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Minding our reputation

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The world cried foul last week when it appeared that the Egyptian soccer team had fallen prey to South African criminals. It was an incident that tapped right into the heart of the negative perception of South Africa overseas, and for the 48 hours following the incident, the internet was flooded with damning reports.

Though time would tell a different story - it was not the average criminal who had robbed the players of their money, but their lady play-friends instead - the moral of this story will not change: the country's international reputation is a vulnerable one.

Danny Jordaan, as the CEO of the Local Organising Committee, and Fikile Mbalula, as the deputy minister of police, picked up on this when they took the local and international media to task this week. Give the place a chance, they said. South Africa was innocent until proven guilty, they said.

That same day Minister of Police Nathi Mthethwa wondered why we always pulled the short straw: Look at Brazil, he pointed out, where crime statistics are as bad as our own, yet the country floats on a positive reputation of great soccer and good samba.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Maybe it's because we had less to overcome than South Africa did," says Paulo Sotero, the director of the Brazil Institute at the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson centre. "We never had the trauma of the legal system of segregation to get to grips with, so maybe we were less divided as a nation when we started out."

Like South Africa, Brazil has a dark past and only crawled out from beneath the cloak of dictatorship in 1985, yet has enjoyed a steady upward climb ever since. In 1980, Brazil's gross domestic product accounted for 40 percent of South America's. Today it accounts for 57 percent.

Sotero puts it down to steady progress doused with a realistic outlook on life and the feeling that while much has been achieved, much more needs to be done "and that the democracy is still being built on a daily basis. And that not only helps our reputation, but our own sense of self as a nation".

Brazilians have rarely been short on optimism, though, and have defined their identity by a vision of what they are going to become as a nation.

South Africans, on the other hand, continue to define themselves by their past, suggests Marian Tupy, a policy analyst at the Washington-based Cato Institute.

He believes that for a long time, South Africa was given the benefit of the doubt, "with a general bias in favour of blaming much of what was wrong with South Africa on the legacy of apartheid, as opposed to the ANC's incompetence", which resulted in a generally positive perception of the country.

That reputation then became sullied under Thabo Mbeki's watch, he argues, because of the former president's Aids denialism, his handling of the Zimbabwe situation, and his general animosity towards the West, which he believes was evident in SA's foreign policy.

To Aids denialism Tupy adds a denialism of sorts where crime is concerned and a perceived tendency on the part of SA authorities to withhold crime data.

Twelve months have passed since the SAPS released its annual statistics and it's understood that this year's figures will not emerge until August or September.

In the view of branding specialist Thebe Ikafaleng, this is a missed opportunity on South Africa's part. "If we don't manage our own brand, then the world will begin to do it for us, which is what is happening. Either you take control of the perception, or the perception will begin to define you. Now we've allowed the image that we are a land of criminals to fester."

Thomas Cargill, the assistant head of the Africa Programme at London's Chatham House think tank, has also watched South Africa's reputation wither in some respects, but suggests it is something that should be appreciated in a wider context. With the global recession has come a shift towards conservatism in the West, and, with that, a return to a more reductionist, and negative, kind of coverage

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of Africa.

Ian Vazquez is the director of the Project on Global Economic Liberty in Washington and dares to compare two countries' international reputations. "Brazil has a reputation as an increasingly successful emerging market economy that has followed a disciplined macro-economic set of policies, and has managed to maintain a sensible democracy. South Africa's democracy, on the other hand, has been critiqued and put under a little bit of doubt."

He suggests that leadership also sways in Brazil's favour. "The fact that the new South African president has been linked to corruption, but has managed to get off, is not helping. It looks like there's a blatant impunity to commit crime and if you're powerful, nothing will necessarily happen."

"Yes, there's a question mark around (President Jacob) Zuma," Sotero agrees, but not for the same reasons that Vazquez suggests. "It's just that we don't know him yet as a president, and he's critical" as one of the major democracies of the so-called south.

Cargill is of the view that time will show us that Zuma will do good for the country's reputation, while Sotero points out that South Africa is far from lacking in leadership. "They've got Mandela, which we never had, a man who continues to teach the world by example. And the world will never forget South Africa for that."

Achille Mbembe is a research professor at Wits University in Johannesburg and reminds us that however bad the country's reputation might be today, it will never be as bad as it was during the apartheid era, "and which only changed the day Mandela was released".

The negotiated settlement that followed "was held as a miracle" by the world and suddenly South Africa and its people were very much in vogue.

However, the country missed the opportunity to articulate a sense of South Africanness and secure a permanent place in the democratic world because though South Africa is inherently pragmatic, it lacks imagination. "The magic of South Africa" is nowhere to be seen today.

While much of this is South Africa's own doing, much of it is down to the fact that South Africa became the darling of the world in 1994 because it was not unlike the rest of the world. "An African country that was potentially worldly," as Mbembe puts it.

"Now the reputation is in tatters," he suggests, but makes the critical point that that is partly because South Africa has become "another ordinary African country" in the eyes of the world.

The challenge now is to combine the two and create an "Afropolitan" state, as he puts it, one that is vibrant as a democracy, with a growing economy, but which is firmly rooted in the African continent. "Totally African and totally wordly. Because Africa is not a world apart. It's a part of the world. And our world would be poorer without it."

If it was the Confederations Cup that put our reputation to the test, then it's up to South Africa to ensure that next year's World Cup defines it.

South Africa's reputation is what it is today, but it's not to say it cannot change tomorrow, though author and analyst Clem Sunter is of the view that if it is not broken, we shouldn't try to fix it.

However negative the coverage of last week's soccer players' misfortune may be, nothing could be more damning than the coverage of Britain right now, a country that is not only reeling from the recession, but left limping by the members of parliament expenses scandal.

"Imagine what they would have said about us if an expense scandal like that broke out here," he says.

He also points to Iran, where massive unrest has been sparked by the disputed election results.

"We've just had an election in South Africa and nobody disputed the results of that. Yes, there's crime and we have to manage it. But democracy is the critical barometer of whether or not a country is functioning. And that's what really matters. South Africa works."

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