

# Civil society positioning on emerging powers' human rights and foreign policy: *A view of ideology, social unrest and solidaristic potential from South Africa*

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The world has entered an exceptionally fluid geopolitical moment, thanks in part to 'Rising Powers', of which the BRICS are most important, followed by MINT (to borrow acronyms introduced by Goldman Sachs in 2001 [as BRIC] and 2013, respectively). These countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa; and Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey – can be seen through a window known as 'civil society'. An overly vague term, 'civil society' usually suffers divides between *civilised* society (NGOs and trade unions) and *uncivil* society (radical social movements and a new labour/community left). Both versions typically emphasise civil and human rights as central to their repertoire, with the former stressing political inclusion, rule of law, and identity; and the latter stressing socio-economic rights and class struggle. Across the BRICS (and MINT), these groups are engaged in tough campaigns against their rulers. If we look at South African positioning in relation to BRICS with a rudimentary class analysis, the potential for a BRICS bloc has generated at least ten coherent ideological stances, of which the first three and last are 'from above' and the other six are from the 'middle' and 'below':

## TEN IDEOLOGICAL STANDPOINTS in SA, in RELATION TO THE BRICS

- **1. BRICS FROM ABOVE** – heads of state, corporates and elite allies
  - 1.1 BRICS as *anti-imperialist*: ANC & Dirco *rhetoric* – 'Talk Left, Walk Right' – based upon national-liberation traditions; and in recent months, the foreign minister on global geopolitics and finance minister on IMF reform; and with more integrity, opposition to Intellectual Property applied to medicines, especially anti-retrovirals, and contestation of EU Economic Partnership Agreements
  - 1.2 BRICS as *sub-imperialist*: Pretoria re-legitimising 'globalisation,' lubricating neoliberalism in – and exploiting – Africa, intensifying structural exploitation of SA's poor/workers/women/nature on behalf of global/local capital, ensuring maximum greenhouse gas emissions alongside BASIC/US no matter the local/continental/global consequences, and even sometimes playing a 'deputy sheriff' role to world hegemons
  - 1.3 BRICS as *inter-imperialist*: Pretoria's potential support for a new internet delinked from the US; promotion of Putin v Obama in September 2013 at G20; and backing Russia in Crimea/Ukraine conflict – as well as earlier episodes where SA lined up with China in UN e.g. in relation to Burma
- **2. Brics-from-the-Middle** – Academic Forum, intellectuals, trade unions, NGOs
  - 2.1 *pro-BRICS advocates*: most of Academic Forum, Johannesburg & Pretoria 'think tanks', and others (including leftists) with hopes BRICS can more effectively challenge global injustices
  - 2.2 *wait-and-see about BRICS*: most NGOs and their funders – as well as most 'Third Worldist' intellectuals – who wish for BRICS to become 'anti-imp' at UN, Bretton Woods Institutions and with New Development Bank and Contingent Reserve Arrangement, etc
  - 2.3 *critics of BRICS*: those associated with brics-from-below networks who consider BRICS to be 'sub-impis' and sometimes also 'inter-impis'
- **3. brics-from-below** – grassroots activists whose visions run local to global
  - 3.1 *localist*: stuck within local or sectoral silos, including myriad 'popcorn protests' – even some against BRICS corporations or projects – that are insurgent, unstrategic, momentary, at constant risk of becoming xenophobic, and prone to populist demagoguery
  - 3.2 *nationally-bound*: most civil society activists who are vaguely aware of BRICS and are hostile to it, yet they are so bound up in national and sectoral battles – most of which counteract BRICS' agenda – that they fail to link up even in areas that would serve their interests
  - 3.3 *solidaristic-internationalist*: 'global justice movement' allies aspiring for joint campaigning for human and ecological rights against common BRICS enemies such as Vale, China Development Bank, DBSA, Transnet/mega-shipping, fossil fuel corporations and other polluters, coming BRICS Development Bank – or providing solidarity to allies across the BRICS when they are repressed
- **4. pro-West business** – in SA, most organic intellectuals of business connected to Old Money, multinational-corporate branch plants, *Business Day*, northern-centric institutions, Democratic Alliance and their ilk, all increasingly worried that BRICS may act as a coherent anti-Western bloc some day

There are important ongoing overlapping and interlocking civil society relations within the BRICS to recount. Because Fortaleza, **Brazil** hosts the BRICS Summit in July 2014, two days after the World Cup ends, of great interest will be whether society remains furious about [Sepp Blatter](#)'s politically-destructive relationship with Workers Party president Dilma Rousseff. That and other neoliberal tendencies – such as raising public transport prices beyond affordability – have mobilised millions of opponents and generated extreme police repression. More profound challenges come from **Russia**, as a result not only of expansion into Ukraine, but repression of [protests](#). Civil society has been courageous in that authoritarian context: a democracy movement in late 2011, a freedom of expression battle involving a risqué rock band in 2012, gay rights in 2013 and at the Winter Olympics, and anti-war protests in March 2014. In **India**, [activists](#) shook the power structure over corruption in 2011-12, a high-profile rape-murder in late 2012, and a municipal electoral surprise by a left-populist anti-establishment political party in late 2013. In **China**, [activists](#) protest an estimated 150 000 times annually, at roughly equivalent rates in [urban and rural settings](#), especially because of [pollution](#), such as the early April 2014 protest throughout [Guandong](#) against a Paraxylene factory. But just as important are labour struggles, such as the current long strike against Nike and Adidas. In **South Africa**, multiple [resource curses](#) help explain what may be the [world's highest protest rate](#); certainly the labour movement deserves its [World Economic Forum](#) rating as the world's most militant working class the last two years. But South Africa's [diverse protesters](#), including those who on 1882 occasions last year turned violent (according to police minister [Nathi Mthethwa](#)), still fail to link up and establish a democratic movement (though the metalworkers union seeks to change this through its United Front initiative). Indeed, many community protesters have [xenophobic tendencies](#), pointing out how structures of power stay in place through divide-and-conquer, and how difficult it is for grassroots activists in the emerging powers to move from 3.1 to 3.3.

The MINTs have similar accomplishments and challenges. Leftists have been active the past few weeks in **Mexico**, where mass anti-privatisation protests addressed energy and education. A frightened *Newsweek* reporter last October reported from Mexico's 'streets of fire', as protests 'have become more frequent, volatile and violent, analysts say, a response to major domestic policy shifts and growing alienation among the young and unemployed.' **Indonesia** recently witnessed [two million protesting workers](#) demanding 50 percent wage increases, while in **Turkey**, [activists](#) competed with Brazilians and other 'Occupiers' for the largest take-over of public space in major cities last year, to halt the potential destruction of Istanbul's [Gezi Park](#). In **Nigeria**, the most intense social activism – not including the Boko Haram Islamic terrorist network – has come from the oil extraction zone, especially as a result of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). At its peak in 2008 MEND prevented half the oil from being extracted at that stage. After a disarmament, this year witnessed a resurgence of [kidnapping](#) and [sabotage](#), which in the last two months disabled Shell and Agip pipelines carrying more than a fifth of Nigeria's crude to ships. However, the most successful was the [Occupy Nigeria](#) national uprising against the doubling of the petrol price in January 2012. High levels of turmoil since 2011 in Egypt, Thailand, Ukraine and a few other stressed semi-peripheral locations in the world system, as well as in southern Europe and cities in the North through Occupy and related movements, is there a new potential for a civil society internationalism? Are the parallels in the conditions faced by activists, especially human rights abuses, sufficient for civil society organisations to develop their *own* 'foreign policy bottom up'?

To answer, consider what we learned from a prior episode. South African democrats benefitted enormously from an **anti-racist internationalism** that, from the late 1950s, chose a formidable global campaigning approach: [boycotts, divestment and sanctions](#) (BDS). The campaign targeted TNCs active in South Africa, with the argument that profits made from apartheid – especially the migrant labour system that was responsible for super-profits – were immoral, that the taxes they paid to Pretoria kept the oppression going, and that even though the firms' black workers would be adversely affected by BDS, those workers and their organizations mainly supported this non-violent strategy. By the mid-1980s when anti-apartheid BDS peaked, it had contributed substantially to South Africa's 1985 economic crash. The campaign kept pressure up until finally it was possible to declare an irreversible victory: the 'one-person one-vote in a unitary state' election on 27 April 1994. In turn, such memories renew our confidence in international solidarity, especially when **BDS** is being applied today [against Israel](#) (in this case supported by the SA government due to historic relations with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation), as well as [against fossil fuel corporations](#) with repeated [reference to SA](#).

SA also has hosted extensive civil society campaigning on behalf of **Zimbabweans, Swazis, Tibetans and Burmese** struggling for liberation (partly against Pretoria and Beijing). The '**Climate Justice**' movement sees SA as a key site, dating to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the 2011 UN Climate Summit. A variety of other global justice projects, especially for **access to AIDS medicines** and fights against **water privatisation** and **carbon trading**, have had critical groundings in SA. These provide experiences for [international solidarity](#) – but *not yet the coherent over-arching internationalist commitments and strategies needed for the complex times ahead*. BRICS offers one site to compare analysis, strategies, tactics and alliances for what might become a crucial corrective to **destructive tendencies by these countries' corporations**, as they take the baton from Western multinational corporations, within the BRICS and across their hinterlands..