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*South Africa in the eyes of the world; This country needs to be viewed in perspective and understood for its Africanness The Sunday Independent (South Africa) June 28, 2009*

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This country needs to be viewed in perspective and understood for its Africanness**BYLINE:** Fiona Forde**BODY:**

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 abroad and for the 48 hours after the event the internet was flooded with damning reports.

Although 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 appears to be vulnerable.

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 is innocent until proved guilty.

That same day, Minister of Police Nathi Mthethwa wondered why we always pull the short straw. Look at Brazil, he pointed out, where crime statistics are as bad, if not worse, than our own, yet the country floats on a 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, 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 crawled out from beneath the cloak of dictatorship only in 1985.

It has, however, enjoyed a steady upward climb since.

In 1980, Brazil's gross domestic product accounted for 40 percent of South America's. Today it accounts for 57 percent and has surpassed Canada as the second-largest economy in the Americas.

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 the democracy is still being built" day by day.

"That not only helps our international reputation, but our own security and sense of self as a nation. We now look at ourselves as a nation that can."

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 **Cato Institute** in Washington.

He believes that for a long time, perhaps too long, South Africa was given the benefit of the doubt, "with a general bias in the media 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 led to a positive perception of the country internationally.

That reputation then became slowly sullied under Thabo Mbeki's watch, he argues, because of the then-president's Aids denialism, his handling of the Zimbabwean situation and his animosity towards the West - which Tupy believes was evident in South Africa's foreign policy.

In Mbeki's defence, Thomas Cargill, the assistant director of the Africa Programme at Chatham House, home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, suggests the expectation was that "Mbeki would single-handedly advance South Africa's standing in the world after Mandela", while in truth the ANC was only beginning to come to terms with the scale of its inheritance.

"Mbeki did try to do his best for the country, but no one man could do this alone," Cargill argues.

Aids was also gaining a grip in Latin America around that time but, Sotero says, "in Brazil we didn't use it to make political gains as the previous government did in South Africa".

"We faced up to it, we tackled the problem and we had some positive results. And I think in social policy, and because of examples like that, we've become quite innovative as a nation, which helps our standing abroad."

To Aids denialism Tupy adds a denialism of sorts on the question of crime and a perceived tendency by South African authorities to withhold crime data. "And people wonder: 'Hey, what's going on here?' "

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

It is unclear whether this has anything to do with the country being in the world glare this month, with the Confederations Cup and the British and Irish Lions tour.

In the view of branding specialist Thebe Ikafaleng, this is an opportunity missed by South Africa.

"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."

Another missed opportunity, in Ikafaleng's view, was the handling of the Egyptian soccer team saga. Until the cause of the crime became apparent, it was the silence by authorities that allowed the world to fulfil its South African prophecies.

"We could've managed our message to the world better, but we didn't. We should have said we have a problem, an investigation is under way, and shown the world we are on top of the situation. People would have looked at us as efficient, as a country trying to deal with crime."

Instead, the reputation only worsened.

Ian Vazquez is the director of the Project on Global Economic Liberty in Washington and dares to look behind South Africa and Brazil's very different reputations.

"Brazil has a reputation as an increasingly successful emerging market economy that has followed a disciplined macro-economic set of policies and 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 in the past few years."

Vazquez suggests that leadership also sways in Brazil's favour.

"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 crimes or violate the law and if you're powerful, nothing will necessarily happen. That doesn't help the country's crime reputation."

Sotero agrees there is a question mark over Jacob Zuma, but not for the reasons Vazquez suggests. "It's just that we don't know him yet as a president, and he's critical for us", as one of the major democracies of the so-called South.

Cargill is of the view that Zuma will do good for the country's reputation, while Sotero points out that South Africa is far from lacking when it comes to 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, a research professor in history and politics at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research, reminds us that however bad the country's reputation may be today, it will never be as bad as it was during the apartheid era and that it

"changed only the day Mandela was released".

This paved the way for a negotiated settlement "and that was held as a miracle" by the world.

That settlement should have been a launching pad for articulating a sense of South Africanness and securing a permanent place in the democratic world.

"But instead we lost a lot of ground on that front," Mbembe suggests, and handed the opportunity to Barack Obama last year. "And now we are envious of him."

Mbembe believes we lost that ground because South Africa as a country is inherently pragmatic but is lacking in imagination, something he believes is evident in politics, economics, culture and most spheres of life. "The magic of South Africa" is nowhere to be seen.

While much of this is South Africa's own doing, much of it is down to the fact that the country 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 he makes the critical point that this is partly because South Africa is in Africa, and to the eyes of the world has become just "another ordinary African country".

The challenge now, Mbembe argues, is to combine the two and create an "Afropolitan" state, one that's vibrant as a democracy, with a growing economy, but which as a country is firmly rooted in the continent - "totally African and totally worldly".

"Africa is not a world apart. It's a part of the world, a very big part of it. Our world would be very much 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.

As Cargill points out, it must also be understood in the global context. With the global financial crisis has come a swing towards conservatism in the West and a return to a more reductionist coverage of Africa, a predictable diet of the negative he thought he had seen the last of.

As author Clem Sunter points out, however, nothing could be more damning than the coverage of Britain right now, a country reeling from the recession but left limping by the MPs' expenses scandal.

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

He also points to Iran, in the throes of grave unrest over the disputed election results.

"We've just had an election in South Africa, and no one disputed the results of that. Yes, there's crime and we have to manage it. But democracy is the critical barometer of whether a country is functioning. And that's what really matters. South Africa works."

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