



Safaris, soccer and the silver screen:

South Africa's emergent soft power

South Africa is a nation that has actively sought to 'punch above its weight' in world affairs, relative to its actual size and strategic importance. This could be partially because of the increasing 'soft power' that South Africa is projecting globally.

NELSON MANDELA'S ICONIC STATURE and the marketing success of 'Mandela Mania', the winning of the rights to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the accolades for the movie *Tsotsi* and, most recently, South Africa's appointment to a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, all point to substantive levels of recognition in the hearts and minds of the international community. The rising levels of tourism, perhaps most pronounced in the latest slew of celebrities visiting South Africa for adventure or business tourism – becoming involved in humanitarian initiatives and, in some instances, choosing to adopt or have their children born in Africa – are also indicative of the increasing allure of this part of the world. In a recent letter to the *Cape Argus*, Joe Adams labelled this phenomenon 'the celebrity scramble for Africa'.

What is it about 'third world chic' – and, increasingly, the novelty and charm of things African and, it is argued, South African – that renders it so fashionable? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the increasing 'soft power' that South Africa is projecting globally and, closely related to this, the remodelling of its national identity as a truly African state.

The term 'soft power' was coined in 1990 by Joseph Nye in *Bound to Lead: The*

Changing Nature of American Power. Nye, former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and currently a professor at the same university, specialises in International Relations. He argued that, globally, the nature of power was changing and – in order for the United States to maintain its superpower status – American leaders would have to become increasingly aware of the type of power they chose to exercise globally. Thus, according to Nye, soft power is used to describe a situation where states get others to want what they want or to consent to a system that will produce such effects, as opposed to hard power, which is conveyed through commanding or shunting others around. Soft power works primarily through means of attraction and appeal, while hard power operates through threat or coercion. Soft power is commonly associated with intangible forms of power such as culture, ideology and institutions, while hard power is purveyed through the military, population size and often, although not always, economic influence.

In 2004, Nye refined the concept in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. If one were to apply Nye's definition to South Africa, one would have to explore South Africa's three main soft power resources: first, its foreign policies, which are viewed as being legitimate and carrying moral authority; second, the attraction of its cultural media; and, third, the view that it tries to live up to its political values, both domestically and abroad.

Traditionally, soft power was conceived as being the exclusive reserve of world superpowers. In a globalised and technologically driven world, however, nations increasingly have to harness non-traditional forms of diplomacy in order to enhance their international status. This argument bears

particular relevance to developing nations, which do not have extensive diplomatic and structural power resources at their disposal and, consequently, have to rely on other means to compete globally, such as enhancing their attraction and appeal – expanding their soft power. The exotic allure of the Bollywood film industry and the flamboyant flare of Brazilian sports are common examples.

Within the developing world, South Africa has emerged as a nation that has explicitly, and often implicitly, sought to use its unique brand of persuasion and charm to good

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effect on the international stage, in a manner complementary to its economic muscle. Having achieved democracy in the last decade of the twentieth century, up to four decades later than most of its African counterparts, South Africa is often viewed as the 'new kid on the block'. However, it appears to have brought with it an array of novel and exciting ideas. The belated re-emergence of South Africa within the international community, coupled with various strategic interests in a post Cold War era, has driven South African state elites twice as hard to impress internationally by pursuing a range of boosting strategies. Principal among these have been the hosting of a string of mega-events and the ideational power of President Mbeki's African Renaissance,



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which has provided substance and style to various foreign policy initiatives.

Politicians commonly draw on the country's experience in the political realm (in particular, the 'miraculous' nature of its transition) as a source of moral authority in world affairs. The manner in which South Africa tries to model itself as a spokesperson or ambassador for Africa and the developing world – coupled with South Africa's role as a peacemaker – is seen as a crucial aspect of the exercise of soft power through its foreign policy.

Nevertheless, the image of South Africa has not always been received with glowing adoration abroad, not least on the African continent itself, where South African corporate behaviour sometimes has seemed to be at odds with the country's overall foreign policy message. Further, South Africa's inability to grapple effectively with the scourge of crime and the AIDS pandemic has had an adverse impact on its ability 'to play the moral card' in world affairs. Most

recently, issues of corruption in the civil service and allegations of misbehaviour and sexual abuse levelled against South African peacekeeping troops have also tarnished its image abroad.

What is interesting about recent events is the headway being made in terms of increased leverage in the international community. Recent events, such as the granting of a Security Council seat to South Africa, point towards a more global Southern orientation – with President Mbeki commonly framing the North-South divide as the 'new apartheid'. The relative political stability and good economic governance that South Africa has displayed undoubtedly put it in a strong position to articulate the interests of the developing world. South Africa appears more poised than ever to take up the good fight on behalf of not only Africa but the entire developing world.

Despite the deepening of South Africa's diplomatic and structural power resources,

and hence its greater access to, and increased responsibility towards, the developing world, the African motif is likely to remain the strategic marketing feature and major source of identification in the near future. By attaching itself to Africa – and through a process of becoming more African – South Africa is able to consolidate its national identity as an African state after years of white rule under apartheid. This provides South Africa with a channel through which it can respond to issues of broader relevance to developing nations and world affairs, but also plays into the interests of global markets. In an increasingly globalised world, re-branding the South African state as a truly African state is not only the natural evolution of South Africa's political identity, but also makes increasing commercial sense.

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