

Water as an Instrument of South African Hegemon in the 20th Century

Nuno J A Ventura¹

¹Institute of Social and Political Sciences - Technical University of Lisbon (ISCSP - UTL),
Observatory for Human Security, Lisbon, Portugal

nuvem.ventura@gmail.com

South African History is punctuated by the use of water as an instrument of economic, political and military power projection. The need to capture water resources has been a constant objective so as to guarantee its economic present and future, earning the country the just classification of a hydro-hegemon. The initial Grand Apartheid policy attributed priority to water management especially for its goldfields industrial complex in the Witwatersrand, today known as Gauteng. South Africa's hydraulic mission, constituted by the construction of dams and inter-basin transfer schemes, was heralded by H.F.Verwoerd as a demonstration of Afrikaner superiority.

South Africa's isolated state status very similar to that of Israel, lead to the joint development and transfer of technology between the two countries in water management and even nuclear technology. Curiously both states have a domestic and international water dynamics marked by the larger political and historical context.

Water as an instrument of war lead to the sponsoring or direct intervention by the RSA in the overthrow of the government in Lesotho in 1986, the attack on the Calueque dam which supplied the north of South-West Africa (at the time under the administration of the RSA) by Angolan and Cuban forces in 1988, and in 1990 the obstruction of water supply to Wesselton Township by the South African government in response to protests over deficient sanitation and living conditions by its population. After the collapse of the Apartheid regime the RSA made significant contributions to the SADC Water Protocol. In 1998 this did not stop further unilateral intervention by the RSA, through the deployment of troops, in response to political turmoil in the kingdom of Lesotho. This action was based on the need to protect the infra-structure of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), a major inter-basin water transfer project destined for the RSA's economic heartland of Gauteng.