

## **Whose Mandela is it anyway**

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Why is writing about Nelson Mandela so difficult? I often wonder. On the contrary, many people consider it easy and in fact most “write what they like” about this international icon, often in ahistorical and depoliticised narratives.

Paradoxically, I am also inclined to concur; it is not difficult to write and say *anything* about Madiba. What is difficult is writing what *ought to be written*, what *ought to be said* about *what he really represents*, the *milieu that shaped* him, the *context that shaped his decisions* and numerous other considerations that, if truly appreciated by all those who invoke his name, the world we live in would undoubtedly be a better place today.

Unfortunately, what most writers, commentators and politicians do is *selectively* draw and apply “lessons from Mandela”. Habitually, commentary is punctuated with posture that suggests those in power don’t qualify to be there because they are not a “Mandela”. In South Africa in particular, a debate is unfolding which unfairly gauges the performance and style of contemporary leaders in terms of the yardstick of the Mandela persona. The blemish in the comparison is two-fold.

First, it depoliticises Mandela. That is, it removes him from his organisation, thus indirectly suggesting that his was a lone crusade not informed and influenced by organisational policies, discipline and decisions.

Second, descriptors are applied instead of first settling definition questions. History has proven that in politicised debates, people elect to describe complex phenomena like Mandela instead of engaging with the most elementary aspect of analysis – defining phenomena. You do not define temperature by looking at the sun – temperature is to be felt and not seen!

What is the point of all of this? Let us start with a notation on history before attempting a contemporary definition of the meaning of Mandela.

### **The freedom fighter**

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, a lawyer by training, cut his teeth in the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), which he founded with luminaries like Anton Lembede, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. He actually practised law with Tambo up until it was no longer possible to do so because of the political situation in the country.

Even before the events leading up to the Rovonia Trial, Mandela had made a name for himself as a youth activist who steadfastly pursued the ANCYL’s radical Programme of Action, which formed the bedrock of the broader Defiance Campaign and the introduction of the armed struggle, up until he was captured in a hideout in the Midlands of KwaZulu-Natal, put on trial and sent to prison.

"We are not anti-white, we are against white supremacy ... we have condemned racialism no matter by whom it is professed."

"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

These statements, advanced by Nelson Mandela as part of his defence in the 1961 to 1964 Rivonia Trial, are pertinent since they define Mandela's character and what he represents. They have global agency today as they did half a century ago.

Eventually Mandela and his comrades were sentenced to life for acts of "defiance", "sabotage" and "terrorism". He spent 27 years in prison, most of which was on Robben Island. When he was released in February 1990, he repeated the latter part of the above citation, signifying his political attitude towards a future non-racial, non-sexist and equal society.

Therefore, commentary on his pursuit of freedom for the African people who were excluded from the body politic of apartheid South Africa as well as his non-racial character should be viewed through his enduring commitment to the democratic principles he inherited from his forebears in the ANC who struggled to create a free, non-racial, non-sexist, inclusive and prosperous South Africa.

They shaped his political attitude even as he was voted the first President of the democratic South Africa. Therefore, outside the historical context of his liberation movement a figure of Nelson Mandela is inconceivable.

### **The unbanning**

When former state presidents PW Botha and later FW de Klerk succumbed to the call for negotiations, Mandela reminded them that he was a prisoner and therefore had no right to negotiate. This ultimately forced De Klerk to unconditionally release all political prisoners. Here, Mandela understood that he was part of the collective and therefore could not agree to a deal that excluded his comrades in prison and in exile. History is littered with leaders who betrayed the cause of "freedom".

Arguably, the biggest test of Mandela's character was his astute political management of the period between 1990 (when political organisations were unbanned and political prisoners released) and 1994 (when South Africa held the first all-inclusive democratic elections).

It is now a fact of history that the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) could have collapsed - unleashing yet another period of uncertainty and instability - had Mandela, acting as part of the ANC collective, not steered

the process towards a particular direction. In essence, he had to balance two things: ensure that the oppressor believes a future democratic South Africa had room for him while not compromising the fundamental demands of the oppressed majority who had to be comfortable enough to accommodate some interests of the minority who had for centuries enjoyed the spoils of colonialism and apartheid.

### **The transition**

A defining moment was the death of Chris Hani on 10 April 1993. Hardly a year had passed after the 17 June (1992) massacre in Boipatong when Mandela had to, once again, calm the nation and remind De Klerk of the necessity to fast-track negotiations. The unintended consequence of the Hani murder was the immediate announcement of the date for the national democratic elections set for April 1994.

For many leaders, maintaining calm during this period would have been a tall order. Emotions were high and the anger of the people was most palpable and justified. This is what he had to say:

“Tonight I am reaching out to every single South African, black and white, from the very depths of my being. A white man, full of prejudice and hate, came to our country and committed a deed so foul that our whole nation now teeters on the brink of disaster. A white woman, of Afrikaner origin, risked her life so that we may know, and bring to justice, this assassin ... Now is the time for all South Africans to stand together against those who, from any quarter, wish to destroy what Chris Hani gave his life for – the freedom of all of us.”

A further complication was that apartheid negotiators were not honest brokers, so that the biggest task for Madiba was to nudge them towards settlement as soon as practicable. They soon realised that unless they stopped the massacres and unrest, the whole negotiation process would collapse. They had more to lose than the oppressed. Conditions were ripe for the insurrection! As a matter of course, those overthrown through insurrection cannot negotiate – they take what is offered.

Enter 1994, and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) threatens to boycott the elections. Given the instability and violence in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal in particular, Madiba knew that no section of South African society would benefit by boycotting elections. This he told them in so many words. Eventually, the IFP took part in the first democratic Parliament, and in Cabinet.

### **Mandela the Statesman**

Mandela presided over the most difficult period in the history of post-apartheid South Africa. The State was weak and bankrupt. Police forces and other state apparatus had no legitimacy. The economy was faltering. Violence continued in the townships. White people were scared. The black majority expected

immediate change. South Africa was no longer a rogue state so it was admitted back into the international arena.

By the time he finished his term, Mandela had turned around the State and South Africa's global standing. Armed and police forces were integrated. There was a unitary state incorporating apartheid-created tribal homelands. He lifted the Rugby World Cup in 1995 and the Africa Cup of Nations in 1996.

The "swart gevaar" evaporated; and doubting Thomases were silenced. More significantly, he initiated a vital project of unifying disparate bureaucracies and formed a single national machinery, all attendant weaknesses notwithstanding.

Social security system was reformed, thus regularising and equalising social grants, from a race-based to an inclusive system. The fiscus was stabilised. Foreign direct investment began to return to South Africa. A world-renowned Constitution with the Bill of Rights was inaugurated in 1996.

In the post-colonial era, tyrannical reign is often manifested by the quest for life-time presidency and so Mandela's groundbreaking decision to retire has become a model. In many cases of unending rule, the common refrain is that a particular leader is yet to finish his mission.

Invariably this is a coded way of saying the leader has to stay in office for ever. Yet Mandela retired gracefully after only his first term but remained in the service of the public through charitable foundations. To date, he remains an inspiration for the poor and oppressed worldwide.

### **Whose Mandela is it anyway?**

Or should the question be: why should we all celebrate Mandela Day on 18 July, his birthday.

Without risking political correctness, I opine that, despite my opening remarks, Mandela should be celebrated by the entire global community – progressives, tyrants, conservatives, public servants, etc. For the progressives, the reasons are obvious; they are also in the pursuit of fair and inclusive local and global political and economic systems. For them, there is no better inspiration than Nelson Mandela.

For those who stand in stark contrast of what Mandela lives and is prepared to die for, celebrating Mandela Day will hopefully help them embrace his clarion call when he opened Parliament in May 1994:

“...Our single most important challenge is therefore to help establish a social order in which the freedom of the individual will truly mean the freedom of the individual. We must construct that people-centred society of freedom in such a manner that it guarantees the political liberties and the human rights of all our citizens...”

More directly, this is what he had to say to those who either stalled or opposed progress:

"...The people have risen and tyrants have fallen. The demand for free and fair elections is very strong. What is happening here is going to send a message to similar areas."

As for those of us in the Public Service, the target audience of this magazine, let us recall what he said when addressing a luncheon in honour of outgoing commissioners of the Public Service Commission in 1996:

"For the majority of South Africans, the Public Service was seen as a hostile instrument of an oppressive minority. We have an immense challenge to build a state that is truly oriented towards the service of all South Africans; that is equitably representative of our society; that is guided by the broad vision of a better life for all; and that is dedicated to making efficient use of public resources. No less demanding are the tasks of rooting out corruption ... Achieving all these goals at the same time as we find the right size for our Public Service, will no doubt produce some testing times..."

In conclusion, there could be no better tribute or celebration of President Nelson Mandela's legacy than responding to a call for the world's people to show their Ubuntu on 18 July. Liberation from all forms of oppression, including poverty, as well as selfless service to others is what Mandela lives for. Integrity characterises him.

Therein lies a challenge for public sector managers – to serve selflessly and with integrity. As the global masses partake in volunteer activities on Mandela Day, we in turn should use this opportunity to rededicate ourselves to serve in a manner that truly transforms society towards the realisation of the goal of creating a better life for all. Failure to do that would weaken our claim to the Mandela legacy.

Let Mandela be our zeitgeist!

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