

Interview

Johann Marx, *Ambassador of the Republic of South Africa to Hungary*

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Introduction: In summer, 2016, the ICRP conducted an interview with Johann Marx, ambassador of the Republic of South Africa to Hungary about the foreign policy priorities of his country and its economic programmes with a special focus on bilateral relations. He gave us his insights of the mentioned topics by pointing out the main features of South Africa's foreign approaches as well as the current political and societal system of the country. Therefore the interview focused on South Africa's role within international organisations and South-South Cooperation, as well as domestic policies, such as the challenges of the Black Economy Empowerment.

South Africa's economy has been growing in the past decade, indeed South Africa is part of BRICS now. However, since 2014 there has been a weakened growth. According to you, which are the main factors that have been contributing to this economic decrease?

There are three main issues: our biggest trading partner as a country is China; Chinese economic growth has reportedly been slowing down in recent years and they import a lot of our commodity products – such as steel. Secondly, we suffered this year and last year a very serious drought, not only in South Africa but also in the whole region, six of our nine provinces were declared disaster areas. The third issue has been power constraints, because of the growth in the period that you mentioned, our economic growth had outstripped for a while

our energy supply and that has also played a role in constricting our further economic growth. The government has addressed the energy issue, it has invested a lot of money in new energy production, not just coal-fired stations. By the way, we have enough coal for an estimated two hundred years supply but we realise in terms of the Paris climate change conference's commitments that we have to reduce our carbon emissions, so we are turning also to renewable energy's resources, such as wind power and solar panels.

How important is the Black Economy Empowerment program to avoid racism at all levels of South Africa's economy?

The whole purpose of Black Economy Empowerment is to rectify the wrongs of the past; remember we had three hundred years of colonial rule and Apartheid where anybody who was not a white citizen was disadvantaged in terms of economic opportunities. So the whole aim here is to bring the majority of our citizens, who are black, into the mainstream economy as fast as possible to ensure that they will have a decent income. This is crucial to provide homes, schools, proper medical treatments, and other facilities.

Which are the countries in Africa or outside the continent, with which South Africa has strong bilateral relations? Are those relations based on predominantly economic or political, historical reasons?

The main focus of our foreign policy is Africa. It has to be. We are part of the African continent - the way Hungary's main focus is obviously Europe, as a member of the European Union. For us, our principal priority is to cooperate with other countries in Africa, because we realise that our own economic prosperity depends on the economic prosperity of the rest of African continent. We must cooperate with the rest of the continent in its economic development; if we can assist in creating elsewhere in Africa more employment opportunities, there would be less migrants coming toward our country and also less moving north toward Europe. So Africa is the principal focus of our foreign policy, but outside Africa we are a member of BRICS, which means that Brazil, Russia, India and China are also important partners for us and we look at that partnership to assist with Africa's economic development as well. To give one example, in the China-Africa Forum that took place last year, China committed 50 billion US dollars for Africa's economic development, 10 billion of which is

coming to South Africa for skills development and industrialisation. Also we are part of IBSA, consisting of India, Brazil and South Africa, which is a separate body from BRICS. Our three democracies are working together on the global stage, regarding political issues.

May you explain the strategy of South Africa regarding South-South Cooperation, and in which way it is important for the country promoting the development of the African continent?

South-South Cooperation is focusing on self-reliance of the developing countries of the world to work together for their own economic development. This does not exclude the developed North but it is just trying to get the countries of the South to cooperate for their own economic advantage. We were chairing the so-called Group of 77, but it is in fact now a much bigger group of countries, including of course African countries and we try to work with this group inter alia for the economic development of its members.

South Africa surrounds Lesotho. This small kingdom is facing many problems, so that in 2010 Lesotho asked South Africa to be annexed to the country. What is now the relation between the two, and would South Africa consider annexing Lesotho?

Let me clarify the situation immediately, Lesotho has never requested to be annexed by South Africa. Lesotho is a proud independent kingdom and it has been since it got its independence from Britain in the 1960's. The country has its own national identity. What you might have heard was that some non-governmental entity in Lesotho reportedly proposed integration with South Africa. This might have been due to some ongoing political tensions within Lesotho, for which the South African Government had been providing mediation assistance to resolve peacefully. because we believe that talking is always better than fighting. And any long term solution to any political conflict requires talking to each other and trying to find a peaceful solution.

Still speaking about South Africa's foreign policy, what is the role of the country in the African Union?

We are trying to assist with the development of the African Union along the lines of the EU. We are moving to increase the economic integration among African countries but we have to consider the size of the continent. The EU has a huge advantage compared to us; it has highly

developed infrastructure which makes it very easy to travel from one country to another and for trading with one another, while Africa does not have that kind of infrastructure yet. So our Head of State, President Zuma, has been designated by other African leaders to promote the development of infrastructure on the African continent; for example we would like to see a Cape to Cairo rail- and road network. We are also looking at developing energy projects on the continent. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) the Congo River is massive and at the moment all the water is just pouring into the sea, so a contract has been signed between us and the DRC to help developing a massive hydroelectric power station. Through this some 40 000 megawatts of electricity will be produced eventually, which could reportedly provide electricity for half the continent. So, African Union cooperation is focusing on two main areas: infrastructure development and industrialisation. But at the same time we have regional economic blocks on the continent, such as the: Southern African Development Community, (SADC) which consists of 15 African countries out of the total of 54 states on the continent. Other regional communities include ECOWAS in West Africa, the East African community and the Maghreb countries of the north. So we see these regional groups as building blocks leading to increase African Union economic integration.

On the 29th of July, there was the 6th conference of the Forum of China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). How important do you think, is the role of China in the development of Africa's countries, and especially of South Africa?

China promises development aid to the African continent and the levels of it is increasing, including in South Africa. China is a major power, it is currently the second biggest economy in the world, and the same way we welcome USA and European investments in Africa, we also welcome Chinese ones. Two years ago in Brazil, BRICS countries established the BRICS development bank with an initial capital of 50 billion US dollars, a substantial part of which will come from China and the idea of this development bank is to assist with projects in developing countries, not just in Africa. It is not in competition with the World Bank, but it is to assist in financing projects that the World Bank is not prepared to invest in. So, in all of this, China is playing a very important role. While the EU is South Africa's biggest trading partner as a block, as an individual country China is however our largest one.

Since the mid-1990s the country is facing serious societal challenges regarding poverty, unemployment, crime and spread of HIV/AIDS. Does the ANC-led government have any programmes to tackle these problems? Do these programmes involve regional cooperation as well?

Yes, especially since our current government administration under President Zuma, who came to power in 2009, it initiated a very active anti-AIDS program which involves two main activities. First of all, a massive roll-out of antiretroviral drugs, in fact recently a state pharmaceutical company was established to provide, these medications directly to the Ministry of Health. Secondly, an AIDS-awareness program, which aims to train people in various communities to create awareness of the dangers of AIDS, how to deal with it and how to prevent it. The Government is also taking active steps to reduce crime and alleviate poverty, inter alia by increasing decent employment opportunities in the country.

1994 is a crucial year in the history of South Africa as the Apartheid regime ended. Since then, which are the most meaningful changes in the society of your country?

The vast majority of people who were excluded from participation in our mainstream economy during the Apartheid era are now becoming active participants., they have also been provided with houses with running water and electricity which in many cases they did not have prior to 1994. The other important change is regarding the social interaction between South Africans. Before 1994 most of the ethnic groups, the blacks, the whites and others, mostly did not interact with each other except in work situations, due to the apartheid policies. Today if you go to South Africa you will see there are very good races relations, I sit here as a white ambassador representing a mainly black Government. It is a proof of how far the country has come since 1994. President Nelson Mandela, our iconic first democratically elected Head of State, played a huge role in this regard.

Since 1994, South Africa is called the “rainbow nation” because of the coexistence of many ethnic groups. Multiculturalism is a peculiarity of this country and a symbol of it, as also represented in South Africa’s flag. Do you believe this feeling of integration is still present in nowadays’ South Africa’s society, or there are still divisions among the many different ethnic groups? Does the past still influence their coexistence?

Yes, I think the past must always influence the present, it is always in the background. But building a new South Africa is a process and it is ongoing. I think that race relations are very good today in South Africa. I will give you one example, we just had municipal elections and now some of the biggest cities such as the administrative capital Pretoria, Johannesburg and Port Elisabeth have to form municipal coalitions to govern and you can see they are working together and everybody accept the results of the elections, they say “we have to work together”. So the overall sense that you get in South Africa is that the relations are very good. Obviously there are individuals that don’t want to reconcile, that will probably always be the case, but there is ongoing progress in the right direction.

In March and April 2015 there were attacks against migrants. Considering the history, how could you explain nowadays’ sentiment against those migrants coming from other African countries to work?

First of all, we have between 6 and 7 million foreign migrants at present living in South Africa. Some of them are desperate for work, so they often are prepared to work for salaries lower than what South African citizens are prepared to accept. And the problem you are referring to started last year when an employer allegedly dismissed some South African workers and replaced them with migrants from other African countries who were reportedly ready to work for lower salaries. This brought about anger among some South Africans. But the government immediately condemned this in very strong terms. The President personally met with representatives of foreign migrants in South Africa and indicated that attacks against foreigners in our country would not be tolerated.. The big problem was the perception among some poor people in South Africa that these migrants were taking jobs away from them, given the high unemployment rate prevailing in our country. We have an unemployment rate of about 25% for the population as a whole, but among the youth between 18 and 29 the rate is much higher, it is around 37%. In many cases migrants help in creating new jobs, because there are entrepreneurs from other African countries coming to establish enterprises in South Africa and this creates jobs for South Africans. The incidents last year were therefore, to my knowledge, not due to hostility against Africans migrants, it was just a matter of the prevailing economic situation. In my view, there is only one long term solution to solving the African migrants’ problem, namely to assist in creating decent employment opportunities in their own countries.

South Africa has eleven official languages. The country also recognises several unofficial languages which may be used in certain official uses in limited areas, where it has been determined that these languages are prevalent. What effect does the linguistic diversity have on public administration processes?

The reality is that the common language we all use for official government work is English. But an important point is that, for instance, in Parliament you can use any of the official languages that you wish to choose and there must be translation and interpreting of the language, but everyone knows that the principal international language is English. So the fact that there are 11 official languages does not affect the situation one way or the other. My own mother tongue is Afrikaans, which is derived from Dutch, English is my second language.

What are the future perspectives about the role of South Africa in global geopolitics?

To us, multilateral cooperation is a very important issue and we would like to see above all the reform of some of the multilateral institutions such as the UN, IMF and the World Bank that were created in the aftermath of World War II, when there were particular circumstances prevailing. For instance, we feel strongly that the Security Council is not representing today's world in terms of ensuring that all parts of the world are a permanent part of it. There are five permanent members who have the veto right and we are pushing very hard to reform the Security Council to bring in more permanent members. Furthermore, we would like to see IMF and the World Bank reformed, in order to have a greater representation of the South, so that the concerns of the South will receive more focus in these organisations. Another area we are really keen on is nuclear disarmament; South Africa is the only country to my knowledge that had nuclear weapons and gave them up voluntarily. Since our first democratic government's election in 1994, a major focus has been to try and to reduce nuclear weapons in the world and have them eliminated eventually. This is a very difficult task and probably it will not take place in our lifetime.

As Ambassador of South Africa in Hungary, could you illustrate the role played by Hungary in South Africa's development process?

One important role that Hungary can play in South Africa's economic development, as well as elsewhere on the African continent, is in the enhancement of skills. Hungary has outstanding universities and people of Hungarian origin have won 14 Nobel prizes for scientific and technologic achievement, which per capita is said to be higher than any other country in the world. The Hungarian government is offering scholarships for students from African countries, and skills development is an absolute prerequisite for creating employment. There are approximately one billion people on the African continent but if you do not have the necessary skills to create decent employment many of them cannot be employed. So Hungary is playing a major role in this regard. We are also trying to encourage Hungarian companies to get involved in infrastructure development projects in Africa, for instance water management is one area in which we are trying to secure their involvement, as this is an area in which Hungary has developed notable expertise. We think this could be a win-win situation of Hungarian companies teaming up with our companies to create new employment opportunities in Africa, which could also reduce the flow of African migrants to Europe.

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