

DUMISANI KUMALO (1947 – 2019)

SA's long-serving UN representative was a diplomat who stood by his government's convictions

By Maureen Isaacson • 24 January 2019

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South African ambassador to the United Nations, Dumisani Kumalo and his grandson, Thanda Madikizela, talk about the attack on them on their way to a children's party. July 2007

Photo credit: [Daily Maverick](#)

Dumisani Kumalo served in the Department of International Relations and Co-operation for 14 years. He was chair of the Group of 77 (a coalition of 134 developing nations) and China; he defeated controversial then US ambassador to the UN John Bolton over the US's attempt to cut the UN budget; as chair of the Non-Aligned Movement he championed South Africa's opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, he chaired the Africa Group and was co-facilitator for the creation of the Human Rights Council.

Dumisani Shadrack Kumalo, who died on 21 January in Johannesburg at 71, was South Africa's longest-serving ambassador to the United Nations.

He served as South Africa's Permanent Representative to the UN from 1999 to 2009 during which time he earned the respect of his countrymen and peers — as well as a reputation for arrogance.

The Thabo Mbeki Foundation regarded his appointment as CEO in March 2011 as a coup. He brought with him considerable experience in multilateral diplomacy and had played a role in securing South Africa's non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Shortly after his appointment, I interviewed Kumalo at the Thabo Mbeki Foundation's Johannesburg Riviera offices. He wasted no time in addressing what he thought were unjust accusations of arrogance.

"In all those instances it is simply because I have demanded that the international community must do more for Africa, whether it is issues of poverty and underdevelopment and issues of security... I was the Cheeky African, I stood up for Africa, I am bullish about African issues because to me Africa matters a lot."

Although a portrait of Thabo Mbeki adorned Kumalo's own office, the former president was "in Sudan most of the time" — Mbeki was, in fact, the foundation's patron, he said.

Kumalo was proud to be the face of a Pan African think tank working with similar institutes for an African renaissance and the education of young Africans.

Dumisani Shadrack Kumalo was born on 16 September 1947 in KwaMbunda village in KwaZulu-Natal and grew up in Evaton, a township on the East Rand outside Johannesburg. His father was a carpenter and fundamentalist preacher; his mother a counsellor and midwife.

Kumalo attended Wilberforce College in Evaton, an institution established by American missionaries of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; he earned a BA degree from the University of South Africa, and an MA degree from Indiana University.

"I never for once forgot where I came from and I will never do so," he said in the interview, "not in the way of being bitter, but in the way of inspiring me. If my father, who could never read and write, could produce me... now people talk about race relations — my father was a carpenter, and he learned carpentry from Mister Jacobson, a Jewish man who had escaped the horrors of Nazism, and who used to send me books to read."

One of the founders of the Union of Black Journalists, Kumalo worked as a political journalist for Drum magazine, Golden City Post and the Sunday Times. In 1976 he became Total Oil's first black marketing executive and in 1977 he went into exile in New York. There his work in diplomacy began, where he contributed to the declaration of apartheid as a crime against humanity. He was a key player in the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 passed by the US Congress.

"I worked with the ANC office in New York and joined the Foreign Service. I ironically worked with the UN as part of the ANC's observer mission; I was Walter Sisulu's guide and assistant on his first trip to the US."

Kumalo also worked with Oliver Tambo and his relationship with Mbeki harked back to "the bad old days".

Kumalo served in the Department of International Relations and Co-operation for 14 years. His successes include being chair of the Group of 77 (a coalition of 134 developing nations) and China; the fight he won against controversial US ambassador to the UN John Bolton over the US's attempt to cut the UN budget. He chaired the Non-Aligned Movement, the Africa Group and was co-facilitator for the creation of the Human Rights Council. He said not many were aware of South

Africa's role in opposing the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when he was chair of the Non-Aligned Movement.

In the interview, Kumalo took the opportunity to address the fact that he had been "attacked unfairly" as South Africa's representative to the UN Security Council, during South Africa's inaugural election for a two-year term, from October 2006, as one of the 10 non-permanent members of the UN Security Council.

He said South Africa's controversial tenure earned the country the perception in some circles of being a "rogue democracy". Kumalo said this was "because it sided with Russia and China, voting against resolutions intended to combat dire human rights abuses in some countries".

"The question I have asked is, have you ever thought that they wanted to side with me?"

He had it on good authority from their diplomats that this was the case.

Kumalo wanted to talk about some of the lesser-known triumphs he experienced behind the scenes at the UN.

"I have been vocal about the power imbalance in the Security Council and you often forget that the other member states who were not permanent, who have given them this position, they have with certain obligations that they would do things." (The permanent five [P5] veto-wielding members are the US, Russia, China, France and Britain.)

During South Africa's term in the Security Council, of the 121 decisions taken, SA agreed 118 times "and nobody said anything. We agreed 118 times, and nobody said anything about that. The three times it went against the majority have stuck".

First, in 2007 South Africa voted against a resolution calling for a Special Tribunal for Lebanon for the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 others in a bomb attack in Beirut in February 2005.

"South Africa agreed there must be a tribunal, but it did not enjoy the support of the Lebanese parliament," Kumalo said in the interview.

In May 2007 a majority of Lebanese parliamentarians expressed support for the tribunal, which at the time of our interview was well underway.

Second, in January 2007, South Africa voted, with China and Russia, against a draft resolution on the situation in Myanmar, including the release of Myanmar's political prisoners.

"The day we voted on this resolution, the ASEAN group (Association of East Asian Nations) said Myanmar is not a threat to international security. It is not just shady countries (Congo, Indonesia and Qatar voted against) saying this — it is India, Malaysia and China — major countries. We decided we would send a rapporteur on human rights there — who documented the killing of monks in prisons."

Kumalo said he had "one regret":

“The mistake we made about our membership in the Security Council was that we failed to explain to our people that this is an organ that has very strict rules enshrined in charter of UN — I got attacked for nothing...The UN Charter authorises that threats to regional or international peace and security would be in the purview of the Security Council and Myanmar is considered a sovereign state.”

He further regretted not having ensured that people grasped how things worked — that foreign policy was decided by the president and his minister and not by UN representatives.

Third, Kumalo explained why SA voted controversially against the resolution to place Zimbabwe on the Security Council agenda in July 2008 at the time of the violent run-off of the presidential election.

“If you put Zimbabwe on the agenda [of the Security Council] it stays there forever. I wanted to see change in Zimbabwe and I agreed there were terrible political issues happening in Zimbabwe that did not meet the mandate of Security Council for peace and security and at same time there were killings in Kenya.”

Kumalo was referring to the violence after the run-off of the Kenyan elections.

“The same countries (that wanted to sanction Zimbabwe) refused to have Kofi Annan brief the Security Council on Kenya.”

Kumalo spoke briefly about Annan having been unfairly blamed for the Rwandan genocide.

“The Security Council that withdrew the troops really accelerated the killing. Annan at the time was head of the UN peace-keeping office and was not the Secretary-General. We have to be critical, but put it into context. I have tried so hard to explain that to put it all on Kofi is to lack understanding.”

Kumalo said critics should also understand that in terms of Zimbabwe:

“South Africa was facilitating as we are facilitating right now, and we were trying as government to get the Zimbabwean people to resolve their government.

“They passed a resolution condemning Gadaffi’s killing of people – and has it stopped the Libyans from killing people?”

In conclusion, Kumalo once again stressed his own experience of being unfairly attacked.

“When the Americans, in the General Assembly, not the Security Council, wanted to pass a resolution condemning rape as a weapon of war, committed by soldiers, I said, ‘What are we saying about rape committed by the man in the street? Let’s condemn rape in all its manifestations.’ The resolution finally said rape in all its manifestations should be condemned.”

Such endeavours have left an impression as Kumalo’s death is being mourned across the diplomatic world and at home in South Africa.

The Thabo Mbeki Foundation, where Kumalo was CEO until 2015, said his contribution to the foundation’s work “will forever be appreciated”.

The foundation named, particularly, his establishment of the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, an initiative in partnership with Unisa which trains young people to become thought leaders on the African continent.

Kumalo's lifetime dedication had, in this capacity, found completion. DM

Reference:

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