authority for

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hosting major sporting events. Although this strategy has been fairly effective until now, the folding of the overtly political into the sporting arena can backfire or have unintended consequences, as Zimbabwe's co-hosting of the Cricket World Cup illustrated. South Africa's choice of Zimbabwe as co-host contradicted the overarching theme of the African renaissance, exacerbated tensions between the Afro-Asian and Anglo-Saxon factions in the Commonwealth, and highlighted the weaknesses in South Africa's policy on Zimbabwe.

Secondly, South Africa has become quite business-like in

its approach to sports mega-events. Whereas the discourse around the rugby and cricket world cups was steeped in the symbolic importance of an 'imagined community', those sentiments are likely to be diluted by the more consumerist global football milieu, and the powerful role of FIFA in deciding who gets what, where, and when.

Finally, public discourse needs to be more critically directed towards the question of who really benefits from these mega-events, and the extent to which these benefits extend beyond big business and the state. ■

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ISSN 1607 2375

Produced by Acumen Publishing Solutions, Johannesburg