

**South African Dreams and Middle East Nightmares**

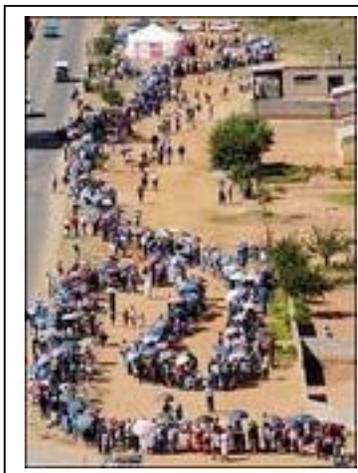
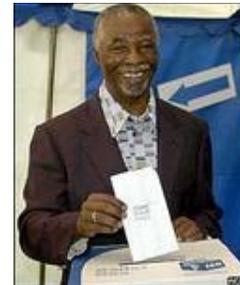
**James S. Henry**

**April 14, 2004**

**SubmergingMarkets™, 2004**

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**T**oday there is much news from the developing world to celebrate as well as to deplore. On the one hand, there is the disturbing fact that **President Bush**, has decided to swallow **Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's so-called "disengagement plan"** hook, line, and sinker. As we have noted elsewhere, this plan is a recipe for the imposition of **de facto apartheid on** the West Bank. This will mean nothing but increased suffering for Palestinians, increased international isolation and insecurity for Israel, and mounting hostility toward Americans and Israelis alike



wherever they go. We did not realize that "**Howdy Doody**" (GW) was a hockey player -- this constitutes a pretty neat hat trick.



**At the other end of the peace and reconciliation spectrum, South Africa** has successfully held its **third free nation-wide elections** in a row. Turnout has reportedly been very heavy, while peace and tranquility have been maintained at almost all the

country's 17,000 polling stations.

Some commentators, like the **New York Times' Michael Wines**, muttered a few dark concerns about an emerging "one-party state," or even "Putinization." But the fact is that while **Thabo Mbeki's ANC** is expected to capture at least two-thirds of

the vote, more than 30 other parties have been represented at the polls, and many non-ANC officials will be elected at the provincial level (especially in KwaZulu) and to the national parliament.

Furthermore, South Africa's press has nothing in common with Russia's increasingly state-influenced media -- as anyone who follows the South African press can attest, the debate in the run-up to today's vote has been lively and free-wheeling.

Less happily, ***the Putin analogy*** is false for a more disturbing reason. Vladimir Putin achieved his March 2004 overwhelming victory in Russia largely because he has presided over a dramatic recovery for Russia's economy, after the tremendous downturn that it suffered in the 1990s at the hands of neoliberal policies. South Africa's ANC has achieved today's victory **despite** the fact that the neoliberal policies it for the most part pursued for the last decade have left the country with ***massive unemployment and a growing gap between rich and poor.***

Of course South Africa also has **many other unsolved problems.** It labors under a severe HIV/AIDs epidemic, which now infects up to 20% of its citizens. Its 40 percent underemployment rate, on top of one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the world and the transfer of policing power to relatively inexperienced recruits, have all contributed to a serious crime wave and a disturbing continuation of "white flight."



Meanwhile, the ANC's top leaders have also indulged in a certain amount of **"crony capitalism."** This is not surprising, at the end of decades of oppression, and it is certainly nothing compared to the massive corruption that has been witnessed in so many other African countries. But it is distressing nonetheless, a betrayal of all those who fought, suffered, and died in the struggle, and never had an opportunity to "cash in." This combination of neoliberal policies, ineffective law enforcement, and insider deals may have produced nice opportunities for the new black elite to live in Joburg's Houghton district, but so far it has done little for most South Africans. ***If the ANC does not achieve better economic results for ordinary people in the next five years, the next election will not go so smoothly.***

Nevertheless, compared with the dire fears that many people had for South Africa's future only a decade ago, this continuation of the New South Africa's peaceful, democratic transition is a signal achievement. Certainly it is a striking contrast to the **ethnic apartheid and endless rounds of**

**righteous, escalating vengeance** that have come to characterize the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

As Nobel-laureate *Bishop **Desmond Tutu said today:***



"Often they say the first election after freedom is the last. Many countries degenerate into dictatorships after their first elections. We are disproving that. We are taking it in our stride."



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