

Can South Africa really afford to meddle in the Israel – Palestine Conflict? – Tshego Motaung



The South African ambassador to Israel, Sisa Ngombane, with then-president Shimon Peres in Jerusalem, in February 2013. (PHOTO: Issac Harari/Flash90 via Times of Israel)

Last year the *Mail & Guardian* hosted a number of dialogues with the ANC presidential hopefuls before the Nasrec conference.

This to me was a rare opportunity to engage ANC leaders on policies that affect all of us as South Africans. I had observed, with concern (as we all have), how the line between party and state has been blurring over the years. Party factional problems have become national problems, and party positions are often confused as government positions.

One of the issues I asked Dr Zweli Mkhize, who was also campaigning for leadership of the party, was the ANC position

on the Israel-Palestine conflict. I wanted to understand if the ANC believed that South Africa, with all its problems, could afford to take sides in the matter. The ANC policy conference had recommended to downgrade diplomatic relations with Israel, however this still needed to be adopted by the ANC conference in Nasrec. Once adopted by the conference, the diplomatic downgrading could easily become government policy.

Dr Mkhize left my question till the end, and when he answered he just stated the party position, without engaging on the reasons behind that posture.

Why so personal?

From the time the ANC policy conference made this recommendation I couldn't help but wonder why the Palestine conflict was so much more important to the ANC than all the other conflicts in the world. Why was it so personal to the ANC?

This is the same ANC that ignored the crisis just next door in Zimbabwe. Since ZANU-PF rigged elections in 2008 we have all witnessed the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe, and South Africa bore the brunt of the problems in Zimbabwe. Yet the ANC maintained that Zimbabweans needed to find solutions internally and one would remember how ANC leaders insisted that there was no crisis in Zimbabwe. My heart broke when Morgan Tsvangirai passed away in February this year before he could enjoy the freedom he had paid dearly for.

On a recent trip back from Ethiopia I sat next to a young woman from Cameroon who said she was coming to explore study opportunities because "the situation at home was no longer bearable". There's been a silent conflict in Cameroon for years now, a legacy of colonialism – where English-speaking citizens have been crying for independence.

The deteriorating situation in Cameroon, she explained, had reached levels they had never seen before, leading to a

decision by her family to send her away to study – a first in her family. This was shortly after the AU Summit – and I don't remember the ANC making a big issue about this compared with the level that I have heard them on Palestine.

One cannot help but ask: why is Palestine so much closer to the ANC than what Zimbabweans went through over the past 10 years, and to what is currently happening in Cameroon? In both these nations there were major human rights violations and atrocities that devastated many families.

I will not even go into conflicts in other African countries like Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Somalia, where many people continue to lose their lives, and South Africa's position has mostly been that of a mediator that allows internal peace processes to resolve these conflicts, instead of taking sides with a faction.

Shared struggle history

Some ANC members cite having been in the trenches with the Palestinians during the struggle days as a reason for taking sides today. I suppose this explains their support for Mugabe – their shared struggle history.

We now have the benefit of hindsight and we know that our freedom as South Africans was delayed because we got caught up in the Cold War. The decision by the ANC to align with the Soviet Union caused our genuine and desperate need for liberation to be mixed up with global politics. While everyone sympathised with the suffering of the South African people, fears of handing over a country with such a developed economy and military prowess to leaders aligned to the Soviet Union was a concern to global powers and sadly we became pawns in the global chess game.

Our country has gone through a painful period caused by oppression but somehow the formerly oppressed and former

oppressors are able to coexist within the same borders. There is a lot of work to be done to heal the divisions of the past, but we have demonstrated that reconciliation is possible. I believe that that's what we need to be championing in the world – peace and reconciliation, and not to be taking sides in conflicts.

The ANC cannot afford to have eternal allies and perpetual enemies; but must rather be guided by the interests of our new democratic society. They have been given a mandate of leadership not only by ANC members but by many other South Africans who are ANC members but voted for them. Therefore, the interests of South Africa must be above those of the party.

Not anybody's private property

South Africa is not the private property of the ANC, or any political party for that matter. By winning elections, the ANC was just given a mandate by the people of South Africa to steward the affairs of the nation for the benefit of all its citizens for five years. They must therefore not use the resources of the nation to repay political favours to their struggle allies.

I don't believe it is in South Africa's interest to take sides in this conflict. Israel has America as its ally, and the economies of these two countries are too advanced; their youth are educated, employed and pioneering major developments in the world; and their combined military might is too strong for us to want to challenge. What is worse for us is that many other African countries are currently strengthening relations with Israel – including Zambia, the former exile headquarters of the ANC.

I do believe the situation of Palestine and Israel must be resolved – but I don't believe we want to bring yet another global conflict to our doorstep; and use our country, its resources and people as pawns in another global chess game.