

Shining a light to the 'dark continent'

By [Justice Malala](#)

7 Oct 2009

Writing in the [New York Times](#) in late July this year, Howard W French told a truth often ignored. “As a matter of convention,” he wrote, “we constantly say and write things about Africa that would be unimaginable with any other continent.



“An often thoughtless broad-brush treatment belies the fact of diversity on a continent of 53 countries (even this is not a settled number) and close to a billion inhabitants, a place of light and dark, rich and poor, increasingly well-governed and still appallingly ill-governed people.”

These words came back to me a few days after they were published while I listened to the speeches at the [Sunday Times Book Awards](#) on 1 August 2009. As the finalists and winners were announced to a room packed with government ministers, academics, authors, publishers, intellectuals and journalists, it occurred to me that perhaps here, in South Africa, we are beginning to show that indeed we are like the rest of the world.

We are, in French's words, “light and dark, rich and poor”. In so many of the works that nearly made it, and the two fiction and non-fiction titles that finally won, this world of light and dark is explored and expanded upon. It is more than light and dark: it is a multicoloured thing, complex and worthy of investigation.

In politics, Africa conjures up certain images. People speak of the “dark continent” and easily draw the line towards the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin or the former Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko.

And yet I know I have lived for five years under the most benign, democratic presidential term many anywhere in the world can ever have known. I lived from 1994 to 1999 under President Nelson Mandela. That image, that five years, and the 10 after it under Thabo Mbeki, is not the “dark continent”. It is another country. It is the shining light to the dark.

I write two weekly columns for two different publications. Never once have I felt that I cannot write what I like; criticise as I like, offend as I feel. I live in a free country.

As I write this the new president of our republic, Jacob Zuma, has just visited a township where over the past few weeks there have been service delivery riots. The people of Balfour complained about poor provision of water, electricity and corruption.

Zuma arrived unannounced, walked and talked with the people of the township and then went to the mayor's office. A worker tucking into her lunch was so shocked to see him there her plate fell out of her hands and smashed to the floor.

The mayor was not around. Zuma told his officials he would sit in the mayor's office until the man came to the office. Many have asked why the mayor was not at his desk. He could have been out seeing residents - like Zuma. In the dark light, in the broad brush, many rushed to say he was lazy and was caught out by the president.

The man had been booked off sick. He roused himself out of bed and came to see Zuma. Sometimes, you see, things are grey. Not dark, not light. This is what Africa needs: the chance to be all shades, not just the "dark continent".

Over the past few years the eyes of the international community have increasingly been turning towards South Africa. With the [2009 FIFA Confederations Cup](#) in June, the Lions Tour and the Indian Premier League, billions of people across the world were glued to their television screens watching the various sports events unfold.

At the end of each of these sports fests, not many would say that South Africa had not pulled off the organisation spectacularly well. I remember speaking to Hans Klaus, head of communications for FIFA, who told me that if anyone ever thought the 2010 World Cup could not be staged in South Africa then they had their answer: the Confederations Cup was an outstanding success.

On the economic front, many across the world expected the Zuma administration to follow a leftist economic slant due to the ruling African National Congress's closeness to its trade union allies. Talk of nationalisation of mines was rife. Yet Zuma has dismissed this talk.

The respected ratings agency Moody in July showed its faith in the new government's economic policy probity by upgrading its foreign currency rating. Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan welcomed the move, saying: "We welcome their understanding that President Zuma's government ... is committed to maintaining a very sound approach to fiscal policy, but at the same time ensuring that we remain agile and responsive to the many challenges that countries like South Africa face."

Dark continent? Hardly.

So what favours can we be done as we hurtle inexorably to the 2010 World Cup? How can the world help us? No favours, really, except for the world's eyes to be opened, for our "light and dark" to be seen in full splendour and not rolled into one "dark continent". The world merely needs to start seeing Africa, and South Africa, as a place of many shades, of many contradictions, of many triumphs and many failures. Like Europe, like any other place on Earth.

It is the least the world can do for us. It is all we ask for. The rest, the proof (if any is needed) that we are special, is up to us.

Article published courtesy of MediaClubSouthAfrica.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justice Malala is an award-winning former newspaper editor, and is now general manager of Avusa's stable of 56 magazines. He writes weekly columns for *The Times* newspaper and *Financial Mail* magazine, as well as a monthly media and politics column for *Empire* magazine. He is the resident political analyst for independent television channel e.tv and has consulted extensively for financial institutions on South African political risk. Malala was also an executive producer on *Hard Copy* I and II, a ground-breaking

television series on SABC3. Hard Copy I w on the Golden Horn Award for best television series. Malala's work has been published internationally in the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *The Independent*, *Forbes*, *Institutional Investor*, *The Age* and *The Observer*.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>