



Need To Communicate And Democratise Our Foreign Policy

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OUR foreign policy has never been a reflection of the values and norms we cherish as a young democracy and our recent guest (or the company we keep) closely attests to that.

One would note our support for the late Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha, our friendship with the nuclear-weapons-obsessed Kim Jong-Il of North Korea (whose manual labourers are constructing our new State House) and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

As is standard, we explained such friendships briefly through the principle of sovereignty (outdated as it is) and secondly on the role that these friends played in liberating Namibia.

However, that is only part of the problem because the key to any good foreign policy is also the clarity with which actors in that domain communicate.

I have to admit that such has been notably absent ever since the first Foreign Minister, Theo-Ben Gurirab, left the ministry.

Foreign Affairs then was a rather exciting affair of flair, elegance and clarity despite the absence of any coherent white paper on foreign policy.

The fact that Gurirab was pretty experienced and eloquent, with, in addition to a well-crafted international profile, also sustained media affability and most importantly our interest in foreign policy.

The tabling of the white paper on foreign policy by Hidipo Hamutenya in 2002 was in a sense an important step to give a new pragmatic and consistent vision to our relations with the world.

It is under Hidipo Hamutenya's short-spell at Foreign Affairs that we witnessed the rise of low-politics through geo-economics as an operational doctrine of the ministry.

And important attempts were made to try and change the face of the ministry through appointments that would mirror our economic diplomacy.

However, success was mixed and limited to a few appointments due to fact that former President Nujoma also had an active interest in such postings.

Ever since, the state of Namibia's foreign policy has not been in the state of flux than it is now, with no doctrine and no coherent vision for the Ministry and ultimately our engagement with the world.

This does suggest that having a policy on paper is but one part of a bigger puzzle that would include leadership, technical expertise and inter-ministerial coordination.

The foreign policy agenda has expanded beyond recognition and this Ministry now touches on many key aspects of our domestic agenda.

We are falling short on these and our diplomacy at present lacks ambition and does not suggest that we are small country with a desire to punch above our weight: something we should do based on many of our successes on the domestic front.

I don't think that there would be anything odd for President Pohamba to communicate a principled position on Zimbabwe, discuss with Robert Mugabe that it is important to solve the crisis at home in view of its regional and transnational dimension: economic refugees, bad investment perceptions of the region and so on (and for Namibians to know that such issues were discussed).

The flux we find at foreign affairs is not only the result of a Minister who appears less at ease in this area (his CV on the rather dysfunctional foreign ministry website suggests that he likes reading agricultural magazines).

The Minister of Foreign Affairs as the focal point of our diplomacy and the communication of foreign policy is important.

Yet it is not enough.

So this state of flux is also compounded by our general lack of interest in foreign policy because we consider it an area too distant to our daily struggles as citizens.

The absence of a vibrant epistemic community and civil society with an active interest in the governance of foreign policy continues to exacerbate this current malaise.

As a result, the foreign policy domain remains concentrated in the executive.

The legislature with a few political elites with an interest in foreign policy has been intermittently an avenue of feedback.

This underlines the absence of debate on key international events and their impact on our domestic agenda as well as our positioning as one of the brighter spots on the African continent.

In recent years, many events pass without Namibians knowing the views of the Foreign Minister.

Yet it is in our interests as citizens to know what he thinks and why the President appointed a certain individual to an ambassadorial posting.

Various foreign policy actors simply make no attempt to create ownership and understanding of the foreign policy process by Namibians.

To conclude, the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy can exist.

It is just called upon to be reinforced by political elites in the mass media amongst other avenues.

The Foreign Minister or his advisers can write in newspapers explaining this or that position.

The media in turn could amplify phenomena and in the process constrain government in its definition of foreign policy.

In a world where disputes take place over the price of bananas, it is absurd to leave this critical area to only a few political elites ensconced in offices and meetings.

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