

The year 2024 is a seminal moment in South Africa. We, like the United States, are entering an election year. We are also marking 30 years since the first democratic election where for the first time, my grandparents, my parents and every eligible Black citizen could finally elect his or her own public representative. That first election was emblematic of a rebirth – a new country could rise from the yoke of racism, exclusion and oppression and offer a model for a thriving multi racial society. That election was about restoring the dignity of black people whilst at the same time assuring white citizens that they too had a home. The election was also about providing services and economic opportunities for the previously disadvantaged.

Next year's election is an inflection point – or it could be. We arrive at that election with many of the promises of 1994, remaining elusive and unfulfilled. The power keg that could undo our democratic edifice is unemployment and inequality. These must be taken seriously as they have a direct impact on citizens' engagement and preference for or against democracy.

The Human Science Research Council's South African Social Attitudes Survey, conducted annually, shows that South Africans are increasingly dissatisfied with democracy. In 2004, when the country celebrated a decade of democracy, 59 % were satisfied with democracy. Now only 32 % are satisfied with how democracy is working in South Africa.

Research also tells us that South Africans attach an instrumentalist value to democracy – it is only a preferred form of governance if it can deliver socio economic improvements and services like housing, welfare and healthcare. They don't necessarily view democracy as having intrinsic value as the best political system to achieve a just society based on human rights, dignity, freedom and equality. This means that democracy remains fragile as long as the economy tankers.

I would like to suggest that there is a strong link between democracy on the ground and our foreign policy choices. South Africa's democracy must not be allowed to collapse, for a variety of reasons but I would say a strong economy also keeps rogue nations like Russia away. We have seen Russia's aggressive return and reengagement with the continent as a whole. But it is important that I

remind you that Africa is not monolithic – there is diversity and plurality. What we see with Russia’s engagement is that it has been most successful amongst weaker states, where democracy is precarious, where the regulatory environment is non-existent and where the returns are quick.

Africa is not only a stage on which Russia projects its power to the United States and its Western allies, but also a space for the exploitation of new commercial opportunities.

Why does Russia succeed?

Russia has presented itself as a historic ally of Africa, claiming to treat the continent as an equal partner in strengthening economies and crafting a multipolar world that can offer a geopolitical counterbalance in the world order. Russia uses normative justifications like anti-imperialism and sovereignty to penetrate the continent.

These messages find fertile ground in the minds of Africans, they resonate because of the colonial past, built on treating Africans as second class citizens. Russia exploits this history and uses narrative as an effective tool - ensuring that it speaks the language that Africa wants to hear whilst diverting attention from its transactional and extractive engagement with the continent.

The United States, whilst investing in numerous developmental and aid initiatives on the continent and in South Africa, does not quite enjoy the same affection. And it is not only because of the Soviet’s ties to the ruling party in South Africa, but it is because the US is viewed as threatening and condescending. Some epistemic humility is required as the US engages with its partners. Africans value their hard earned autonomy and any partner that adopts a paternalistic tone is viewed with disdain. The United States is viewed as a country that seldom reflects on its own contradictions and inconsistencies, and uses its economic and military might to ensure that others tow the line, whilst adopting a different set of rules for itself. It is true that South Africa benefits richly from its relationship with the United States, far more than it does from its relationship with Russia.

South Africa also has far more in common with the United States and shares common values and norms – an independent judiciary, checks and balances, a free press and a robust civil society that pushes back against state excesses. There is much to value and salvage from this relationship.

However, African states don't want to seem weak. They do not want to be seen to be doing the bidding of the United States. Their peers and constituencies may punish them for that.

Western governments will need to take Africa into their confidence regarding geopolitical matters rather than berate the sovereign stances of countries that feel unseen and undermined. The United States must demonstrate respect for historical wounds and the sovereignty that matters so greatly to its African counter-parts.

The historical ties to Russia are a reality. Yes it was the Soviets made up of other countries, including Ukraine, who supported South Africa's anti apartheid struggle. But the power lay in the Kremlin and it is modern Russia that is in Africa now, with its messaging on historical ties. The message is bolstered by a mutual mistrust of the West. From vaccine inequality to not having a place on the UN Security Council, Africans don't always feel that the US is a friend and thus are not impervious to Russia's overtures, which in the long run, are detrimental to democracy.

But we should not exaggerate Russia's influence on South Africa and other African nations. The spread of Africa's votes on the UN resolutions to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, indicates that Africa was not unanimous, instead it pulled in different directions. For some abstaining was a rational choice. Like South Africa, there are many African states that simply did not want to be the target of another Cold War. They did not want to be made to choose, even as their impulses and sympathies may lie with Ukraine. Their autonomy and non-alignment mattered more to them.

Russia's influence is limited by the extent to which it can influence the political elite of a country and spread its patronage network.

In South Africa, Russia has not succeeded in penetrating the state. Our multi-party democracy is strong and vibrant, civil society pushed back

against the state's nuclear deal with Russia and it was eventually cancelled, our media and academia scrutinize every policy proposal.

Whilst South Africa's position on Russia's aggression was disappointing, I posit that away from the flashing cameras and slogans, our democratic institutions have held. But they need to be supported. Furthermore programs that bolster economic growth and democracy, will go a long way in closing the door for any rogue players and ensuring that the South African state always acts within the dictates of liberal democracy and constitutionalism.