

Trump Is Burning US Credibility in South Africa

Donald Trump's recent public meeting with South African president Cyril Ramaphosa was the latest episode in his administration's crusade against the African republic. Over the course of about an hour, Trump lambasted and interrogated Ramaphosa over allegations of systematic killing of white farmers in the country, echoing widespread cries of white genocide among the American right. This grilling was a rhetorical escalation of his recent refugee policy, which has ushered several families of Afrikaners into the United States under the auspices of protection from political persecution, as well as his February aid freeze over land reform. And it reflects, among other things, a perilous indifference to American reception in the young democracy.

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As the centrepiece to his litany of grievances, Trump chose a video compilation of several controversial remarks from contemporary South African politicians on violence and land reform. Most prominent among these was Julius Malema, "commander-in-chief" of the leftist minority party Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), who has received infamy among much of the right for his unapologetic use of the apartheid-era revolutionary chant "*Dubul' ibhunu*" ("Kill the Boer") at public rallies, and for openly countenancing the eventual use of violence to fulfill his party's slogan of "expropriation without compensation" of white-owned South African land. (Malema, for his part, insists that the song does not reflect any hatred by the party of white people as such, and has gone out of his way to promote white EFF representation in parliament and advertise the EFF as a home for likeminded whites.) Jacob Zuma, the former national president now head of the anti-establishment uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party, was also featured. If South Africa is not overseeing a white genocide, Trump asked, why were government officials proudly announcing their intentions to kill and dispossess white farmers?

These questions placed Ramaphosa in the awkward position of having to, essentially, teach the president of the United States about the very idea of a multiparty parliamentary democracy. As his agriculture minister John Steenhuisen explained: not only were Malema and Zuma leaders of opposition parties out of government, in 2024 Ramaphosa's newly minority ANC had entered into a coalition with his own white-dominated, centre-right Democratic Alliance (DA) specifically to keep the EFF and MK from power, placing their marginalisation ahead of the ANC's historical enmity with the functional successor to the old National Party of the country's apartheid days.

Indeed, though for obvious reasons of public image it was unlikely, Ramaphosa and Steenhuisen could have gone further in emphasising their shared political hostility to the EFF and MK. While it is the largest member of the coalition after the ANC, the DA is not the only rightwing party within the new government of national unity. Particularly striking has been the ANC's decision to coalition with Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), highly conservative white and Zulu nationalist parties (respectively) tracing their roots back before the advent of democracy in 1994, when their forerunners engaged in overt reaction to the ANC and international sanctions.

This friendliness with old enemies goes well beyond the erstwhile “rainbow nation” bridge-building of Nelson Mandela. The Afrikaner Volksfront (political ancestor of FF+) and the IFP carried out armed struggle against the ANC late into the transition to democracy, even after hostilities with the National Party had been paused and negotiations were underway, eventually earning them especially harsh condemnations from the post-revolutionary Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The IFP, in particular, was a clear sore spot for Mandela in those years, an exception to his famously irenic disposition; during the first democratic presidential debates, he went as far as to tar the National Party for its association and leniency with the “murderous” IFP, rather than *vice versa*. Both are currently small minority parties, enjoying only 1.5% and 4.2% representation in the National Assembly respectively.

The context of the recent Expropriation Act, for all its controversy, similarly underscores the ANC’s antipathy towards radicals like Malema. Not only, as the press has widely pointed out, does the bill hew a quite moderate course on land reform capacities, similar to eminent domain in the United States. And not only does the government have yet to exercise this newfound power. It is widely understood within South Africa that the ANC promoted this bill specifically to undercut the EFF’s signature calls for more far-reaching powers of seizure and redistribution—a point well grasped enough by the EFF for it to have opposed the bill in parliament.

Even the ANC’s handling of the purely rhetorical “*Dubul’ ibhunu*” matter could have played well to Trump’s concerns about Zuma and Malema, had he been willing to listen. From 2003 to 2022, the chant was proscribed as hate speech by South African courts, a ban in the main respected by the ANC and flouted by the EFF. AfriForum, the Afrikaner advocacy group to have led the legal battle against the use of the chant and a leading voice in claims of white farmer persecution, met just this month with the ANC to discuss “matters of common interest.” While the details of these meetings are still under wraps, it seems likely that any final statement will include their shared distaste for the EFF’s violent posturing.

These facts raise a difficult question for Ramaphosa. If an outright alliance with marginal reactionary forces is insufficient to project credibility to the US over the EFF and MK, what could be? If the ANC will still get “Kill the Boer” thrown in its face after renouncing it and cooperating with its main legal opponents, what more can it do to distance itself from the chant? Trump seems to believe, or at least wishes to convey, that he is willing to do what it takes to put pressure on Ramaphosa to crack down on anti-white racism in his country and government. The trouble is that Ramaphosa has bent over backwards to do so already, apparently to no avail.

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It would be wrong to ignore or disregard the moral dimension to Trump’s missteps here. There is an undeniably racist aspect to his allegations, not just in their origin from the darker recesses of apartheid-nostalgist conspiracy theorising, but in his open distrust of an exceptionally conciliatory black counterpart trying to allay them. Were Trump successfully advancing white or Afrikaner interests in South Africa, his actions would still for that very reason be reprehensible.

But the problems in Trump's ambush this week go beyond such high-minded concerns. South African conservative and liberal leadership are now confronted, quite vividly, with an American government whose assessment of their conduct is frankly divorced from reality. In order to project influence, the US needs to be at least minimally responsive to the facts on the ground, and the degree of compliance with its geopolitical desires. An administration both hostile and insensitive is one that offers no incentives for cooperation, just as an administration both friendly and insensitive offers no incentive against defection and freeloading. Trump has indeed taught Ramaphosa a stern lesson, albeit not the one he intended: "it may be dangerous to be America's enemy, but to be America's friend is fatal."

On the subject of the EFF and MK's redistributionist ambitions, of course, the question of American influence may not in the end matter that much. The ANC and DA, as the prevailing representatives of South African capital, have their own reasons for politically sidelining the revolutionary aspirations of the EFF and the kleptocratic populism of MK. While it seems likely that Western perceptions entered somewhat into their maneuvering against upstart parties on the Left, it seems certain that they would have undertaken those efforts in some manner even had the US been assured not to care one way or the other.

But not all matters of South African policy are so detached from their American reception. To take just one example, Trump's offhand remark during his meeting with Ramaphosa about South African jets was (perhaps unwittingly) apropos. The Test Flying Academy of South Africa was added to the Bureau of Industry and Security's (BIS) "entity list" in 2023, as sanction for training with Chinese military pilots. The BIS has continued to exert pressure on this point, this March sanctioning three new aviation companies for ties to the school. The thin and alarmist basis of these sanctions aside, such points of potential choice between US cooperation and independent national self-interest are only likely to proliferate as Chinese prominence spreads on the continent, especially with Ramaphosa manning the helm of G20.

Nor are the current South African governing elites the only ones likely to take heed from Trump's recent petulance towards their national leader. Trump has delivered a political windfall to opposition figures like Malema, who on the eve of Ramaphosa's visit attacked the national president for walking into what was bound to be a disrespectful reception. The ignorance and intransigence on display in the meeting, which most likely exceeded even Malema's fears (or hopes), have surely vindicated such warnings very richly. The liberal press has praised Ramaphosa for his patience in the face of the accusations, but such patience counts for very little politically to one's electorate if it shows no ability to persuade or mollify. If Trump's aim was to check the political strength of the left opposition in South Africa—from parties, incidentally, much more firmly anti-American than the ANC or DA—the result will inevitably be a catastrophic backfiring.

South Africa is not a solitary case. In publicly attacking the government of national unity for the crimes of its political enemies, Trump has again illustrated to the countries of the world the fate that may await them for falling afoul of America's increasingly temperamental, unpredictable, and arbitrary moral-political standards.

If his actions are likely to meet with apprehension abroad, and condescension from the liberal press, they have been greeted with overwhelming and distasteful warmth from much of the domestic right. *Breitbart*, for example, hailed them as “the best thing to happen to South Africa since the end of apartheid.” On social media, the reception is even more alarming: the meeting has been showered with claims of “FAFO” and classic Trumpian hard-dealing, and much of the pro-Trump commentariat appears embarrassingly unable or unwilling to distinguish Ramaphosa from Malema or Zuma as individuals. Given the well-established feedback cycle between right-wing media and presidential pronouncements, this response bodes very ill.

Viewed from this perspective, the Trump-Ramaphosa exchange is just a particularly offensive reassertion of one of this presidency’s basic themes: a torching of international credibility, prestige, and influence in service of pandering to some of the Trump base’s most noxious elements. While a decline in American soft power in South Africa is likely to meet with approval from certain segments of the Left (not least of them in South Africa itself), it seems a dubious exchange to trade such power in for an increasingly energised reactionary movement at home. The threat posed here may only be exacerbated if the new Afrikaner refugee programme takes off in greater numbers, for if it does we in the US may be forced in this context to contend with the same problems posed elsewhere by expatriate communities of reactionary Ukrainian nationalists or anti-communist Cuban exiles. If so, South African cries of “good riddance” to the newly American refugees may well come to haunt those now voicing them.

Even for all the shameful legacy of US-South African collaboration during the decades of white minority rule, the US still retains (or has retained, until recently) a good deal of moral authority within democratic South Africa after its leading role in the international sanctions campaign. As recently as 2012, US approval in the country exceeded 75%, and as of 2023 still outstrips disapproval. Those are the stakes America now stands to lose. If something is not done to avert the gratuitously hostile and racist path the White House is now pursuing, the costs will be borne not only by South Africa itself but by its former benefactor across the Atlantic.