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THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN POLITICAL TRANSITIONS: THE ENDING OF THE COLD WAR AND SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRATISATION

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Abstract

The South African military have been an integral part of the political transitions of the South African society since the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. This paper specifically addresses the role of the military in the process of political transition to democracy in 1994. Three case studies are used to highlight the complicated relationship between the South African military and society; and the South African military and the polity: the compulsory retirement of generals from the South African National Defence Force, the use of the military in the Bophuthatswana uprising, and the ANC's Operation Vula. The paper concludes that the military had three critical integral institutional capabilities that contributed directly to the transitional process: a comprehensive institutional structure, a well-developed pool of manpower, and unique equipment capabilities. Taken as a whole, the role of the South African military in the political transition was characterised by its subordination to civilian authority, its support for the democratic process, and its commitment to ensuring stability and security during a period of profound political change in South Africa. Without the military, the miracle of democratisation in South Africa in 1994 would not have been possible.

Introduction

The South African military is no stranger to political transitions. In the last century, the country underwent three critical political transitions: the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the process of political transition following the National Party election victory in 1948, and the political transition following the 1994 elections and democratisation. Although the creation of the Union in 1910 was profoundly influenced by the military realities of the Second Boer War, and the military was a soft influencing reality in 1948, the military played a profound role in the political transition to democracy in 1994. In all three of these transformations, the military was profoundly influenced and shaped by the unfolding of the political landscape. In 1994, however, the role of the military was critical in maintaining stability, law and order, to facilitate the negotiation process, and to allow for a relative peaceful process to transition.

The focus of this paper is primarily on the role of the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the process of political transition in South Africa in the early 1990s. The discussion does not repudiate the important role of the armed wings of the various political entities who readied themselves for military action with the apartheid state in case of the failure of the negotiated processes; the biggest being Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the paramilitary wing of the African National Congress (ANC), and its so-called armed struggle. The paper also does not reflect any denial of the often very violent armed struggle that unfolded at grassroots level between the various political entities in South Africa – often black-on-black ethnic violence – that bordered on a violent social revolution, and that led to the death of about 20 000 people between the early 1980s and democratisation in 1994.

As such, the paper aims at outlining the role of the SADF as the only statutory military force in the country in the build-up to democratisation in 1994 and in the aftermath of the extended period of conflict at the end of the Cold War in Southern Africa. The paper therefore reflects on the role of the South African military during the period of political transition in South Africa in the early 1990s, which culminated in the 1994 elections, democratisation, and the ANC – under the leadership of President Mandela – becoming the first black majority government in South Africa. The discussion is divided into three parts: an outline of the role of the military in political transitions, the South African political transition, and a summary of the role of the South African military in the process of democratisation.

The Military in Political Transitions

The role of the military in political transitions is deeply connected to the nature of political transition, the role of the military in domestic security, the dynamic interaction between the military and society, and, obviously, the nature of civil–military relations. The role of the military in political transitions varies significantly depending on the

context, the history of the country, and the specific circumstances at the time of the transition. From a positive perspective, the military is often an important stabilising entity to ensure a smooth transition of power and to maintain law and order in times of great political turmoil and uncertainty. Alternatively, the role played of the military may be rather negative as a result of its involvement and participation in politics during the period of transition: directly through the seizure of power and coups, or indirectly by exerting influence using soft power. From a political perspective, it therefore matters whether the transition is towards a democratic dispensation or not; whether the military is facilitating and supporting the process of democratic transitioning; or whether the military is undermining the process of democratisation. Eventually, militaries may have a defining influence on the outcome of the transitional process and the nature of the post-transitional political landscape (Grewal, When do militaries undermine democratization?).

The process of democratic transition faces two contradictory military realities. On the one hand, transitional states ought to manage – some would say neutralise – the potential of the military to disrupt the process of democratisation. On the other hand, the process of democratisation necessitates a refinement of civil–military relations to ensure the political subordination of the military in the post-transitional state. In combination, it is a trade-off between security and liberty, and between military effectiveness and subordination of the military to the polity, because in transitional regimes, the political control of the armed forces is often prioritised over the ability of the armed forces to defend the country (Matei, "A New Conceptualization of Civil–military Relations", 28). This necessitates the militaries in transitional societies to redefine their role and level of autonomy, eliminate their political prerogatives, establish a proper distribution of power between civilian and military authorities, and develop institutional structures for democratic control over armed forces (Pion-Berlin and Dudley, "Civil–Military Relations: What is the State of the Field). This ought to lead to a fine balance between keeping the military subordinate to the democratic political authority, and – at the same time – ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of the military institution. Yet, measures aimed at the subordination of the military in transitional societies often undermine their effectiveness and efficiency (Pion-Berlin and Dudley, "Civil–Military Relations: What is the State of the Field). In a paradoxical way, a military facing challenges pertaining to effectiveness and efficiency is, by implication, a threat to civilian control.

The role, position, and nature of the armed forces in transitional states not only affect the balance of power between the civilian population, the political authorities, and the military, but are eventually critical for the outcome and success of the process of democratic transitions. More specifically, transitional authorities face a real challenge in keeping the military from disrupting the process of democratisation. The problem is specifically acute in countries that are emerging from military rule or in military-dominated societies like South Africa before 1994. The military may intrude on the

process of democratisation by means of a military coup or the threat thereof, through undue influence over policies and policy decisions, due to the prevention of political and military reforms, and as a result of the obstruction of human rights prosecutions (Pion-Berlin and Dudley, "Civil–Military Relations: What is the State of the Field). This often necessitates a process of military reforms as part of, or accompanying, the political transition. The aim of such reforms should be to establish institutional structures for democratic oversight over the defence sector, and to build capacity to strengthen democratic civilian control of defence policy and democratic governance. The purpose of structural oversight and the development of the capacity for democratic civilian control of defence are to remove the military from the political arena, and to lessen its inclination and capability to intervene (Gunashvili, Challenges to Democratic Civilian Control).

With this as an introduction and background, it is possible to narrow the role of the military in democratic transitions down to several critical functions. Firstly, the armed forces have a critical role in maintaining societal security and stability during the process of transitioning. This may be a critical element of the transitional process in countries that are coming out of military rule or that had to deal with some form of insurgency or domestic divide and uproar. In cases of civil strife and conflict that involved the military, maintaining stability may be highly problematic, since the military may be lacking in legitimacy. In situations of political deadlock or high levels of instability, the role of the military may be highly contentious (Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, Building the Foundations and Start of Transition Processes in the Security Sector). Secondly, the military may have a role in rising above domestic political divides and the world of low politics to address critical issues of high politics in order to protect the international interests of the country against external threats, safeguard national sovereignty, and preserve the integrity of the state. Disagreement about foreign policy directions in the lower-order political world of may place the military in a precarious position in operationalising the role of the military against external threats and disturbances (Drew & Snow, Making Twenty-first Century Strategy, Chapter 3).

Thirdly, the military may be an important driver of change in a transitional society. From a professional and institutional perspective, the military may have a better understanding of the imperatives of transformation in society than the those in the political sphere and society at large. The military may be proactive as a driver of change by supporting progressive reform or by initiating progressive institutional or societal reforms. A modern, reformed military may be an example to society at large, whilst the inherent strength of the military in society may initiate political and societal reforms (Meijer, The Role of the Military in Political Transitions, 20). Fourthly, in the case of authoritarian rule, militaries may use systemic pressures and soft power to facilitate and convey a message and need for change. A military that is no longer willing to maintain internal security and to participate in the repression of political opposition and civil society

is most often a key factor in bringing about political change from authoritarian rule. The shift in emphasis from domestic deployment and repression to a more traditional role of protecting the sovereignty is an important part of transitioning from authoritarian to democratic rule reforms (Meijer, The Role of the Military in Political Transitions, 18).

All things considered, the military plays a complicated and diverse role in political transitions, and the way it affects the outcome of the transition depends on a number of different variables. While the military may occasionally be able to assist in a smooth and orderly transition to democracy, it may also threaten democratic governance by attempting to hold onto its own authority and influence.

The South African Political Transition in the early 1990s

The South African political landscape was very much at the centre of political transitions in the early 1990s, and has been discussed from various perspectives in width, depth, and context. Irrespective of the quality of democratic rule in South Africa since 1994, the process of democratisation itself is still a remarkable example of a successful transition from apartheid to democracy, largely driven by negotiations rather than violent conflict. Apartheid has been an ingrained part of the history of South Africa since its foundation in 1652, and has been institutionalised in various ways in society over time – from slavery to institutionalised racism in the various sectors of society, and from the parliament to the church.

Over time, and specifically in the aftermath of the Second World War, South Africa was increasingly seen by the international world as a pariah state. And rightly so. At a time when the world was increasingly moving towards independence for colonial states in Africa and elsewhere, South Africa was departing on a deliberate pathway of apartheid and separate development. Apartheid is usually branded as a period of spectacular political failure, which, of course, it was. But apartheid was more than just a political concept. A meaningful analysis of apartheid necessitates a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural, economic, historical, and security realities thereof in South Africa. The argument by Paul Moorcraft about the successes of apartheid makes sense only through a holistic view of the concept. Moorcraft points out that apartheid succeeded in three ways for so-called 'white' South Africa.

Firstly, it was a psychological success to the extent that it kept the different races apart and, in the process, succeeded in creating an isolated enclave, a kraal of isolation, in which white South Africa could live in relative prosperity, peace, and safety. From a historical and cultural perspective, the history of the white population fostered a sense of separateness and self-reliance, especially in the Afrikaner community, to preserve their independence, cultural identity, and power. As a cultural group, Afrikaners specifically, had a strong sense of cultural and linguistic identity apart from their English-speaking fellow whites. Psychologically, however, the white population knew that the demographic

clock was ticking, and that there was a certain dichotomy in their safety and security. To quote Ken Owen:

[W]hite South Africans tend to profess an undying love for a country they hardly know, whose people often frighten them, and whose stark beauty they constantly try to change in imitation of Europe (Owen, The way forward, 61).

Secondly, apartheid South Africa was an economic success for the white people of South Africa. The 1960s and early 1970s was a period of profound economic prosperity and growth, characterised by high growth and disappearance of the so-called 'poor white problem'. Through Volkskapitalisme (i.e. Afrikaner capitalism), the government succeeded in creating several successful state-owned enterprises, including Iscor (steel), Sasol (synthetic fuel), Eskom (electricity), Volkskas (banking), Sanlam (insurance) and Naspers (media) (O'Meara, Volkskapitalisme). White English-speaking South Africa also prospered under the system of apartheid, and avoided outright opposition to the system, especially in the mining sector. In the 1960s and 1970s, the country went through a process of industrialisation to develop a world-class infrastructure for business in the cities and to connect the rural agricultural areas with the urban centres. Exports increased by more than 150 per cent in the 1970s, with gold sales rising, and the geographical range of South African trade widening (Pretorius, Addleson, and Tomlinson, History of industrial decentralization in South Africa, 37–49).

Thirdly, apartheid South Africa succeeded in becoming a military power backed by a highly successful defence industry and a nuclear capability. Over time, the experience of the South African military was shaped through its involvement in a counterinsurgency campaign in Namibia as a colonial occupying power, and through its involvement in the Angolan Civil War that placed South Africa on the side of the greater West in the Cold War. White South Africa was conscripted, while black South Africa joined the military on a voluntary basis – although not as officers until the middle of the 1980s. Inside the country, effective security forces were a way to deal with perceived white fears of threats to their way of life, and apartheid as an indispensable system to maintain order, security, and the supremacy of the white minority in a diverse and changing society (Seegers, The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa). Over time, the overbearing role of the military in communities led to the South African society becoming highly militarised by the late 1980s.

Resistance to apartheid rule gradually started to take effect from the early 1950s, coinciding with the rise to power of the National Party and its institutionalised policy of petty apartheid. The 1950s were characterised by the Defiance Campaign and the acceptance of the idea of 'the people shall govern' in the 1955 Freedom Charter (South African Government, Final Freedom Charter, 12). The Sharpeville Massacre of 1961 was followed by the Rivonia Trial and the beginning of the armed struggle. By the end of the 1960s, however, the realisation that the armed struggle was not going to succeed,

took effect, and the consequent rise of the Black Consciousness movement and the 1976 student uprisings placed the ANC on a definitive path to resistance (Apartheid Museum, Learners Book, 68). The ANC learnt much from the Vietnamese about liberation warfare, following a visit by the Revolutionary Council of the ANC to Saigon in 1978 (Barrell, The Turn to the Masses, 64-92). This specifically related to the lessons the Vietnamese learned about strategic campaigning and the need to prioritise armed propaganda over the armed struggle.

The visit to Vietnam led to the acceptance of the so-called Green Book to enable greater co-ordination of the political efforts of the ANC, including the creation of a so-called 'popular front' in the form of the United Democratic Movement, the strengthening of a propaganda wing, and the importance of international diplomatic efforts. In the end, the strategy of the ANC as an anti-apartheid and revolutionary movement was of significant importance in the struggle against apartheid (Mills, and Van der Merwe, "We learnt from Vietnam in the past, 6). Over time, the strategy combined and integrated four basic pillars:

- the organisation and mobilisation of the mass of the people against all manifestations of oppression;
- the establishment of underground structures to work among the masses and create conditions for effective leadership;
- the formation of an armed wing and the conduct of armed actions against the machinery of apartheid oppression; and
- the mobilisation of the international community to support the struggle of the South African people and isolate the apartheid regime (ANC, Policy Documents, Strategy and Tactics).

By the end of the 1980s, the apartheid state was beginning to break down under the strains of war, its military involvement in Namibia and Angola specifically, the effect of international sanctions and domestic economic stagnation, and the internal pressures from both the white and black populations in South Africa. This led to a process of internal reform by the apartheid government and, eventually, a process of negotiations. During the late 1980s – whilst the country was in turmoil because of internal uprisings, consumer boycotts, and mass mobilisation – groups from business and society started to meet with the ANC leadership in exile. The most prominent of these meetings was the so-called 'Dakar Initiative' in 1987, organised by the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (IDASA), and comprising a wide range of people from white society in South Africa (Giliomee, and Mbenga, Nuwe Geskiedenis Van Suid-Afrika, 387).

The fall of the Berlin Wall, signifying the end to communist rule in eastern Europe in November 1989, coincided with a fundamental change in National Party leadership

in South Africa with FW de Klerk taking over from PW Botha as president. De Klerk initiated a series of reforms that included the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in February 1990, and the unbanning of political organisations, such as the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). The unbanning of these political organisations and the release of the political prisoners were the first step in a process that culminated in multiparty negotiations involving the apartheid government, the ANC, the PAC, and other political organisations. Thus, it is possible to argue that five critical factors eventually brought the government to the negotiating table:

- the presidential change from PW Botha to FW de Klerk;
- the significance of black resistance;
- the Significance of international pressure;
- the growing social and economic inequality and economic decline; and
- the fall of communism (Groes Kofoed and Ingvarsson, FW De Klerk, 19-21).

The negotiation process unfolded against the backdrop of political violence instigated by various factions but led to the signing of a number of landmark agreements – the Groote Schuur Minute (1990), the Pretoria Minute (1991), and the Multiparty Negotiating Forum (1993). These agreements addressed key issues on the road to democratic transition, and focused on issues, such as the release of political prisoners, the return of exiles, the cessation of violence, and the drafting of a new constitution. The negotiations and the transition process culminated in the historic democratic elections of April 1994, in which all citizens, regardless of race, were allowed to vote for the first time. The ANC secured a landslide victory, and Nelson Mandela became the first black South African president, leading a government of national unity (South African History Online, Chapter 4 – Removing the obstacles).

In the end, the political transformation of the early 1990s in South Africa reflects the effectiveness of dialogue, compromise, and reconciliation in overcoming entrenched systems of oppression, and achieving a peaceful transition to democracy. In many ways, the transition was a bottom-up process; not a top-down process enforced through the involvement of foreign powers. The inclusive process of political negotiations ended in a home-grown solution for a domestic dispute that troubled modern South Africa since inception. The transition was an outcome of a process that was long in the making and which unfolded over time. The process was helped by the fact that the racial tensions in South Africa never reached the point of open armed conflict between the various races. By the end of the 1980s, apartheid South Africa was faced with social bankruptcy, a lack of legitimacy, and financial crisis and economic implosion, primarily because of defence expenditure due to its military involvement in Namibia and Angola. The peace processes and democratisation of Namibia and Angola paved the way for the peace and

transitional processes in South Africa. The leadership of people, such as Nelson Mandela, FW de Klerk, Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, and Constant Viljoen, was fundamental in facilitating the process to democracy. The instrument that stood in the background between total anarchy and the transition to democracy, however, was the South African military, a role for which it did not often receive the recognition it deserved.

The Military in the Process of Political Transition in South Africa

By the end of the 1980s, the South African military faced a legitimacy problem from a broad society perspective, including a growing resistance from conscript white South Africa due to a growing war-weariness in the aftermath of the wars in Namibia and Angola. However, the SADF was a powerful instrument of power – highly trained, well equipped, and professionally competent. It was operationally well prepared to fulfil a critical role in the stability and security of the country to ensure a smooth transition of power and to maintain law and order in times of great political turmoil and uncertainty.

The SADF had a long tradition of political subordination, a tradition the military inherited through the British regimental system and that was deeply rooted in the professionalism, training, and culture of the armed forces. Over time, and because of the prominent role of the military in the State Security Council and the so-called National Security Management System inside the country, the defence force became an important role player in governance – to the extent that society was militarised (Alden, Apartheid's Last Stand, 1996). Since the president at the time, Mr PW Botha, served as Minister of Defence before his appointment as president, there was a close relationship between the military and the Botha administration. Botha also appointed Gen. Magnus Malan, previous Chief of the Defence Force, as Minister of Defence in his cabinet. His successor, Mr FW de Klerk, was distrustful of the role of the security establishment in governance and society, and the political subordination of the military to government was tested shortly after President De Klerk's takeover and the beginning of the negotiation process.

In South Africa, the early 1990s were characterised by extreme levels of political violence. The ANC and black political movements in general attributed the violence to a state-aligned so-called 'third force'. In 1992, the Goldstone Commission, appointed to investigate the political violence, conducted a raid on the SADF Directorate of Covert Collections. The Commission found evidence of possible SADF involvement in illegal political activities. An SADF Air Force general, Gen. Pierre Steyn, was appointed by De Klerk on 18 November 1992 to investigate the findings of the Goldstone Commission. On 18 December. Gen. Steyn presented his preliminary findings to President De Klerk and senior members of government at Tuynhuys in Cape Town. The Steyn Report alleged that certain senior SADF members were part of a covert 'third force' campaign intended to discredit the ANC. While the Steyn Report refuted the notion that this was the official policy of the SADF, Steyn conceded that there were strong indications that

some individuals had been involved in actions trying to thwart transition, and in doing so, were responsible for unlawful actions and the deaths of people (De Klerk, Die Laaste Trek – 'n Nuwe Begin, 279).

Based on recommendations of the Steyn Report, FW de Klerk announced on 18 December 1992 that 23 members of the SADF, including two generals and four brigadiers, were being forcibly retired or suspended. Certain SADF units were immediately shut down, and intelligence activities were restructured. In the aftermath of the 1994 elections, all the relevant documentation of the Gold Stone Commission and the Steyn Report was handed over to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (South African History Online, SADF officers dismissed, 2011). The TRC had little success in establishing the truth of Steyn's provisional findings (South African History Online, SADF officers dismissed, 2019). De Klerk, in his autobiography, Die Laaste Trek – 'n Nuwe Begin: Die Outobiografie (1999, 285), noted:

Although General Steyn succeeded in puncturing the steel-belted culture of the SADF and in exposing some of its inner secrets, the self-sealing properties of the culture were soon activated.

Although De Klerk noted in his autobiography that he never, at any time, doubted the subordination of the military to the political authority, the Steyn Report demonstrated the depth of the culture of political subordination of the military to the broader South African society (De Klerk, Die Laaste Trek – 'n Nuwe Begin, 285-286).

Following the Steyn Report and the Goldstone investigation, the possibility of a military coup was still a reality – not from the side of the military necessarily, but rather from the non-statutory potential for armed force by the extremes of the left and right wings of the political spectrum. The right wing, with the Afrikaner Resistance Movement as the primary actor, was increasingly coming to the fore under the leadership of a former Chief of the SADF, Gen. Constand Viljoen. Viljoen was highly respected throughout society. As a military man, highly trained, competent, and dynamic, Viljoen's leadership was decidedly pragmatic and rational. At the time, the intelligence services were of the view that he would be able to raise a well-trained citizen army of about 50 000 men – men who had previously served under his command in the SADF. This raised concerns about the loyalty of the reserve military to the government of the day. Concerns in this regard were shown to be misplaced through a major upheaval by the white conservative political right wing in support of the homeland leader of Bophuthatswana, Mr Lucas Mangope, in March 1994. It was an incident during which several white right-wing members were killed by the military, but the upheaval was quickly contained and decisively dealt with by the SADF (Taylor, "Whites, Troops Clash in Black 'Homeland'", 11 March 1994).

The confrontation clearly demonstrated that the South African military was not to lose track of their support for the government of the day. The Chief of the SADF

at the time, Gen. Georg Meiring recalled a conversation with Gen. Viljoen in the aftermath of the incident. Viljoen, apparently, noted, "You and I and our men can take this country in an afternoon", to which Meiring replied, "Yes, that is so, but what do we do the morning after the coup?" (O'Malley's political interviews. "30 Nov 1999: General George Meiring in Pretoria", 30 Nov 1999). Both Meiring and Viljoen were aware of the demographic realities of the South African society, the pressure from both the domestic and international political worlds, and the inevitable realities facing the South African society as a whole. Meiring recalled his emotions when Viljoen eventually phoned him in person to inform him that he was going to participate in the national elections (Meiring, Soldaat en Mens, 170). This not only brought the extreme white right wing into the democratic process for a democratic dispensation, but – very importantly – demonstrated to the ANC leadership and black population in general that the SADF could be trusted as a professional entity.

Revolutionary movements always tend to have their own armed wings for the conduct of an armed struggle. The revolutionary movements in South Africa were no different with uMkhonto weSizwe or MK, the paramilitary wing of the ANC, founded by Nelson Mandela in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre, as the most important military wing. Fortunately for South Africa, the armed struggle against apartheid South Africa was never fully operationalised, with the struggle by the anti-apartheid movements unfolding predominantly through mass mobilisation of the population in general to make the country ungovernable. In the run-up to the negotiations for a democratic South Africa in the early 1990s, MK however conducted a covert operation, Operation Vula. There seems to be a divergence of opinion about the purpose of this operation.

The South African government portrayed it as a last effort by the revolutionary forces to establish internal armed networks for a violent insurrection in case of a failure of negotiations (Staff Reporter, "Thabo's boys vs Vula's boys", 15 December 2011). The ANC, however, viewed and portrayed Operation Vula as an effort to establish an underground communication network between ANC leaders in exile and those inside South Africa. The operation however involved the smuggling of trained personnel and weaponry into South Africa through neighbouring countries, such as Swaziland and Mozambique, where the ANC had bases (Jenkin, The Story of the Secret Underground Communications Network of Operation Vula, 1995.). Although the operation was highly secretive, it was compromised when certain of its members were arrested by the South African security forces. The arrests led to the exposure of the network and the subsequent arrest of key operatives. Despite the arrests, Operation Vula highlighted the determination of the ANC to resist apartheid with armed forces if necessary and to maintain its organisational structure within South Africa. It also played a role in the negotiations that eventually led to the end of apartheid and the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 (eNCA, "The Vula Connection", 24 Jul 2014).

In terms of the process of democratisation in South Africa, and the role of the revolutionary armed forces, Operation Vula raised many questions. For the ANC, it was a deliberate decision to continue with underground military activities and the armed struggle because there were no guarantees that the then government would negotiate in good faith with the liberation movements. For government, the operation was entirely at odds with the undertakings of the ANC in the Groote Schuur Minute and its professed commitment to a peaceful and negotiated constitutional settlement. The then government viewed Operation Vula as a plot by the ANC to infiltrate key operatives into South Africa to organise an underground network to prepare for an armed revolution (South African History Online, Members of the ANC and SACP are detained due to Operation Vula, 2011).

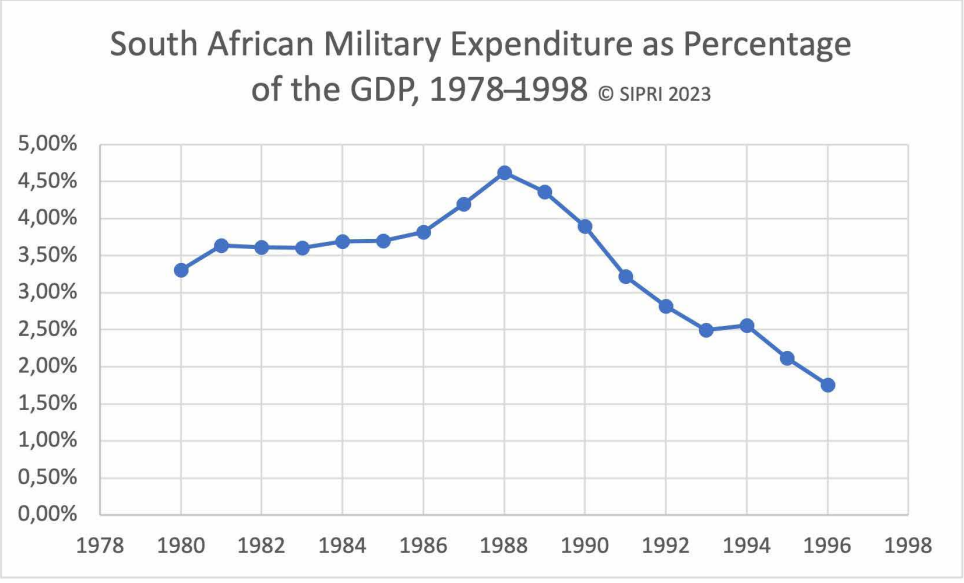

Figure 1: South African Military Expenditure as Percentage of the GDP, 1978–1988 (SIPRI, Military Expenditure Database).

Despite these critical incidents concerning the military and armed forces in the run-up to the democratic elections in 1994, the transition in South Africa was marked by the subordination of the military to civilian authority, both in the case of government and of the resistance movements. Perhaps the most critical factor in the role of the military in the transitional period was the in-depth understanding within the SADF of the need for transformation and democratisation. The military had a well-developed doctrine, and was exceptionally well trained in counterinsurgency. The doctrine highlighted the importance of political progress and the inability of the military to be strategically successful in the conduct of counterinsurgency without political reform (Esterhuyse and Jordaan, The South African Defence Force and Counterinsurgency, 159–190). The military was also deeply aware of the historical examples of white minority rule in

Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola. Unlike countries where the military might have resisted democratic change, most of the South African military however supported the reform agenda, including the unbanning of political parties, such as the ANC and the release of political prisoners, such as Nelson Mandela (E-mail, Col (ret) South African Special Forces).

The South African military had no direct political role in the process of political transition. At the same time, though, the SADF, and the security services in South African in general, had a clear understanding of the role of the military in maintaining stability and law and order and to prevent the country in general to descend into chaos. The military, specifically, had three critical integral institutional capabilities that contributed directly and positively to the transitional process. Firstly, the military had a comprehensive institutional structure throughout the country, from regional command structures to so-called 'area group headquarters' and local area defence unites known as commandos. This provided the Defence Force, on the one hand, with a logistical infrastructure to deploy at a moment's notice wherever it was required throughout the country. The structural presence of the military, on the other hand, provided the military with blanket intelligence coverage of the country as a whole. The intelligence coverage had both a tactical and strategic advantage. Strategically, the commandos, as territorial forces, and the area Group Headquarters and Commands provided Defence Headquarters in Pretoria with daily intelligence updates about their respective areas. The Defence Force, as such, had precise and in-depth knowledge of what was unfolding in every part of the country and could predict where instability is due to unfold and where action will be needed – much better, perhaps, than any other government institution. Tactically, the Commando forces and Group Headquarters provided the military forces deploying into particular areas of instability with detailed local knowledge of the area – from an in-depth understanding of the geography of the area to a clear understanding of the local population, language, trouble spots, and instigators in the community (.E-mail, SANDF general).

Secondly, the Defence Force, by means of their conscript and reserve system, had access to manpower that allowed the military to deploy adequate forces to areas where it was needed. Moreover, these forces were well trained, experienced, well equipped, and professional. That does not mean that mistakes were not made and that military at all times behaved in an impeccable manner. Given the severity of the situation in many areas and the high levels of violence and intimidation, the military was however relatively successful in acting and behaving in a manner that should be considered as professional. In reflecting on the behaviour of the soldiers in general, and the deployment of the military, it is important to keep in mind that the military deployed at all times in support of the police, and that the police was the primary actor in maintaining law and order in the domestic security environment (Telephone conversation, SADF Colonel, 5 June 2024).

Lastly, the South African military had unique capabilities that were not available in the rest of the public or private societies in South Africa and which placed the military at the centre of the management of the process of democratisation. This specifically concerned the movement of important political leaders, the deployment of troops to potential conflict areas, ensuring security for the electoral process, and providing logistical support. During the election process, the South African Air Force (SAAF), specifically, played a crucial role in transporting election materials, ballot boxes, and personnel to remote and difficult-to-access areas across the country. This support was essential in ensuring that all citizens had access to voting stations and that the elections were conducted efficiently. In case of any emergencies or incidents that required rapid response, the SAAF provided airlift capabilities for emergency services and personnel. In reflecting on the role of the military in the four days of the election, one observer noted –

To the rescue came the South African army and air force, institutions that had been central to the maintenance of apartheid. With precision and speed, they delivered millions of ballots to inaccessible outlying areas. Trained helicopter and Dakota pilots were now saving South Africa's first democratic election. This little-known fact confirms the near miracle of the birth of the new South Africa (Weinberg, Daily Maverick).

Nothing, perhaps reflect the role of the military in the process of democratisation more than the white generals, standing in the background in their full-dress uniforms, medals and all, with the newly elected President Mandela taking the oath of office. Taken as a whole, the role of the South African military in the political transition was characterised by its subordination to civilian authority, its support for the democratic process, and its commitment to ensuring stability and security during a period of profound political change in the country. Perhaps, and in the end, it is important to differentiate between the critical and professional role that the military fulfilled during the process of political transition in South Africa in the early 1990s, and the role of the military in the consolidation of democracy in South Africa that was underpinned largely by the dismantling of the military through budgetary and strategic neglect.

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to reflect on the role of the military in the political transitional processes in South Africa and which culminated in democratisation, the 1994 elections, and the ANC, under the leadership of President Mandela, becoming the first black majority party to govern South Africa. The paper therefore addressed primarily the role of the South African Defence Force as the only statutory military in the country in the build-up to democratisation in 1994 and in the aftermath of the extended period of Cold War conflict in Southern Africa.

The role of the military in political transitions is defined by the nature of the transitional process, its role in domestic security and society in the pre-transitional process, and

the nature of civil–military relations. This role unfolds along a line – from the military as a stabilising entity to ensure a smooth transition of power, to the maintenance of law and order, and the military as a political actor with possible participation in the transitional process. Successful political transitions depend on the one hand on the neutralisation of the military potential for disruption of the process of democratisation, and, on the other hand, on the refinement of civil–military relations to ensure political subordination of the military to democratic political control during and in the aftermath of the transitional process. The challenge is therefore to find a balance between keeping the military subordinate to the democratic political authority, and, at the same time, to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of the military institution. This effectiveness and efficiency of the military during the transitional process are tied to several critical military functions – maintaining societal security and stability, safeguarding national sovereignty and protection against external threats, support for progressive reform, initiating both institutional and societal change, and using systemic pressures and soft power to facilitate and convey a message of the need for change. To what extent did the South African military fulfil these functions?

Apartheid has been an ingrained part of the history of South Africa since the foundation of the country. Apartheid is usually branded as a period of spectacular failure. As a historical reality, it was not only an ingrained part of the South African society. At its core, it defined the South African society politically, economically, socio-culturally, and as a security construct. Resistance to apartheid rule gradually started to take effect from the early 1950s, coinciding with the rise to power of the National Party and its institutionalised policy of petty apartheid. The strategy of resistance and the struggle against apartheid eventually combined and integrated four basic pillars that emphasise mass mobilisation, the establishment of an underground network, armed resistance, and international support. The apartheid state responded to this strategy with a two-pronged approach of political reform and the maintenance of security. The role of the military in support of the police in the maintenance of security contaminated the military as a political actor. International events – and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union specifically – however created a strategic window of opportunity for the apartheid government to unban the resistance movements and to release political prisoners. This transformed the political transitional process in South Africa into a localised and home-grown solution with minimal international involvement, relying on the need for dialogue, compromise, and reconciliation in the peaceful transition to democracy. All the parties at the negotiations however also had access to a military capacity with the potential to derail the transitional process. As the only statutory military, the role of the SADF was critical in keeping the country from collapsing into total anarchy.

By the early 1990s, the South African military faced a legitimacy problem from society at large, having been involved in domestic stability operations for more than ten years. However, the SADF was a powerful instrument of power – highly trained, well equipped,

and highly competent. The SADF had a long tradition of political subordination; yet, it was also an integral part of the security state through its involvement in the Security Council and the National Security Management System. The subordination of the military was tested through the findings of the Goldstone Commission and the forced retirement of several senior officers, a right-wing uprising under the leadership of a highly respected senior officer that once served as Chief of the SADF, and the uncovering of an underground plot from the so-called 'revolutionary forces' to prepare for a military takeover.

The South African military had no direct political role in the process of political transition; yet, it was critical for the maintenance of stability, law, and order. The most essential reality in the role of the military in the transitional period was the in-depth appreciation within the SADF for the need for transformation and democratisation based on a refined understanding of counterinsurgency. The military, specifically, had three critical integral institutional capabilities that contributed directly to the transitional process: a comprehensive institutional structure, a well-developed pool of manpower, and unique equipment capabilities. Taken as a whole, the role of the South African military in the political transition was characterised by its subordination to civilian authority, its support for the democratic process, and its commitment to ensuring stability and security during a period of profound political change in South Africa. Without the military, the miracle of democratisation in South Africa in 1994 would not have been possible.

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