

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Southern Africa: An American Enigma by Sheikh R. Ali

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9g4939k3>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 16(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Robb, Judith

Publication Date

1988

DOI

10.5070/F7163016928

Copyright Information

Copyright 1988 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

could?), and certain omissions are frankly admitted in the preface. There is no chapter on the state apparatus and other decision-making structures, a topic that is highly relevant to any discussion on development. This topic is not entirely ignored, however, since references are made to various decision-making structures within each chapter. Similarly, the important topics of education and nutrition are not given separate chapters, but are referred to in passing elsewhere. The editors apologize for these omissions, pleading a shortage of suitable Nordic contributors. This underlines another, deliberate limitation of the book: it only represents the particular experiences and points of view of Nordic researchers strongly influenced by the liberal philosophies and policies of their governments towards Tanzania. The book does not, therefore, represent itself as a debate among a wide range of opinions on the wisdom of Tanzania's long range development goals. The book instead succeeds as a multi-faceted analysis of what has gone wrong, and why, by scholars who share a common frame of reference and unabashedly support the humanistic priorities promulgated by Tanzania's esteemed first president, Julius Nyerere.

One final qualification I would offer concerns the necessarily limited depth of analysis and detail offered in each chapter. The entire book is 325 pages long, divided into 15 chapters of uneven length (the shortest, on health, being 9 pages and the longest, on agriculture, being 47), an introduction, and other assorted features. Each chapter topic deserves its own book, but in this anthology the editors deliberately opted for a non-elitist, broad scope for readers wanting a relatively comprehensive overview of Tanzania's development dilemmas. Their stated aim is accessibility for public discussion, not academic or technical virtuosity for a narrow, competitive audience. Yet the quality of the contributions is quite good, even for the specialist. This book challenges other scholars to offer fresh perspectives on Tanzania's development problems and (let's not forget) successes.

Hilarie Kelly

Sheikh R.Ali, **Southern Africa: An American Enigma**. NYC: Praeger Publishers, 1987. 227 pp.

Let us imagine South Africa as an enormous spider. This spider is extremely dangerous, cunning and entirely aligned with the doctrine of egoism. It is strategically positioned so as to benefit only itself, and anyone caught in its immense web becomes a victim, which the spider will feed on without hesitation or remorse.

South Africa has spun a web of astonishing strength and resilience across the international realm, pulling in other "spiders" to aid its design and structure. While these spiders have their own webs of force, they have become interdependent with that of South Africa, and to examine and attempt to understand them is to become entangled in a political conglomerate.

Sheikh R. Ali in Southern Africa: An American Enigma, stands in the American political web and looks out over South Africa and the southern Africa subsystem in an effort to dissect and interpret the complex relationships between these nations. It is Ali's aim to explore the "currents" of U.S. policy towards South Africa, highlighting the "principles and practices" of South Africa throughout his discussion. He places particular emphasis on the policies of the Reagan administration and other western nations (namely, Britain, France and West Germany), based on the Third World perception of Washington and London as "sustaining the white supremacy regimes in southern Africa." (p. xi)

Ali presents South Africa as the center of the racial tensions in southern Africa and the international realm. As the major power in southern Africa, South Africa's socio-political and economic policies are entrenched in the system of apartheid. This system, according to Ali, does not stop at minority political rule. It completely dominates and determines the way of life for millions of people. Ali vehemently attacks the South African regime as an "Afrikaner-dominated Nazi-styled National Party" (p.34), upholding a "system of genocide (p.63)." He describes the politics and economics of apartheid as "...woven together in a grotesque fabric of black exploitation and systematic impoverishment by a ruling elite of white minority" (p. 36), and points a strong finger at the U.S. and Britain for sustaining this "sadistic whiteocracy" through their economic interests.

By way of introduction, Ali provides a historical background of the southern African subsystem that includes South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe, emphasizing South Africa's dominance in this area and the development of white supremacy. He defines apartheid discussing its complex social, political and economic dimensions. Ali further examines apartheid South Africa in relation to the UN, OAU and the Commonwealth of Nations, drawing attention to the actions taken by these organizations and the Nationalist Party's adamant neglect and refusal to comply.

South Africa's nuclear capability is an area of grave concern. According to Ali, "The greatest threat to peace in southern Africa is its racial policies that deny human rights to the majority and the minority government's use of strong repressive mean to safeguard their interests (p.66)." South Africa's defense policy is in direct support of the apartheid structure. Ali views the justification of the acquisition of

nuclear weapons as South Africa's "last resort" to intimidate neighboring African nations, the international realm, and to demoralize the black population in South Africa. Military strength and nuclear potential in South Africa have major international implications since "nobody doubts that if South Africa becomes embattled and is threatened with annihilation by black Africa, the white regime would use nuclear weapons to defend itself. (p.75)."

Ali next concentrates on South Africa's "open door policy" toward foreign investment, emphasizing that foreign investors from the developed world play a key role in the economy. He points out that Britain has large economic ties with South Africa, and that despite U.S. verbal denunciation of apartheid, investments and trade are not shrinking. Ali posits that American interests with regard to South Africa are based on two issues: economic ties, and the threat of communism. "The main thrust of Reagan's policy is to pursue American economic interest in southern Africa and capitalize on Moscow's current isolation from most of the region (p. 171)." While apartheid is entirely inconsistent with U.S. principles of human equality and freedom, the southern African region would be a crucial loss to the western world were it to fall under communist sway. Reagan's foreign policy is dominated by the global competition between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and the strategic significance of the issue.

Since domestic pressure is rising in the United States, particularly since the South African constitutional crisis and the recurrence of riots since 1985, Ali firmly believes that a serious crisis in South Africa would have severe ramifications within the U.S. In the event of racial conflict in southern Africa, the United States would have to take sides, "either to protect American investments or to help stop what would become a black bloodbath...(p.84)." He also feels that any race war in southern Africa would exacerbate racial tensions in America as well.

Can the United States create a balance amidst the mounting tensions? Ali questions American priorities, asking "what weight should the Reagan administration give to its short-term interests of democracy and anti-communism (p.187)?" Thus far, Reagan's unwillingness to abandon South Africa through his policy of constructive engagement has only served to support the racist system. It is obvious, to Ali, that the administration's interests are economic and not open to dramatic change.

Although the author is not in the "center of the web," he has unraveled a fundamental thread explaining the policies and principles governing U.S. action toward South Africa and the southern Africa subsystem, as well as the factors motivating South Africa in the maintenance of the apartheid structure. Ali's vehement sentiments toward the South African regime are obvious and unflinching

throughout his discussion. He views Afrikaners as "narrow-minded and intolerant, resisting absolutely any liberal ideas of government," and claims that it is "evident" that "the government in South Africa is a throwback to Hitler and his Nazi party (p.29)." He sees no solution to the crisis in southern Africa other than the complete dismantlement of the entire apartheid system. One would hope to find these same nefarious passions directed toward any government supporting the South African regime. Despite the fact that Ali views U.S. actions as maintaining the apartheid system, his tone takes a complete turn when discussing American policies toward South Africa. While he calls U.S. policy toward southern Africa "weak and reactive" and is in support of complete divestment and disengagement of U.S. diplomatic ties, his tone and suggestions for American policy are surprisingly weak and apathetic.

But all in all, Southern Africa: An American Enigma, is a sound introduction to the fundamental issues of apartheid, particularly with respect to U.S. and South African relations. Ali presents the information with substantial clarity and cohesiveness.

The book has a bibliography which provides a sound framework for persons who have limited knowledge in this particular field and wish to further their understanding. It also has a fairly extensive index for quick reference to topics raised throughout his discussion.

Judith Robb

Benjamin M. Joseph. Besieged Bedfellows: Israel and the Land of Apartheid. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988).

There has been a great deal of speculation about the contemporary relationship between Israel and South Africa. Clearly, Israel and South Africa are two of the foremost pariah states in the world today whose international isolation is only comparable to Albania, the Vietnamese backed regime in Kampuchea and arguably, Taiwan. In fact, there are a number of countries in the world today in which political affairs are dominated by an ethnic clique, yet there is something very distinctive about the immutability of the Israeli and South African political systems which are both explicitly racist in ideology and yet democratic in form. It is as if all the 20th century trends toward liberation, equality and freedom have been frozen out of southern Africa or Palestine. In fact, no state since World War II has more consistently and flagrantly disregarded and abused the principles of universal citizenship and the sanctity of borders which form the basis of modern international politics than either Israel or South Africa.