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## **Will SA retreat from Africa?**

KWANDIWE KONDLO: COMMENT - Sep 29 2008 08:45

**One of the things that former President Thabo Mbeki got right during his term was his relationship with and role on the African continent.**

When South Africa embarked on a new era of democracy in 1994, some African heads of state were cautious in their optimism and sceptical about whether South Africa was going to be a truly African state or would remain a white tip on a black continent. Mbeki succeeded in allaying such fears and even exceeded the expectations of most African states.

There was concern about what role the new South Africa would seek to play on the African continent -- would its approach be in line with the expectations of African states or would it be informed by the American and British agenda? More than his predecessor, Nelson Mandela, Mbeki came across as rooted in his African nationalist thinking and vision for the continent. During his time in office he made friends and inspired active commitments to a vision of Africa's development. The so-called super-powers were not always happy with his stance on African matters.

As a result of their positive experience with Mbeki, many African countries are concerned about what is happening in the country at the moment. But African countries' concern is not just about whether Mbeki is president; they are also concerned about the kind of challenges the sudden change in leadership will represent for South Africa's young democracy.

Most importantly, they wonder whether South Africa will still be able to play its pivotal role in pursuing the agenda of African development and what implications the events in South Africa have for the rest of the continent.

A key goal during Mbeki's tenure was to position the country to become a critical player in shaping the development agenda of the continent. South Africa was key in the establishment of the African Union (AU) and pivotal in negotiating the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad).

Even though the new leadership of the ANC has stated unequivocally that the substance and orientation of policy in South Africa will not change after Mbeki's departure, it is not clear whether the areas of emphasis will be the same. If one examines the new ANC leadership's January 8 statement, one is inclined to believe that the focus will shift more to domestic matters.

The proactive leadership role that characterised the Mbeki presidency is likely to be toned down and Mbeki's visions for Africa, such as the African renaissance, are unlikely to receive the passionate and insightful leadership push that characterised his term in office. Much will also depend on whether the ANC will "deploy" him to champion the Africa-wide initiatives he launched and also if his efforts will carry the same weight.

African leaders are a sensitive species; one which jealously guards its collective survival -- hence the tendency to close ranks with leaders of the worst governments on the continent. The ANC's decision to remove Mbeki is definitely "an injury to all", but is accommodated in a gesture of respect for South Africa's sovereign independence and the ANC's right to deal with its own internal matters.

Even so, coming on the heels of the recent explosion of xenophobic violence, the ANC's decision to recall Mbeki has further tarnished South Africa's moral leadership and authority within the community of African states.

The question that has now arisen among African scholars is whether the new forces that have emerged in South Africa will strengthen democracy and provide a new set of lessons for the continent or whether we will see the reversal of democratic gains.

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