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**‘A PARIAH IN OUR MIDST’: REGIONAL  
ORGANISATIONS AND THE PROBLEMATIC OF  
WESTERN-DESIGNATED PARIAH REGIMES - THE  
CASES OF SADC/ZIMBABWE AND  
ASEAN/MYANMAR**

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**‘A Pariah in Our Midst’:  
Regional organisations and the problematic of Western-designated pariah  
regimes – the cases of SADC/Zimbabwe and ASEAN/Myanmar**

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How do regional organisations handle the problem of Western-designated ‘pariah’ states? The pressure brought to bear by the United States and the European Union (EU) on regional organisations to play a key role in transforming the domestic politics of member states is becoming a perennial feature of contemporary international relations. Informing this conflictual dynamic is an assumption that regional organisations are best placed due to their proximity, local knowledge and interlocking interests with the affected ‘pariah’ state to act judiciously in managing the delicate diplomacy of political change. Moreover, with regional organisations in areas as far removed as Southern Africa and Southeast Asia overtly committed to democratic norms like democracy, expectations that they are able to perform the determining role as implementing agents of change have been high.

In fact, regional organisations in the developing world have not proven to be effective intermediaries or instruments for promoting compliance with progressive norms within the global structures of governance. From a Western perspective, regional organisations have served primarily as buffers against internationally-inspired action by providing diplomatic and economic resistance to ‘outside interference’, be it mandated through the UN Security Council or elsewhere. Prime examples of this phenomenon are Zimbabwe and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Myanmar and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both of which have featured recalcitrant authoritarian regimes and practices that, while subjected to diplomatic campaigns and economic sanctions by the West, have sought – and gained – active support from their respective regional organisations. At the same time, within the confines of established regional practice, a close examination of regional organisations and their member states demonstrates that actions were taken to censure the regimes in Zimbabwe and Myanmar. Why this has been the case and how regional organisations have attempted to respond to contradictory mandates from international, regional and domestic sources forms the focus of this investigation.

This paper examines the role of regional organisations as interlocutors between the putatively universal liberal norms promoted by extra-regional actors and the communities of practice adopted by two regional organisations, namely, SADC and ASEAN. In particular, it will investigate the dilemmas posed by Western-designated pariah regimes for said regional organisations and the processes by which these organisations seek to address this problematic. It will focus on the relationship between multilateral institutions as instigators of liberal norms as sources of regime legitimacy; regional organisations as interpreters of these norms; and the interplay between the local (pariah regimes and civil society in these states) and these aforementioned entities.

## Regional Organisations and International Security

The role of regional organisations as interlocutors between the international community and the local environment has become a well-established principle in international law based on Chapter VIII of the UN Charter.<sup>1</sup> Article 52(3), for example, allows for a leading role in the resolution of international disputes at the regional level at the behest of the Security Council. Indeed, the UN Secretary General's blueprint for post-Cold War security management, *An Agenda for Peace* (Boutros-Ghali 1995: 63-4), explicitly builds on this by endorsing the idea that:

‘...undertakings by a group of States to deal with a matter appropriate for regional action which can also contribute to the maintenance of peace and security...’

He goes on to note:

‘In the past, regional arrangements often were created because of the absence of a universal system for collective security; thus their activities could on occasion work at cross-purposes with the sense of solidarity required for the effectiveness of the world Organisation. But in this new era of opportunity, regional arrangements or agencies can render great service if their actions are taken in a manner consistent with the Purposes and Principles of the Charter, and if their relationship with the United Nations, and in particular the Security Council, is governed by Chapter VIII.’

This notion of an enhanced role for regional organisations in the security arena linked to ‘burden sharing’ was further supported by the Report of the Commission on Global Governance (1995: 50-1) and, with respect to peacekeeping, the Brahimi Report (United Nations 2000).

This position of regional organisations as a bridge between the international and its values, processes and institutions is seen by many to be the foundation for emerging structures of global governance (Falk 1999: 241-2; Knight 2000: 176-9). That being said, there is great variation in development of formalised procedures and the attendant strength of regional institutions as sites of negotiation and enforcement of international regimes. For instance, while the standing of regional organisations within the global trading environment is clearly drawn, built around the principle of ‘most-favoured nation status’ and codified through practices derived from legal provisions such as Article 24 in the WTO treaty and its dispute-resolution mechanism, regional organisations’ security provisions are much less well-articulated.

Security arrangements rely upon the twin notions of ‘collective security’ and ‘subsidiarity’ in peace enforcement and peacekeeping, concepts underwritten by the fact that all member states of the UN are obliged to fulfil responsibilities as signatories of the Charter (UN 1945; Falk 1999: 241; Knight 2000: 170-2). These efforts nonetheless have a much more chequered history of application and adherence by member states than trade issues, while there is only selective use of the International Court of Justice to resolve conflicts. This uneven landscape within a hierarchical structure of governance, dependent upon the substantive levels of acceptance of prevailing norms in economic and security issues at the regional and local levels that go beyond formal acceptance at the international level, contributes to uncertainty in perception and ultimately practice in realising international security aims.

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<sup>1</sup> The term used in the Charter is ‘regional arrangements’, but this is today commonly understood to include regional organisations (Gareis and Varwick 2005: 87)

A major oversight in assessments of regional organisations within the framework of global governance and security is their position towards internationally-designated ‘pariah regimes’. The act of legitimising and de-legitimising political regimes is absolutely crucial to promoting effective governance of the global system in line with the norms found in the UN Charter and operationalised through the positions adopted, for instance, by the UN Security Council or UN General Assembly. In terms of Chapter VIII, regional organisations, as intermediaries between the international and the local, are presumed by policy makers and scholars to enforce rules and processes defined at the global level (UN 1945; Boutros-Ghali 1995; Knight 2000; Graham and Felicio 2005; Mills 2005). These notions are by and large built upon the approach and experience of the EU. In fact, experience has shown that regional organisations are as often resistant to international entreaties as they are compliant, actively seeking to thwart or redefine these in line with local perceptions. Apartheid South Africa, which had tacit support for domestic segregation policies from the Western-dominated UN Security Council up to the 1980s, failed to win regional support either from the Organisation for African Unity, the Frontline States group or even for its own stillborn regional organisation, the Constellation of Southern African States.<sup>2</sup> African regional resistance to the acknowledgment and enforcement of international positions (played out in the UN General Assembly but operationalised on the continent) proved to be critical to de-legitimising the apartheid regime in favour of anti-apartheid non-state actors, most especially the African National Congress (ANC), as well as redefining the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs.

As the precise modalities of the expected role of regional organisations are not clearly spelled out in the UN Charter and actual practice by regional organisations has not provided a consistent guide to understanding the nature of this relationship, there remains considerable ambiguity in assessing this phenomenon. Neither does the theoretical literature on the subject provide much insight into regional approaches to global governance, especially given the limited number of comparative studies of regional organisations and security issues.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, with the bulk of global security issues increasingly found in the developing countries of the South – where failed states vie with aspirant nuclear powers for international attention – the stance taken by regional organisations is recognised to be crucial. In this context, it seems that the most important factors that impact upon this international-regional-local dynamic in the realm of security are:

- a) Multilateral institutions that seek to define global security norms and concerns and promulgate policies in line with these concerns;
- b) Regional organisations as sites of interpretation of these international norms and their ‘localisation’ in line with prevailing regional and local norms;
- c) The local environment as the source of insecurity itself, the actors engaged in the issue and an organisational arena for addressing the security concern.

Underlying this schema is a set of assumptions regarding the hierarchical character of norms diffusion as well as the linear nature of the process of policy implementation. The role of local actors, especially though not exclusively states within the region, as arbitrators of external ideas and process, is clearly central. As Acharya (2004) demonstrates in his work on

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<sup>2</sup> The latter in fact inspired the creation of a ‘counter’ regional formation, the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference in 1980.

<sup>3</sup> This is changing, for instance see Wulf 2009.

norm localisation, it is local agents who act as interpreters and implementers of ‘external’ ideas and policies, rendering them understandable and even palatable in local terms, or outright rejecting their incorporation into the local political landscape. It is a process that can significantly alter the content of the ideas and policies from ‘outside’. The parallel with regional organisations in relation to the international community – especially Western states that have elaborated an increasingly significant legal departure from classic definitions of sovereignty through such doctrines as the ‘responsibility to protect’ – is relevant. Within the context of multilateral institutions and regional organisations it must be acknowledged that it is states that delineate and contest the concept of ‘global security’ in terms of their respective interests. The state’s ability to interpret externally-generated norms and policy prescriptions in ways that conform to regional norms and practices – and crucially are in tune with their own interests – determines the scope of action available on a given issue. Even in those cases where great powers, whether legitimated or not by international institutions, employ their own means to tackle a particular threat (as was the case in Iraq in 2003), the capacity for generating successful and sustainable outcomes remains crucially dependent on local and regional factors. Capturing this dynamic between states and regional organisations is critical to understanding processes and outcomes of decisions made to respond to designated threats to global security.

Comparing the cases of SADC in relation to Zimbabwe and ASEAN in relation to Myanmar provides important insights into the dilemmas and dynamics posed by Western-designated pariahs. In defining the security concern in these regions, Western countries in particular have focused on sources of political regime legitimacy that privilege both process – elections that the governing parties have lost or nullified – and local (opposition) actors as the key factors in determining their decision to characterise these states as pariahs and call for policies that isolate their governments. Regional organisations have emphasised the sanctity of state sovereignty and the rule of non-interference in Zimbabwe (Schoeman and Alden 2003) and Myanmar (Ramcharan 2000), as well as the role of initiatives that are said to conform to regional norms (‘quiet diplomacy’ and ‘ASEAN way’) and therefore are in their view likely to be more effective. This active resistance on the part of SADC and ASEAN to the range of Western-led efforts to delegitimise the political regimes in Harare and Yangon – including diplomatic and economic sanctions campaigns – has resulted in a stalemate that has not resolved these underlying security concerns. This was despite the fact that key states within the regional organisations actively attempted to bring about a change in conduct by the internationally-designated pariahs so as to facilitate a resolution acceptable to local and international actors. Despite this, the continuing deterioration of conditions within these countries, coming atop sustained human rights violations, only served to underscore the dire consequences of public inaction and the concomitant failure of regional approaches to effectively manage and resolve security dilemmas in their respective regions.

### **SADC and Zimbabwe**

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) was formally established in 1992, though its origins reside in the regional politics of resistance to apartheid and colonialism. The creation of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference in April 1980 – partially in response to the apartheid government’s own regional initiative and actively supported by Western European governments– with its explicit mandate to reduce its members’ economic dependency upon South Africa, reflected the regional ethos of solidarity with liberation aims and the incoming leadership of Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe. By 1992, with the negotiations towards a democratic transition well underway in South Africa, the

organisation recast its aims to embark on a deeper developmental agenda, bolster regional security and commit itself to supporting democracy and human rights amongst members. With all member states constitutional democracies, except Swaziland and the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (Angola having returned to civil war in the wake of the disputed 1991 elections), the conditions for SADC fostering greater economic prosperity while encouraging adherence to democratic principles seemed brighter than ever. Moreover, from the perspective of the US and the EU, by incorporating newly democratic South Africa within the organisational structures in 1994, SADC coupled the region's strongest economy, military and bureaucracy to the fulfilment of these ambitions (Lyman 1996).

The onset of the Zimbabwean crisis in 2000, though rooted in the transitional arrangements that effectively froze the political economy of settler colonialism through constitutional means at the same time that it opened up the political system to democratic pluralism led by a liberation party, had its contemporary expression in the rising tide of democratic politics in that country (Alden and Anseuw 2009). The establishment of an opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which drew its support primarily from the trade unions, urban professionals and the white farming community, challenged the decision by the Zimbabwean Peoples National Unity-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) to alter the constitution to entrench Robert Mugabe's position as head of state. After losing considerable support to the MDC in parliamentary elections in June 2000, Mugabe reignited the national debate on land as a way of reinvigorating support from Zanu-PF's traditional rural constituency. Political violence instigated by Zanu-PF supporters with the complicity of the police was initially aimed at ousting white commercial farmers from the land, but spilled over into the run-up to the presidential elections in 2002. These actions included systemic disruption of opposition campaigning, a voter-registration process riddled with fraud, intimidation and even murder of opposition candidates and their supporters (International Crisis Group 2004). The Zimbabwean government earned a sharp condemnation from the US, Australia and the EU.

For ex-settler states like South Africa and Namibia, which shared many of the same domestic characteristics found in Zimbabwe, the crisis in Zimbabwe raised deeply uncomfortable questions about the conduct and commitment of the ruling parties in fulfilling liberation-era promises. Indeed, in South Africa over 84 percent of agricultural land remained in the hands of white owners, leaving the apartheid-era land ownership patterns virtually unchanged. Between 1994 and 1999 only 5,000 of the estimated 63,500 land-restitution claims had been settled by the government. In neighbouring Namibia, where 3,800 white commercial farmers owned 80 percent of the arable land, just as little progress had also been made on agrarian reform. By 2001, only 97 commercial farms (totalling 568,821 hectares) had been acquired for resettlement and 1,964 black families resettled (Alden and Anseuw 2009). For other SADC countries, the powerful anti-imperial message conveyed by Mugabe evoked the regional solidarity campaigns of the recent past (Philminster and Raftopoulos 2005).

The result was that the South African government – widely expected by the West to take up a critical stance against the violations of basic democratic practice by Harare given its own democratic credentials – acted with a curious mix of timidity, equivocation and support for the Zimbabwean government's actions. Other SADC states were hardly different in their approach to the issues, with the notable exception of Botswana, and either explicitly endorsed Mugabe's position or remained conspicuously silent. Most importantly, the South African president, Thabo Mbeki, articulated a policy of constructive engagement (called 'quiet diplomacy'), which sought to encourage Mugabe privately on the path to reform while publicly proclaiming support for his actions (Schoeman and Alden 2003). As Zimbabwe was

South Africa's largest trading partner in Africa, Mbeki's government argued that the imposition of economic sanctions would impose high costs on South African businesses operating there. Moreover, there was serious concern that a destabilised Zimbabwe would ignite refugee flows and greater economic chaos across the region (Africa Institute 2001). Namibia, whose direct ties with the Zimbabwean economy were far fewer, nonetheless was linked through its close monetary and trade links to South Africa. Its president, Sam Nujoma, had a close personal relationship with Mugabe and this contributed to Namibia's support for Zimbabwean intervention in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1998 (itself controversial and unauthorised by SADC).

At the SADC level, despite differences behind the scenes, regional solidarity marked the collective response to the Zimbabwean crisis in its initial phase. A meeting between Mugabe and the leaders of South Africa and Mozambique in April 2000 ended with Mbeki and Joaquim Chissano proclaiming solidarity with the Zimbabwean leader. Nujoma was consistently supportive of Mugabe's analysis of the origins of the crisis – colonial legacies and neo-imperialism – and the measures adopted by Zanu-PF to combat these factors. This position began to change at the August 2001 SADC summit in Blantyre, which expressed concern at the effect the crisis was having on the region, and a SADC Task Team criticised Mugabe in October 2001 on failure to reinstate law and order. Concurrently, SADC leaders sought to punish Mugabe by denying him expected senior positions within the organisation. At a press conference in November 2001, Mbeki acknowledged that the violence occurring in the build up to the Zimbabwean presidential elections would affect more than just perceptions, noting (Independent Online, May 29, 2001): 'If you have elections which are not seen as legitimate by the people, you will have a situation that will be worse than the present one.' The response of the Zimbabwean media to this most circumspect of public criticisms was devastatingly personal, accusing Mbeki of conspiring with the British government to unseat Mugabe and turn back the clock on liberation.

During the build up to Zimbabwe's presidential elections of March 2002, South African officials sought to address the issue in the regional SADC setting, the continental forum of the Organisation of African Unity, and internationally through the Commonwealth and the UN. Following the UN's Millennium 2000 Summit, where Mbeki committed the government to play a role as intermediary between the international financial institutions and Zimbabwe at the behest of Kofi Annan, South African officials secured International Monetary Fund (IMF) support for a financial package to cover some of the costs of a land-redistribution programme envisaged at a 1998 UN Development Programme conference. Britain itself was induced to pledge US\$57 million towards the process, but again the agreement fell apart as Harare refused to be moved on the issue of 'law and order' and transparency. There was a last effort to resolve the land question in advance of the Zimbabwean presidential elections at a meeting in Abuja, Nigeria in September 2001 under the auspices of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, which promised British financial support for land reform and its results were swiftly endorsed by five SADC presidents.

At the same time, Mugabe began to speak openly at SADC summits of mobilising the black population of neighbouring states to launch their own land occupations of white-owned commercial farms, raising the spectacle of economic disruption and political strife across the region. His most notable articulation of this was his vitriolic attack on the British government in front of world leaders at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. Mugabe himself instigated, to thundering applause, the most memorable attack on Blair at that gathering (Telegraph, September 3, 2002):

‘We are not Europeans. We have not asked for an inch of Europe, any square inch of that territory. So Blair, keep your England and let me keep my Zimbabwe.’

The Chief of Zimbabwe’s Defence Force, General Vitalis Zvinavashe, openly declared he would not be willing to serve under a president who had not been part of the liberation struggle, a position criticised by SADC leaders (Human Rights Watch 2005). The rapturous receptions Mugabe and other top Zanu-PF officials received at gatherings around the region, including in South Africa and Namibia, underscored his growing popularity with African audiences.<sup>4</sup>

The ramifications of the Zimbabwean crisis for the domestic situation in the former settler states were considerable (Lahiff and Cousins 2001). Land activists, from the Transkei Land Services Organisation to the Landless Peoples Movement in South Africa to Namibian NGO and trade unionists, used the spectacle in Zimbabwe to raise questions about the continuing inequities in land distribution in their countries. Many regional NGOs, who responded with a critical review of their own situations to Moyo’s comments criticising their inaction (cited in Mwengo 1999: 7), moved to embrace a more aggressive public stance on the topic in future. New measures that they committed themselves to included ‘stimulating a faster pace of land reforms by exerting pressure on government and policy makers’ as well as ‘influencing donors and other foreign interests to support land reform and redistribution processes’ (Mwengo 1999: 42). In Namibia, the Namibian National Farmers Union (NFFU), the Namibian NGO Forum (Nangof) and the National Union of Namibian Workers organised a march on parliament to protest about the slow pace of land reform as well as their exclusion from consultation on proposed legislation on communal land rights (The Namibian, September 8, 1999). After a visit to Zimbabwe in April 2000, the NNFU and Nangof were able to call upon the Zimbabwean experience as a stark warning to the government and the white commercial farmers that land reform was imperative to stability in Namibia, declaring (NNFU Nangof press statement, May 24, 2000): ‘Let us keep in mind that today is Zimbabwe and tomorrow could be Namibia.’

This heightening of domestic tensions over the land issue played into Mugabe’s hands, putting the South African government on the defensive, denying the failure of its land reform programmes to address inequalities inherited from the past and emphasising the importance of retaining the constitutional guarantees on property. In South Africa, where the reaction to the Zimbabwean crisis had been more divided, growing pressure within the ANC to take a harder line against Mugabe had been a feature of the public debate since the middle of 2000.<sup>5</sup> But, at the same time, contrary expressions of support within the party were much in evidence. For example, Kgalema Motlanthe, ANC Secretary General, declared that Zimbabwe’s land occupations were a ‘protest action’ and that the land imbalance in that country was ‘immoral’ (cited in Lahiff and Cousins 2001: 655). The popularity of Zanu-PF amongst ANC party rank and file was clearly illustrated by the cheers that greeted Emmerson Mnangagwa, at that time Mugabe chosen successor, at the annual ANC party congress in 2002 (Main and Guardian, April 26, 2003). At the same time, the composition of the MDC, led by black trade unionists and white agricultural interests, mirrored in broad terms (potentially) discontented factions within South Africa’s own political landscape: there was a visceral reaction within ANC

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Mashabela (2002) declared at the WSSD summit that Mugabe was ‘speaking for black people worldwide’.

<sup>5</sup> The ANC’s alliance partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party, became increasingly vocal in their criticism of spiral of violence and attacks on Zimbabwean trade unions and the media.



circles against legitimising the MDC over the interests of a fellow liberation movement. By 2004, however, the ANC had acknowledged the shortcomings of the market-based approach to reform, a key component of the historic compromise that ushered in the transition to democracy. In South Africa, Mbeki committed to transforming black ownership of farmland to 30 percent of all land by 2015 and increased the finances available to the Department of Land Affairs to purchase farms as well as the legal tools to speed up expropriation. In Namibia, despite inflammatory language by Nujoma, the emphasis on due process was continually underscored by the government as it sought to resettle the estimated 240,000 landless Namibians.

The international reaction to the presidential elections in Zimbabwe in 2002 and the atmosphere of violence and intimidation that preceded them was divided. The electoral observers from regional states in Southern Africa declared the poll to be ‘free and fair’, though the SADC parliamentary electoral observers broke with this position saying (SADC Parliamentary Forum 2002: 12):

‘The climate of insecurity obtaining in Zimbabwe since the 2000 parliamentary elections was such that the electoral process could not be said to adequately comply with the Norms and Standards of Elections in the SADC region’.

So too did the Commonwealth Observer Mission, led by Nigerian General Abjulsalami Abubakar, which stated that ‘the conditions in Zimbabwe did not adequately allow for a free expression of will by the electors’ and advocated an ‘appropriate Commonwealth response’ (International Crisis Group 2004). The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in London in the aftermath of the Zimbabwean election voted for a year’s suspension. A reluctant Mbeki joined Nigerian president Oluseun Obasanjo and Australia’s John Howard in forming the ‘Troika’ of states who were to review and report on the Zimbabwean government’s progress in meeting the Commonwealth’s expressed concerns in the coming year. At the Commonwealth summit held in Abuja, Mugabe’s anger at the unwillingness to rescind its suspension and, concurrently, the failure of South African-led attempts to organise a removal of its head, Don MacKinnon, finally caused the Zimbabwean president to withdraw the country permanently from the organisation in December 2003.

By 2004, with an estimated four hundred farms left in the hands of whites and reportedly several hundred of their families residing in the cities, the land issue had largely receded into the background of the Zimbabwean crisis. In its stead was a naked contest for political power, played out both within Zanu-PF and its opponents, the MDC. In the winter of 2005, acting in advance of parliamentary elections, a security operation code named ‘Operation Murambatsvina’ – designed to rid Harare’s outlying areas of MDC supporters – was launched, bulldozing houses and informal settlements and leaving an estimated 18,000 people without shelter. The government’s electoral victory was widely condemned by Western countries for its overt violence and intimidation of the MDC, but endorsed by South Africa and the African Union. The MDC itself split into two factions, one wing associated with Tsvangirai and a smaller group headed by Arthur Mutambara, over a decision not to participate in the newly formed Senate. During this period, the economic hardships facing the country continued to escalate, with life expectancy falling from 60 years in 1990 to 37 years in 2006. The economy itself steadily lost ground, shrinking at a rate of over 10 percent from 2002 onwards, unemployment estimated at 80 percent and its currency experiencing hyperinflation to the point where the Reserve Bank had to issue a new Z\$100 trillion note in January 2009. Starvation and hunger directly effecting at least three million people stalked the country.

Remarkably, despite these terribly adverse conditions facing much of the country, the ability of Mugabe's government to mobilise support both within Zimbabwe and, most importantly, in the rest of Africa remained largely intact. Within Zimbabwe, the strategic use of dwindling resources and party loyalties, alongside direct intimidation and fear, continued to deliver support from traditional leaders and amongst the rural communities. At the same time, by continuing to decry British and US interference in Zimbabwean affairs, Mugabe ensured that South Africa and to a large extent SADC itself treated his government's trespasses of democracy and economic problems with kid gloves. The application of sanctions by the IMF – a largely meaningless act in light of Zimbabwe's inability to meet its interest payments – coupled to targeted sanctions against top Zanu-PF officials and their families by Washington, Brussels and their allies, provided the necessary 'proof' of Western complicity in a conspiracy to overturn the liberation. Mugabe's efforts to seek alternative sources of support through his 'Look East' policy launched in 2003 secured diplomatic support from China, critical in blocking action at the UN Security Council, but this did not translate into much more than promises of financial investment.

However, patience within governing circles in Pretoria had begun to thin, especially after Harare kicked out a Cosatu delegation in 2007; and, as conditions deteriorated within Zimbabwe, tens of thousands of refugees began to stream over the border into neighbouring countries. South African efforts to mediate disputes in advance of the joint presidential and parliamentary elections in March 2008 resulted in the promulgation in Zimbabwe of a SADC commitment to new accountable standards for electoral contests. The result was a clear victory for the newly reunited MDC in parliament and (though disputed by a shocked Zanu-PF) a victory for Morgan Tsvangirai. At the G8 summit in Hokkaido three months later, Mbeki was subjected to public criticism by the US President and British Prime Minister for his defence of Mugabe; and, subsequently, they tabled a resolution at the UN Security Council condemning the Zimbabwean governments' failure to abide by the results of the elections. A veto by China and Russia thwarted the resolution, but active pressure applied by China and South Africa on Mugabe – the former state indicating that they would not block future resolutions – finally brought Mugabe into direct talks with Tsvangirai. Though protracted, the discussions produced a joint commitment to work together in a government of national unity. Predictably, the SADC mediation in late 2008 tilted towards Mugabe and forced Tsvangirai and his party to accept a secondary role as prime minister in a unity government under the Zanu-PF leader in January 2009.

### **ASEAN and Myanmar**

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines against a backdrop of decades of domestic and regional turmoil. The key pillars of the organisation were a commitment to a classic interpretation of the sovereignty principle and a desire to minimise what were seen to be destabilising forms of external involvement in the region. The organisation evolved gradually, assuming a greater official role through the establishment of the Secretariat at the Jakarta Summit in 1976, as well as expanding its involvement in the economic development of the region. These economic initiatives, which produced only modest growth in intra-regional trade, were given a further boost in 1992 with the commitment to establish an ASEAN Free Trade Area, which became operational in 2003. Security co-operation in the form of confidence-building measures and frequent multilateral and track two meetings were adopted and frequently employed by ASEAN. These endeavours were linked to a host of initiatives, including the launching of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, which put the organisation at

the centre of some of the most contentious regional security issues. Through a continual series of meetings at ministerial levels, punctuated by annual summits involving ASEAN leaders, the organisation has developed an orchestrated form of regularised diplomacy that aims at, and to some extent has achieved, the building of greater regional cohesion (Simon 2008). At the same time, a process of expansion of ASEAN membership brought Vietnam into the organisation in 1995, followed by the decision to include Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and finally (after a two-year delay) Cambodia in 1999, putting the organisation at its current complement of ten states.<sup>6</sup>

ASEAN diplomacy has centred on the founding ideals encapsulated in the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation, which enshrined sovereignty and non-interference as the bedrock of the institution, and the subsequent call for a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in 1971, which decried external interference in the region. These regional norms provided the moral authority for ASEAN to take a lead role in what is arguably its most successful diplomatic initiative, the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from war-torn Cambodia in 1992. Post-Cold War diplomacy has focused on developing approaches to managing – if not resolving – a range of pressing regional security issues with intra- and extra-regional dimensions, such as the competing claims over the resource-rich South China Sea. An innovative response to the power asymmetry between the organisation and the key international actors in the region – the US, China, India and the EU – prompted the creation of the ‘dialogue partner’ process. In stylistic terms, the organisation’s perchance for informal, elite-based interaction came to be known as the ‘ASEAN way’. This approach held that private diplomacy was preferable to its public form – which was not only seen to be culturally offensive but often counter-productive – as a means of addressing problems between members.

Myanmar, the country once known as Burma (and still called that by pro-democracy activists), is the organisation’s most vexing contemporary problem in the post-Cold War era. The rise of anti-government protests in 1988, despite thousands being killed in the ensuing crackdown, brought about the collapse of the isolationist regime of Ne Win and led to a military take-over. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) held elections in May 1990 in pursuit of external legitimacy (Steinberg 2007: 136) and, much to the shock of the presiding military junta, Aung Sung Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) won 392 out of the 489 seats being contested. The SLORC nullified the results, banned the NLD and placed Suu Kyi under house arrest. Despite a tide of domestic and Western protests, the SLORC continued its suppression of the NLD and its supporters. General Than Shwe launched the National Convention in 1993, a putative all-party process – which periodically banned the participation of the NLD representatives – whose aim was to develop a new constitution. By July 1995, the military junta released Suu Kyi and a process of dialogue with the UN Secretary General’s special envoys commenced, complemented by preliminary discussions with ASEAN over ascension. This was cut short when Suu Kyi was re-arrested and the National Convention was suspended a year later.

Seeking a way out of the impasse, the military junta established the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, replacing the SLORC but nonetheless retaining a heavy military dominance. The aim of this move was to pave the way for stability and the rehabilitation of Myanmar (as the country was now called) back into international community. It was on this basis that Myanmar joined ASEAN in 1997, with the SPDC having given assurances to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed that this

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<sup>6</sup> Brunei was admitted to ASEAN in 1984.

represented a move towards a form of democracy. According to scholars, the expectation at the time was that the military would adopt a version of Indonesia's 'guided democracy', where the military had a statutory role in decision making since the 1965 coup. The collapse of Suharto's regime in mid-1998 rendered that idea temporarily stillborn and Myanmar continued on its uncertain path of military rule through that SPDC and under the spotlight of sustained Western criticism.

Though the decision to bring Myanmar into the regional organisation generated a measure of controversy within ASEAN, it became more acute as the years passed and the internal situation continued to generate negative publicity and problems. At the regional level, the combination of illegal drugs and human trafficking into Thailand as well as refugee flows out of Myanmar impacted on that country in particular, exacerbated by occasional military skirmishes on their common border (Ganesan 2006). By 1998, the Thai government proposed the adoption of a new form of public diplomacy towards Myanmar characterised as 'flexible engagement'. Resisted by the SPDC with the support of Vietnam, a watered-down version of 'enhanced interaction' was adopted instead (Simon 2008: 272). In June 2003, in the wake of the unrest at Depayin the previous month that cost the lives of four members of the NLD and brought about a renewed detention of the Nobel Prize winner, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting took their first public stance. Sharp exchanges were alleged to have passed between some ASEAN leaders and the Myanmar foreign minister, Khin Nyunt, and the final communiqué broke new ground in publicly calling on Myanmar's government to demonstrate progress towards a 'peaceful transition to democracy' (Haacke 2006: 192).

In the wake of rising tensions between ASEAN and Myanmar a number of diplomatic initiatives were mooted to break the deadlock. Indonesia proposed the convening of an 'ASEAN Troika' (an innovation created in 2000 to handle sensitive issues with regional political and security implications), but this was rejected by the SPDC (Ganesan 2006: 142). Mahathir suggested darkly that, in the absence of moves towards democratisation, Myanmar would be expelled from ASEAN 'as a last resort'. A newly-elected Thai government put forward the idea of a 'road map' in 2003 with the ultimate aim of finding a way of releasing the NLD's leader and holding free elections to which the SPDC responded with the seven-step 'road map' of its own (Ganesan 2006: 140-1;). This so-called 'Bangkok process' had the support of key member states like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. However, the sudden removal of Khin Nyunt (who was viewed as a moderate within the military junta in Myanmar) in advance of the ASEAN Summit in 2004 proved to be a major setback and, despite the fact that no mention was made of the situation in Myanmar in the proceeding and final communiqués of the subsequent ASEAN Summit in 2004, the military – seemingly in defiance of ASEAN – extended Suu Kyi's house arrest for another year. The UN Special Envoy, a Malaysian diplomat named Razali Ismail, gave up trying to win Suu Kyi's release by late 2004, when he was no longer welcome in the country.

Throughout this period, the US, European states and Japan exerted pressure on the government of Myanmar to varying degrees. The US initially imposed wide-ranging sanctions after the military takeover in 1988 and the junta's subsequent decision to scuttle the 1990 elections, while the EU introduced selective trade and arms embargoes as well as restrictions on investment and aid. In December 2005, the US and Britain sponsored an informal consultation about conditions in Myanmar at the UN Security Council, followed by a decision to allow Myanmar to become a formal part of the UN Security Council agenda in 2006. For its part Japan maintained a closer association with the regime but kept restrictions on their foreign aid in place since 1988; these were further reduced after the Depayin incident

in 2003 . Ironically, the structured forms of diplomatic engagement, namely the dialogue-partnership process – which sought to turn the asymmetric ties with major foreign powers into a form of ‘enmeshment’ – provided a platform at these annual gatherings for ritualised condemnation of Myanmar and pressure on ASEAN by the US and the EU. Pro-democracy activists in the West have pushed for compliance by Western companies through boycotts and lawsuits, while UN agencies like the International Labour Organisation took legal action at the International Court of Justice in November 2006 against the military junta, claiming that tens of thousands of Burmese were subject to forced labour. The UN General Assembly, responding to the annual reports submitted by the UN Special Rapporteur of the Commission of Human Rights for Myanmar, passed resolutions in 2006 condemning the violation of human rights there.

At the same time, with the advent of sanctions and boycotts by the West, the military junta looked to China for diplomatic, military and economic support. The suspension of Beijing’s support for the Burmese Communist Party in 1995, one of the more effective insurgency groups active in Myanmar, coupled to the onset of major investments in infrastructure and the energy sphere, produced important economic and diplomatic dividends for the junta (Haacke 2006: 25-33). After 1995, the SPDC sought to diversify its economic partners to include India and has been rewarded with loans and investments in its energy sector as well as diplomatic backing at the UN (Haacke 2006: 33-8). ASEAN members have provided some direct investment but, partly due to the negative impact of the 1997 Asian economic crisis on the region, this fell far short of the SPDC’s expectations.

At the same time, developments within ASEAN added additional impetus to the pressure being directed at Myanmar. In December 2005, the decision was taken to establish a formal legal entity through the promulgation of the ASEAN Charter, which included a strong endorsement of human rights and democracy. The ensuing debate over the use of sanctions against member states that violated ASEAN declarations and agreements resulted in a modification of the sanctions provisions. Nonetheless, in this contentious climate, ASEAN members were able to convince Myanmar not to take up the rotational chairmanship of the organisation to avoid the spectacle of public condemnation (and the possibility of a boycott) by its Western dialogue partners (Gansen 2006: 132). The Charter was formally adopted in November 2007 and though sceptics have pointed out that ‘human rights remains subordinate to the Association’s bedrock principle of non-interference’, it is clear it reflects changing attitudes across Southeast Asia (Simon 2008: 278). Concurrently, the chorus of ASEAN government, parliamentary and civil society voices openly critical of the situation in Myanmar grows louder. For instance, the establishment of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus to promote the democratisation process in that country noted the negative image the situation had on the organisation (Gansen 2006: 142). Since 2007, when the Myanmar issue proved to be divisive at the annual ASEAN Summit, key member states have indicated that they were no longer willing to defend Myanmar at international gatherings.

In the meantime, tensions arose again within Myanmar with another series of massive protests, this time in response to rising fuel prices and led by Buddhist monks in September 2007, culminating in a severe military crackdown. The veto by China and Russia of a UN Security Council draft resolution condemning the Myanmar government (itself tacitly supported by an Indonesian abstention) signalled the continued unwillingness of ASEAN to provide diplomatic cover. The military junta’s decision to hold a national referendum on the proposed constitution coincided with a destructive typhoon that struck on May 3, 2008, leaving an estimated 200,000 people dead or missing and up to one million homeless. Initial

relief efforts presented in terms that invoked the ‘responsibility to protect’ by the international community, including the US military, were rejected by the military junta. Ultimately ASEAN states were able to facilitate the delivery of limited provisions for humanitarian assistance, but not without forestalling another round of international criticism. In the wake of this, the completion of the lengthy constitutional referendum process coincided with an Indonesian-led initiative to involve the UN, China and India directly in discussions on the emerging political transition. (Haacke 2008: 162-3) Despite a public declaration by ASEAN foreign ministers in July 2009 urging the military junta to release all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, so as to allow them to participate in upcoming 2010 elections, the government refused to budge.<sup>7</sup>

### **SADC and ASEAN and the Limits of Regional Responses to Internal ‘Pariahs’**

This comparative study of regional organisations provides a template for understanding the policy choices and actions undertaken by these organisations and their member states in response to external pressure on internal ‘pariahs’. Moreover, it helps to delineate the reasons for the gap between the expectations that Western-dominated international institutions have of regional organisations as local managers of security and the operating assumptions that guide these regional organisations, as well as the actual local conditions as determinants of policy outcomes.

The overriding assumption of the literature on evolving forms of global governance is a linear one, with international policies being derived from recognised international norms, founded on the UN Charter and past precedents (Falk 1999: 241-2). Regional organisations are situated in this depiction of the international hierarchy as local *implementing* agents, not as local *interpreters* of international norms. Local actors, meaning governments, are essentially held to be passive recipients of ideas and practices without significant local agency over them. They owe their position as intermediary inter-governmental bodies within the international system by virtue of the fact that member states are part of the UN, are therefore signatories to key documents such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and, in terms of Chapter VIII, recognised as having a statutory (if not spelled out by the Charter) role within the international system. Indeed, the operating assumptions of the key notion underpinning this particular account of global governance is ‘subsidiarity’, which, after all, is a terminology derived from the Catholic Church. The scope of bishoprics for independent interpretation and action may vary somewhat, but ultimately doctrine is made at the centre (the Papacy) and their respective positions are legitimised by this same centre with its unique confluence of ideational and material power.

This common assessment of the sources of legitimacy for regional organisations is a fundamental misreading of the situation. Regional organisations were founded not as instruments for the conveyance and enforcement of international directives or ideas but rather as, first and foremost, bulwarks of local politics against external forces – be they great power ambitions or the various (economic, political and ideological) forces of internationalism (Tavares 2007: 5). The primary function they serve is therefore to ensure the survival of the state, sometimes defined as leader or regime interests, and which is best done by supporting its continued legitimacy. In those cases where a regional power is a source of concern, for instance South Africa or India, strategies of state survival encompass ‘enmeshment’ into regional arrangements such that their preponderance of material capabilities is checked by

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<sup>7</sup> A position solidified by the quixotic actions of a US ‘supporter’ who illegally gained entry to Suu Kyi’s home.

established norms and practices within the regional organisation. External policies and events are measured against their impact on these core values of sovereignty and legitimacy. Rhetoric notwithstanding, regional organisations are only secondarily seen by member states as sites for pursuing co-operative strategies in other areas like enhancing intra-regional trade. Indeed, the obvious resistance to substantive expansion of these economic pursuits, reflected for instance in the unwillingness to implement trade protocols, underscores the instinctive need to preserve intact sovereignty as the key source of regime legitimacy. Even when it comes to responding to externally-generated ideas, regional organisations exert a mediating function, ensuring that these are absorbed (or discarded) in ways that correspond to, and reinforce, prevailing forms of government (Acharya 2004).

Behind the misreading of regional organisations is a notable ahistorical interpretation. Part of the problem resides in the post-Cold War scholarship on regional organisations, which in the main has ignored complex questions of their role in respect to regional security and stability. In particular, the literature on ‘new regionalism’ – which focuses on regional organisations solely as economic entities responding to the challenges of globalisation – provides limited insight (indeed seems to suffer a loss of historical memory in this regard) into the formative political forces that compelled states to establish them in the first place (Grugel and Hout 1999). By stripping away the primary political purpose that gave rise to regional organisations, scholars have reduced any potential understanding of guiding norms, structures of accountability and modes of decision making and the reasons that these endure into the present day. These were, as outlined above, rooted in fundamental concerns of state (and regime) security, embracing the principle of sovereignty as a source of legitimacy and as an instrument for nation building. For instance, an organisation like ASEAN, whose commitment to genuinely strengthening intra-regional trade was only ever partially realised in the last decade, cannot be adequately understood if seen as primarily an instrument for furthering trade and investment, as many scholars persist in doing. The choices pursued reference the effect that any policies have on the maintenance of ASEAN’s core values. So too an excessive emphasis on the economic development aims of SADC, boosted by treaty commitments and other public declarations, glosses over the overriding concerns of political actors who seek legitimacy and stability in the face of tremendous domestic and external challenges. The security dimension for both organisations is deeply ingrained in their approach to sovereignty in general, their intra-regional relations and most especially in how they respond to the external environment outside the region.

Reaffirming the historical trajectory of forms of regionalism in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa provides a means of understanding the contemporary configurations and the accompanying policy choices in place within these regional organisations. The role of path dependency in shaping institutional formations, notably the constraining role played by decades of Cold War politics in Southeast Asia (Beeson 2004: 14) and Southern Africa (Lee 1989; Nathan 2004a, 2004b), remain significant to today’s politics. As Kuhonta (2006: 339) notes, ‘ASEAN’s intense preoccupation with sovereignty should be understood within the context of state formation in the post-colonial world’. Nathan (2004a: 18) echoes this position when he declares that the ‘political, economic and administrative weakness of SADC weak states has hindered the creation of a viable security regime’. Scholars have gone further to suggest that ASEAN is – and one could incorporate SADC as well – fundamentally an ‘illiberal security community’. As Kuhonta (2006: 342) notes:

‘It is this mix of legal-rational and socio-cultural norms that provides the glue binding the ASEAN states together. Liberalism is conspicuously absent in the building blocks of ASEAN’s security community.’

Drawing from Nathan's work on SADC and values, shared regional norms on the inviolability of sovereignty dominate the discourse and practices of SADC, producing a similar tendency towards an illiberal security community (Nathan 2004a: 19), but one that nonetheless adheres broadly to the electoral practices that brought about majoritarian rule.

Complicating the picture further is a scholarly and policy-making focus on regional hegemon as potential leaders within regional organisations. Though they hold more material power and can even derive further legitimacy from external sources, the fact is that their position within their respective region is nearly always contested. Regional hegemons are from this perspective largely captives of their organisations, at least when it comes to problems defined by external actors as matters of international consequence. In order to conduct successful policies towards their regions, regional hegemons have to engage the member states through regional organisations that are explicitly designed to counter dominance by any one state. As such, putative regional hegemons endanger their standing within both regions and regional organisations when they respond too readily to external pressures. The impulse towards unity is built into the very structures of the organisation, from the horizontal forms of accountability, the role of legitimisation of other states and the very decision-making process. All of this, then, puts the focus back on the regional organisation as the key actor and the accompanying structures, processes and underlying values that inform its approach.

In the cases of SADC and ASEAN outlined above, the Western implication of a particular member state as a 'pariah', though constituted in terms of its failure to abide by accepted international norms – even when those norms are accepted by individual member states and codified into region-wide policies – takes little cognisance of the founding values and established practices of the regional organisation in question. Believing that regional organisations like SADC and ASEAN are constituted as intermediaries within the international system, Western governments have sought to use pressure – in the first instance moral suasion but increasingly coupled to punitive diplomatic and economic sanctions against targeted regimes in Zimbabwe and Myanmar – to ensure compliance with what are seen to be accepted international norms and practices. The failure to recognise that these regional organisations' *raison d'être* is the security of its member states, defined as resisting forms of external (and intra-regional) interference that challenge the legitimacy of any one of its members, has meant that Western governments misread the possibility of producing change through them. Recourse to regional hegemons like South Africa does nothing to alter this equation.

Under these circumstances, the pre-eminence of domestic and regional concerns over that of international issues is a natural policy response amongst the member states of regional organisations. What this has meant is that in both the cases of SADC and ASEAN, attempts to pressure them to join external actors in treating one of their member states as a 'pariah' were very likely to produce not compliance but regional unity of resistance. When, however, member states recognise that public support for Western-designated pariahs is incurring costs to their own legitimacy or that of their regional organisations, they will seek to use the established structures of accountability to exert their own forms of pressure on these regimes to modify their conduct. Such localised efforts at 'behaviour modification' are nonetheless framed within the concerns of maintaining the public appearance of regional unity and remain subject to the overriding impulse to guard sovereignty. For this reason these are unlikely to produce dramatic changes in behaviour, as has been demonstrated by the cases of Zimbabwe and Myanmar.



At the same time, as is evident from the two case studies, though the historical processes have structured and conditioned these regional organisations towards a sovereignty bias, it would be a mistake to view their sources of legitimacy or even view regional organisations themselves as static. Indeed, in the realm of ideas, arguably the most potent force for change, both SADC and ASEAN provide cogent examples of differing forms of adaptation to changing or new norms and patterns of enforcement of these norms. SADC, for instance, provides an illustration of how its commitment to majoritarian rule nurtured during the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle evolved into a regional norm mandating electorally-based forms of change of government that serves as a crucial basis for recognition and legitimacy within the region. The willingness to suspend member states that blatantly violate this principle, such as the regime in Madagascar in 2008, confirms this fundamental position. At the same time, the liberation narrative that promotes the idea that authentic independence is synonymous with government by liberation movement-cum-party produces a cross-cutting norm within the region (Alden and Anseeuw 2009; Dorman 2006). In this regard it is instructive that Mugabe, while violating much of the spirit of democracy during various electoral campaigns, nonetheless continued to adhere to elections so as not to alienate SADC and invoke punitive action. Supporting this has been Mugabe's skilful use of the horizontal and vertical structures of accountability founded on liberation movement-cum-party links as an additional source of regional legitimacy – which dominate in South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Angola – and have strengthened his claim to power.

In the case of ASEAN, new ideas about the desirability of seeking legitimacy through democracy have increasingly taken hold amongst member states over the years, culminating in the promotion of the ASEAN Charter process with its more explicit commitment to democratic principles. However, while some Southeast Asian states may find elections to be a new source of legitimacy, the fact that ASEAN accepted authoritarian states into its membership within the last decade limits the possibilities of extending that idea into a regional norm. The enduring strength of the non-interference principle coupled to the operating mode of consensus decision making continues to undercut efforts to broaden the basis of regional legitimacy. This was further demonstrated by the purging of punitive measures, such as suspension of membership from earlier versions of the Charter. The result has been that member states that sought to distance themselves from Myanmar could do no more than declaim their dissatisfaction as individual states or through the mechanism of the regional diplomatic censure.

Comparing the two cases, it seems that the conformity of political purpose that featured in the long anti-colonial/anti-apartheid struggle in Southern African and allowed radicals and liberals, statist and non-state actors to share a common aim has carried over into the post-independence period. The controversy in Zimbabwe is not about democracy as such, but rather the right of liberation movements to claim an enduring political status by virtue of their historical role in rooting out colonialism. In the case of ASEAN, the strong imprint of ethno-nationalism and its formative role in state formation, coupled to the record of Cold War intervention in the region, produced distinctively autonomous regimes within the states of the region whose suspicions of each other were only transcended by fears of external power intentions. Nevertheless, in both the SADC and ASEAN, the spectre of external interference in regional affairs produces a residual closing of ranks that is deeply encoded in the historically-conditioned regional structures, rendering regional organisations ineffective managers for 'pariahs' within their midst.

## Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the challenges confronting regional organisations in managing the countervailing dynamics of Western-designated ‘pariahs’ and their formative concerns about sovereignty determine the levels and degree of their responsiveness. Where regional organisations have acted to criticise these offending member states, it is when inaction has reached a point where their own legitimacy is in some way affected. Far from representing any significant shift in regional outlook, such responses have remained framed by concerns around classic interpretations of sovereignty rather than reflecting any embrace of emerging international norms on sovereign responsibility.

This relatively tepid response to externally-designated ‘pariahs’ is due in part to the overlapping and contrary interests that these regional organisations serve. At the same time, these problems stem from broader assumptions about the positioning of regional organisations within the global governance system effectively as intermediaries between international organisations and the spatial territory within which these regional organisations operate. Composed of states and established to serve their national interests, albeit through some form of mandated collective action, these regional organisations formulate norms and interpret rules that reflect the common perspectives of their members with regime survival and sovereignty as the cornerstone for action. At the same time, regional organisations are rooted in societies whose prevailing norms may or may not fully reflect the formative interests of the governing elites that convened and steer the regional organisation or, for that matter, those norms promoted by international organisations.

Against this localised situation is the changing international dynamic on matters of sovereignty, democracy and human rights. Far from being static, international organisations themselves have undergone a partial transformation towards greater incorporation of democratic principles into the substance their work. Indeed, as the paper has shown the part played by international organisations, in particular the UN Security Council and its various agencies as well as the international financial institutions in regards to Western-designated ‘pariah’ states, is much more complex than a simple reading would suggest. The gradualist transformation of the UN system away from its rigid defence of sovereign principles to one that wrestles with the incorporation of democracy and human rights into its policies and practices is mirrored by the broadening of institutional concerns away from those dominated by the leading UN Security Council members. Though prematurely deemed a failure by its leading proponents, the establishment of a UN Human Rights Council in 2006 was another mark of the seemingly inextricable march towards greater incorporation of democratic principles into the international organisation’s daily policies and practices.

The result of this gradualist expansion of democratic norms at the level of global governance is that, while commonly seen to be a site for the defence of sovereignty by Western critics, too often – from the perspective of Western-designated ‘pariah’ states – the UN system is seen more as a potential threat to the very legitimacy of these regimes. As Haacke (2006: 95) points out in relation to Myanmar and the United Nations (but a statement that could equally apply to Zimbabwe):

‘It would be a major historical irony if Myanmar, which joined the UN to better protect itself against threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, were to find that preventing UNSC (UN Security Council) involvement had become its primary foreign policy challenge.’

In this setting, regional organisations are seen to be a stronger bastion of sovereignty by targeted states than the UN.

Finally, if regional organisations are not serving as interlocutors between the local and the established instruments of global governance, what function do they perform? Indeed, one assessment that could be derived from this paper is that regional organisations are not meaningful to the management of local security matters. Such a view would be misplaced. As noted earlier, regional organisations serve as legitimising agents through their role in formative events like membership accession and mutual recognition of local political actors and processes. They are inextricably involved in the maintenance of regional security but not on the terms set by the Western-dominated international institutions but rather in response to their own definitions and shared needs. That these are sites where traditional concepts of sovereignty do ‘battle’ with progressive norms and practices is a marker of their significance as actors within the international system.

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