



Democracy Digest

4th March 2022

Abstaining on Ukraine

According to the government, South Africa's abstention in the UN General Assembly's vote to call for an end to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was motivated by principle. The Deputy-Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, Candith Mashego-Dlamini, told Parliament that "South Africa "stands by its principled position of peaceful resolution of conflict." All parties to the conflict should be encouraged to use "quiet diplomacy" to resolve the conflict.

<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-its-against-sas-principles-to-take-sides-says-deputy-minister-20220303>

The SA Ambassador to the UN, Mathu Joyini, argued that the resolution was likely to "drive a deeper wedge between the parties rather than contributing to a resolution of the conflict."

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2022-03-02-sa-explains-decision-to-abstain-from-voting-to-reprimand-russia/>

<https://www.citizen.co.za/news/news-world/3039906/why-south-africa-abstained-from-ukraine-vote-at-un-general-assembly/>

Implicit in these explanations is an assumption of moral equivalence – that somehow Russia and Ukraine are equally to blame for the situation, and that they should both be prepared to make concessions. The Ambassador, for example, urged "all sides to uphold international law, including humanitarian law and human rights law, as well as the principles of the UN Charter, including sovereignty and territorial integrity." This stance seems to fly in the face of the rather obvious fact that only one side has so far violated international, humanitarian and human rights law, the UN Charter, and another nation's sovereignty.

Earlier, on 24th February, it seemed that South Africa was adopting a more explicit position, when Minister Naledi Pandor released a statement calling unambiguously on Russia to withdraw its troops.

<http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/2022/ukra0224.htm>

But apparently this statement did not enjoy the support of the governing party, and Ms Pandor subsequently reverted to the 'both parties' rhetoric.

<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/pandor-toes-party-line-on-ukraine-and-punts-diplomacy-in-address-to-un-20220301>

South Africa was one of 35 countries that abstained, almost half of them African. 141 countries condemned Russia's actions, while five supported it. This link shows at a glance how the world's countries voted.

<https://ewn.co.za/2022/03/03/infographic-sa-among-countries-that-abstained-in-un-vote-over-ukraine-invasion>

It is difficult to find much support for South Africa's official position among local commentators, academics and civil society activists. Indeed, worldwide there are not many disinterested voices

arguing that the ultimate blame for the conflict should fall anywhere other than on Vladimir Putin and his circle. This article from the Guardian, however, gives an interesting alternative view.

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/28/nato-expansion-war-russia-ukraine?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

To return to the question of South Africa's position, the commentator Eusebius McKaiser ascribes it to the "moral bankruptcy" of the ANC. Our stance on the conflict, he writes, is "standard stuff for SA when it comes to foreign policy — a combination of incoherence and moral cowardice."

<https://tinyurl.com/nhze56f9>

John Matisonn also considers the incoherence and inconsistency that has long characterised South Africa's foreign policy.

<https://tinyurl.com/2p94cevv>

Nostalgia for the supportive role that the Soviet Union played in the ANC's years of exile should not be allowed to gloss over the actions of the Russian leader, according to Rhodes University's Professor Cyril Nhlanhla Mbatha: "Putin cannot be seen as a moral beacon and representative of the USSR and its friendship and support towards many Africans during their struggle against colonial rule." Instead, "[h]e needs to be openly criticised on moral grounds for promoting political repressions on a global scale."

<https://tinyurl.com/yc6m7pk2>

In a wide-ranging reflection in the *Daily Maverick*, Judith February locates South Africa's equivocal stance on the war in the ANC's gradual loss of its "ethical compass" and in the fact that "the ANC or this presidency is so hamstrung by factionalism and corruption." She also notes the "cringeworthy" spectacle of ANC officials attending celebrations at the Russian Embassy a couple of days after the invasion of Ukraine. In what some might consider an understatement, she sees it as "entirely tone deaf for the ANC to be partying with the Russians during their invasion of a sovereign country and amidst Putin's threats of nuclear war."

<https://tinyurl.com/2je3hmvj>

Lastly, Ms February joins various other writers in drawing attention to the words of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "*If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.*"

It does not take much imagination to know what the Arch would have had to say about his country's latest attempts at "quiet diplomacy" and "peaceful resolution of conflict".

Mike Pothier
Programme Manager
mike@cpl.org.za



The Democracy & Governance Project of the CPLO is supported by the Hanns Seidel Foundation. The opinions and statements contained in CPLO's publications do not necessarily reflect the views of the HSF.

This Digest, or parts thereof, may be reproduced with acknowledgement.