

AFRICA AND NORTH KOREA: MONUMENTS AND MUNITIONS

By George F. Ward

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Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses.



In this photo taken Monday, Sept. 21, 2009, North Korean workers construct the 50-meter-high (328-foot-high) bronze statue dubbed the Monument of the African Renaissance in Dakar, Senegal. (Source: AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell.)

ZAMBIA AT A TIPPING POINT?

By Dr. Alexander Noyes

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In this January 2015 file photo Hakainde Hichilema, of the Zambia opposition United Party for National Development, addresses an election rally in Lusaka, Zambia. (Source: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, File.)

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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North Korean Relations with African States

Oddly enough, the North Korean relationship with several African states can be said to be rooted in art. Since 1969, Pyongyang's [Mansudae Art Studio](#) has provided statues and monuments to at least 16 African countries. The works exported to Africa range from memorials of anti-colonial struggles to large statues of post-colonial leaders done in Socialist-Realist style. The studio, which was founded in 1959 during the rule of Kim Il-sung, has turned out tens of thousands of statues and monuments, mostly for the home audience. It [employs](#) 4,000 people, including 1,000 artists. From the beginning of its activities in Africa, Mansudae served as a political instrument. Until the turn of this century, its works were provided completely free of charge. More recently, perhaps because of the DPRK's dire economic circumstances, the North Korean state has received payment for Mansudae's efforts.

Providing monumental art was the thin edge of North Korea's wedge into Africa, but other channels of effort soon became active. The North Korean government launched educational and cultural exchanges aimed at spreading its philosophy of Juche (self-reliance) on the continent. Some [Juche](#) study groups reportedly still exist in Africa. Select African students were provided scholarships for study in North Korea.

North Korean policy also has had a distinctly [harder aspect](#). The Hermit Kingdom has long provided arms, military equipment, and military training to African countries. North Korean entities have constructed military facilities in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Madagascar, Namibia, and Uganda. Leadership protection training offered by North Korea has been particularly in demand. Over the years, Benin, the DRC, Egypt, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Libya, Seychelles, Uganda, and Zimbabwe have participated.

Perhaps the most sordid episode in North Korea's engagement with Africa played out in Zimbabwe. Soon after Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980, Robert Mugabe, then the country's prime minister, visited North Korea and returned full of admiration for Kim Il Sung. Before long, a contingent of North Korean military advisers arrived in Zimbabwe. They trained 3,500 ex-liberation fighters. The result was the notorious Fifth Brigade, which was sent to Matebeleland to deal with "dissidents." In a campaign that became known as "Gukurahundi" (a Shona word for the spring rains that sweep



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away dry season chaff), about 20,000 civilians, overwhelmingly from the Ndebele ethnic group that supported Joshua Nkomo, Mugabe's political opponent, were killed. [Documents released in recent years](#) implicate Robert Mugabe personally for orchestrating the killings. Ironically, [the statue of Joshua Nkomo](#) that stands in central Bulawayo was reportedly created by sculptors from Mansudae Art Studio.

Africa and North Korea under UN Sanctions

Several African states are reported as not fully complying with UN sanctions related to North Korea. For example, the [report](#) of the UN panel of experts released in February 2016 stated that a North Korean entity either working with, or using the alias of, the Mansudae Overseas Project Group (MOPG), conducted military construction activities in Namibia at least through 2015. (MOPG is the overseas subsidiary of the Mansudae Art Studio.) These activities included the construction of what the experts characterized as a munitions plant and a number of military bases. The report did not include the assertion made by other sources that the financing of some of the military construction was provided by [soft loans from China](#), a permanent member of the UN Security Council that voted for sanctions on North Korea.

The response of the government of Namibia to the UN experts report was [confusing](#). The government told the panel of experts that it had not been aware of the connection between MOPG and KOMID, North Korea's primary overseas military contractor. At another point, the government stated that military construction by the North Koreans had been completed by 2005, before UN sanctions came into force. Documentary evidence in the UN report refuted that claim. Finally, Namibia's president, Hage Geingob, journeyed to New York to explain his country's actions to the UN. Without admitting that sanctions had been violated, the Namibian government stated that Mansudae's current projects had been terminated and that the company had been asked to leave Namibia.

The [2017 report](#) by the UN experts cited additional possible sanctions violations by the following African countries: Angola, the DRC, Eritrea, Egypt, Mozambique, Namibia, Sudan, and Uganda. The experts noted that UN Security Council Resolution 2321, passed in 2016, prohibited states from procuring statues from the DPRK, whether directly or indirectly. Despite this ban, Mansudae continued to be active on the African continent.

Policy Implications

According to an [August 2016 report](#) by the National Committee on North Korea, the DPRK then had diplomatic relations with 50 African states and maintained embassies in 12 of those countries. Those relationships provide a broad base of maneuver for North Korea in its efforts to circumvent sanctions and earn hard currency revenue. Having cultivated political, economic, cultural, and military relationships with African countries over many decades, North Korea can count on a sympathetic hearing in many parts of the continent. In response to these circumstances, the reports by the UN panel of experts are useful instruments. Note, however, that the reports themselves are not likely to be effective in changing African state behavior to the extent needed. Reaching that goal would require continued efforts by the United States and other interested countries to elevate sanctions compliance as a major issue in their relations with African states.

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In this January 2015 file photo Hakainde Hichilema, of the Zambia opposition United Party for National Development, addresses an election rally in Lusaka, Zambia. (Source: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, File.)

Background

Zambia is a country of 16 million located in southern Africa. The country has a well-earned reputation for relative peace and democracy. Indeed, it is the only country in the region in which the governing party has [twice](#) been successfully unseated by the opposition party. Over the last several years, however, first under President Michael Sata of the Patriotic Front (PF) party, who passed away in office in 2014, and currently under Lungu, also of PF, Zambia has been headed in a more authoritarian direction. Frequent [arrests](#) of opposition figures, a [crackdown](#) on the press and other [civil society](#) groups, and increasing levels of election-related [violence](#) in the run-up to August 2016 polls have all threatened to tarnish the country's democratic credentials.

Before the 2016 vote, the chairman of the Zambia's Electoral Commission [asserted](#) that pre-election violence was "unprecedented and has marred Zambia's historic record of peaceful elections." Although the August 2016 polls themselves were relatively peaceful, international election monitors [noted](#) an uneven playing field and a media bias toward the PF. After the elections, which Lungu won by a narrow margin over Hichilema, the UPND alleged that the results were fraudulent and refused to recognize Lungu as the president. In October 2016, Hichilema and his deputy were [arrested](#) for "unlawful assembly" and "seditious practices," but were later released on bail.

Arrest and Fallout

These simmering tensions again came to a head with Hichilema's most recent arrest in April 2017. Up to 100 police [stormed](#) Hichilema's house in the middle of the night, allegedly breaking down doors, firing tear gas, and [abusing](#) his staff. As [argued](#) by scholar Nic Cheeseman, the nature of the arrest suggests that "the main aim of the operation was not an efficient and speedy arrest, but rather the humiliation and intimidation of an opponent." The specifics of the treason charge remain murky. Court documents [allege](#) that Hichilema, "on unknown dates but between 10 October 2016 and 8 April 2017 and whilst acting together with other persons unknown did endeavor to overthrow by unlawful means the government of Edgar Lungu." [Bail](#) is not available for treason charges, which in Zambia carry a maximum sentence of death and a minimum of 15 years in jail. Hichilema's lawyers [sought](#) to have the charges dropped, but the request was denied.

The Zambian opposition, along with domestic and outside observers, have decried the arrest and argued that the charges are politically motivated. Jack Mwiimbu, Hichilema's lawyer, [said](#) that Hichilema "has always known that the PF have always wanted to charge him with a non-bailable offence, so he is not shocked." After the arrest, Archbishop Telephore Mpundu, president of the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, [noted the ramifications of Hichilema's arrest](#): "Our country is now all, except in designation, a dictatorship; and if it is not yet, then we are not far from it." Depose

Muchena, Amnesty International's Regional Director for Southern Africa, [argued](#) that Hichilema and his co-accused, “are victims of longstanding persecution by the Zambian authorities stemming from their political activities and last year’s disputed election.”

Conclusion

Amid a [depressed](#) economy, low commodity prices (Zambia’s economy is dominated by copper exports), and rising unemployment, Lungu appears willing to use increasingly authoritarian tactics to suppress challenges to his rule. Hichilema’s arrest and treason charge constitute the latest episode in a long line of worrying incidents under PF rule that threaten to tarnish Zambia’s democratic bona fides. To help steer Zambia back onto a democratic trajectory, international and regional partners should consider advising the Zambian government to drop the treason charge on Hichilema and enter into a political dialogue to end the impasse between Lungu and Hichilema. A pending [deal](#) with the International Monetary Fund worth over \$1 billion could provide helpful leverage. The Southern Africa Development Community, and South Africa in particular, could play an important role in such an effort. As [noted](#) by an advisor to Hichilema, “South Africa could fix this mess with a strongly worded statement. But the silence from South Africa is license for the president to continue.”

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