

Nelson Mandela's Place in South African Society: Some Critical Reflection on His Legacy

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Summary

Modern South Africa has replaced the iron rule of the apartheid system with a constitutional democracy. This context of oppression and exploitation had a bearing on the kind of leaders produced by society. Conflict and exploitation formed part of the oppressive machinery in the country. At the end of the Second World War, South Africa experienced an unprecedented urbanisation which was followed by repressive laws. On the one hand, this led to the radicalisation of black politics in the country. The silencing of political voices after the Sharpeville massacre saw scores and scores of activists either in jail, under house arrest or in exile. Development in South Africa suffered a great blow with talented men and women who had to endure suffering in jail or exile. In other words, the cream of society was banished and South Africa as a society suffered materially and intellectually during this period. Nelson Mandela is one example of a leader from the oppressed section of society who was removed from society for over three decades. South African development would have reached a different level had the minority whites not reacted differently to urbanisation as a global phenomenon. The names of Luthuli, Tambo, Mandela and others continue to be invoked whenever the ruling party experiences challenges regarding leadership. Although these leaders cannot rule from their graves, it is their profound contribution to the development of the society that speaks about the legacy which is central to this study.

Opsomming

Hedendaagse Suid-Afrika het die ysterbewind van die apartheidstelsel vervang met 'n grondwetlike demokrasie. Hierdie konteks van onderdrukking en uitbuiting het 'n uitwerking gehad op die soort leiers wat die samelewing opgelewer het. Konflik en uitbuiting was deel van die onderdrukkingsmiddele in die land. Aan die einde van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog het Suid-Afrika ongekende verstedeliking ervaar, gevolg deur onderdrukkende wette. Aan die een kant het dit tot die radikalisering van swart politiek in die land gelei. Politieke stemme is stilgemaak ná die Sharpeville-massamoord, en talle aktiviste is tronkstraf opgelê, onder huisarres geplaas of verban. Ontwikkeling in Suid-Afrika het 'n lelike knou gekry as gevolg daarvan dat talentvolle mans en vrouens lyding in die tronk of in ballingskap moes verduur. Met ander woorde, die room van die samelewing is verban en Suid-Afrika as 'n samelewing het in hierdie tyd materieel en intellektueel skade gely. Nelson Mandela is maar een voorbeeld van 'n leier uit die onderdrukte deel van die samelewing, wat vir langer as drie dekades uit die samelewing verwyder is. Die ontwikkeling in Suid-Afrika sou 'n ander vlak bereik het

as die wit meerderheid nie anders reageer het op verstedeliking as 'n wêreldwye verskynsel nie. Name soos Luthuli, Tambo, Mandela en ander word steeds opgeroep wanneer die regerende party uitdagings ten opsigte van leierskap ervaar. Al kan hierdie leiers nie vanuit hul grafte heers nie, is dit hul noemenswaardige bydrae tot die ontwikkeling van die samelewing wat getuig van die nalatenskap wat die kern van hierdie studie is.

Introduction.

South African history and politics have been heavily influenced by colonial and apartheid discourses. The society categorised the population into citizens and subjects – whites and blacks or “regime of differentiation” (Mamdani 1996: 7). In an industrialising society, it became paramount how these indigenous people would be handled or the definition of their roles in the society. Migrant labourers came to play crucial roles in the mining industry as cheap labour and the broad political economy. It is important to analyse government concerns how the natives would be engaged in the urban areas in the world of work as expressed by the Prime minister, General Christian Smuts when he said,

“The political system of the natives was ruthlessly destroyed in order to incorporate them as equals into the white system. The African was good as a potential European; his social and political culture was bad, barbarous, and only deserving to be stamped out root and branch. In some of the British possessions in Africa the native just emerged from barbarism was accepted as an equal citizen with full political rights along with the whites. But his native institutions were ruthlessly proscribed and destroyed. The principle of equal rights was applied in its crudest form, and while it gave the native a semblance of equality with whites, which was little good to him, it destroyed the basis of his African system which was his highest good. These are the two extreme native policies which have prevailed in the past, and the second has been only less harmful than the first” (cited in Mamdani 1996: 5). This view saw the division of the natives into urban and rural blacks. By the time Nelson Mandela moved to Johannesburg, he came into contact with the challenges Africans were facing on a daily basis such as housing, pass laws, schooling, sport etc.

Mandela came into contact with other oppressed blacks such as Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Peter Mda, Robert Sobukwe, Anton Lembede, etc. (Glaser 2012: 40-41). These circles of friendship had connection with place of origin, political and schooling networks in particular the University of Fort Hare. As young people, with political interests ended with membership of the African National Congress Youth League. He and Tambo established a law firm in Johannesburg and the majority clients were regularly grappling with issues of human rights violation at the hands of the state such as unfair arrest, pass laws, harassment by police, and assault by gangs in townships. They also

experienced the hardship other blacks were exposed to on a daily basis. As members of the Youth League, they became involved in the politics of the mother body which was found to be conservative and wanted to change the course of politics in the country by injecting some radicalism with strikes, protest, mass action as opposed to the petitions and delegations of the mother body.

This radicalism of the Youth League brought a challenge over African Nationalism as it had to bring tangible results which their constituency yearned for. As the mother body had established working relations with the Indian Congress, the Congress of Democrats and the Communist Party of South Africa, the narrow African Nationalism set them apart from the mother body. By the end of the late 1950s, a new political formation emerged out of the theoretical difference in the form of the Pan African Congress (Lodge 1990: 84).

Politics and Gender Dynamics

Politics and love affairs came into the picture as well. In the early 1940s, Mandela established closer relations with Walter Sisulu's cousin, Evelyn Mase, a qualified nurse (Meer 1988: 416). This relationship ended in a marriage that was blessed with three children, Makgatho, Thembi and Makaziwe. Evelyn became an important pillar to the Mandela family especially when Mandela was in and out of the family because of political activities. During the defiance campaign of 1952, Nelson spend more and more time out of the family.

The family became under enormous pressure for the love and care for the children. The other pressure they family experienced was about extra marital relations Nelson had with other women. According to Evelyn, "I could not place my finger on it at first. Nobody would tell me. Then the gossip reached me. Nelson, I was told, was having an affair with a woman member of the ANC. I knew this woman and admired and liked her. She visited us often and I got on well with her. I did not believe the rumour at first, but unable to bear it, I turned to Nelson. Who else could I have turned to? He was angry that I questioned his fidelity. The woman was an important ANC leader that was all there was to it, he said. But the gossip continued, and there were those who tried to console me by claiming he was bewitched. There was also another woman and this one started coming home, walking into our bedroom, following him to the bathroom" (Meer 1988: 78-79). By 1956, the relationship between Nelson and Evelyn had reached an irretrievable breakdown and ended in a divorce (Cronje & Heaton 2004: 119). Evelyn was given the custody of the children and Nelson paid *lobola* after the divorce (Meer 1988: 81). *Lobola* (bridewealth) forms part of customary marriage in which the groom pays the bride's parents in the form of cattle or money.

It is argued that Nelson Mandela had an eye for beautiful women. Just a year after his divorce to Evelyn, he met Winifred Nomzamo Madikizela. Mandela himself was a handsome tall man in formal clothes who was attractive to women as well. This relationship with Winnie brought two kids, Zeni and Zindzi.

Raising a family under the context of struggle was a challenge to the Mandela family. This was like passing the baton to the other. The challenges Evelyn faced during her term with Nelson was repeating itself. The defiance campaign became a national campaign for the African National Congress and this had a bearing on families of comrades. They had to get material, moral and spiritual support during this moment of state attack. All those involved in the campaign were charged for attempts to overthrow the state and this became part of the Treason Trial which ended in 1956. Three year down the line the movement started another campaign, the anti-pass campaign, which was scheduled for 31 March 1960. With the breakaway of the Pan African Congress which scheduled its campaign on 21 March 1960. According to the PAC, men had to leave their passes at home and hand themselves over to the nearest police station for refusing to carry passes in a spirit of absolute peaceful manner. In the townships of Sharpeville and Langa the police panicked and opened fire on peaceful demonstrators killing 69 and the majority on their backs (Molapo1994: 198).

What became known as the Sharpeville massacre had devastating results for the country and the liberation movements. Both the ANC and the PAC were banned and by 1960 (Poqo) and 1961 (Mk) turned to armed struggle. Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Elias Motsoaledi, Raymond Mhlaba, Wilton Mkwayi, Ahmed Kathrada, Walter Sisulu, Andrew Mlangeni were given life sentences on Robben island for attempts to overthrow the state militarily.

Exile and Prison

As these men were taken to prison, their wives had to assume the responsibilities they used to do when they were free. They had to feed, clothe and house their families. More than that they had to face the might of the state. Life became very hard for these women and their relatives. Njabulo Ndebele compares these women with women of migrant workers who waited for their husbands who had gone on labour contract to the mines until their contracts came to an end.

He states that, Departures. Waitings. Returns. How right you are! Three pillars of a South African woman's life. I too saw my Nelson go. Then I waited for him. Then he returned. Yes. This is the story of hundreds of thousands of other women. Of course, my Nelson departed in a flourish. I waited with a flourish. Do you remember his return? There I was with him on

every television screen in the world as he walked out of Victor Verster prison with a flourish (Ndebele 2003: 87).

At the time of the banning of political voices, political activity and structures were destroyed. People who were suspected were captured under the 90 days detention Act which gave the police powers to extract information from people by whatever means possible. Some came out of the detention without trial broken people as a result of torture.

Changed Political Landscape

The deadening iron rule that existed in the country in the early 1960s made opposition voices almost absent. By late 1960s a spark was rekindled on university campuses by students who had a different ideological orientation called the Black Consciousness Movement of Stephen Bantu Biko. Biko advocated for the emancipation of the mind as well as the physical. Mental liberation according to Biko was paramount in that Blacks would be proud of themselves who they are in the world (Biko 1996: 96). This movement had a profound impact on the society even though it was small. By the early 1970s the economy of the country was in recession and the workers in Durban were feeling the pressure and this took the form of wild cat strikes which were not easily controlled. A Commission was established by government to find out why industry was experiencing economic losses as a result of the strikes. This was an important turning point in the history of the country. The armed struggle of both parties, ANC and PAC had minimal influence of the situation in the country as the organisations were almost fossilised in exile except some propaganda that infiltrated the country. The Soweto student uprising was the second turning point in favour of the liberation movements. According to Bonner, there were structural factors added to the student's objection to the Afrikaans issue that contributed to the rebellion (Bonner 2004: 37). By structural factors he refers to housing, economy, state repressive laws and the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in the schools. These factors when looked at contributed to the anger that gripped the students. The rebellion became a national phenomenon as Afrikaans as a medium of instruction affected students in schools. The language factor was seen as the extension of the apartheid system.

Turbulence of the 1980s a Turning Point

The transition to democracy in South Africa can be located to the early 1980s when internal mass resistance movement became more critical than the military movements storming Pretoria (Saunders 2004: 17). Saunders sees a number of factors that played themselves out in the transition. Amongst the

others he sees mass resistance, depressed economy, the winding down of the Cold War (Saunders 2004: 17). It was during the turbulent period of the 1980s that the name Nelson Mandela became central to the internal mass resistance movement. Civil society and political formations mobilised around the United Democratic Front (UDF) under the release Mandela campaign. While in exile, the international community turned their support in favour of the liberation movements. In other words, the trend had tripped in favour of change in South Africa. The South African government's aggression against her neighbours such as Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Zimbabwe which experienced bombings lost the sympathy of the inter-national community. It was the economic crisis the country faced in terms of sanctions that forced South Africa to consider the release of Nelson Mandela and other prisoners and the return of exiles.

The name of Nelson Mandela became central to the transition period. This is captured in the freedom songs chanted during the 1980s. The following two songs are critical in locating Tambo and Mandela in the transition politics.

Skhokhele Tambo	Lead us Tambo
O' Mandela nabo Sisulu	Mandela and Sisulu and others
Bavalelw'entolongweni	Are locked in jails.
S'khokhele Tambo	Lead us Tambo
Baba Luthuli	Father Luthuli
Siyokokhumbula	We will remember you
Endleleni yenkululeko	The road to freedom.

(Molapo 2014: 986)

The second song placed Mandela at the centre of the transition.

Mandela says freedom now.
Now we say away with slavery
In our land of Africa.
Rolihlahla Mandela
Freedom is in our hands
Show us the way
In our land of Africa.
Vula Botha siyanqonqoza
Khulul'uMandela asikhokhele

Open Botha, we are knocking
Release Mandela, so he can lead us
In all my trouble and suffering
Mandela is with me
Even amidst hippos
Mandela is with me
Amandla!

(Molapo 2014: 988)

These songs are important in locating the struggle against the apartheid system. They reflect the voices of the oppressed people when they saw Nelson Mandela. Mandela represented the hope of the majority and the future of the country. The cries of the people were for his release and the return of exiles.

Imbongi and the President

The release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the return of exiles signalled the end of apartheid. The government was interested in controlling the transition in favour of group rights or minority groups. That is, the white minority had to be given protection under the new constitution. As popular uprising was intensified the state became worried that the ANC was gaining power in terms of mass support. A low intensity warfare ensued with the killing of people in Kwazulu-Natal, Soweto hostels, Katshele and Springs leading to the massacre of scores at Boipatong township as a result of political conflict between the UDF, ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).

Another dramatic turn of events was the assassination of Chris Hani on 10 April 1993 and this nearly plunged the country into a civil war but the leadership of Nelson Mandela calmed the people despite the loss and the destruction of property as a result of the anger of the masses. Nelson separated from his wife Winnie Mandela and later Oliver Tambo died from a stroke. The government was forced to move towards drafting a Constitution and preparing the country for the 1994 general elections.

27 April 1994 was declared the date of the general elections. The ANC was voted into power by the majority with the exception of the Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal. Nelson Mandela was inaugurated on 19 May 1994 as the new President of an independent South Africa. This was a historical moment marked by interest all over the world. His inauguration programme included the unusual performance by *imbongi* (poets) (Jadezweni 2001: 55). During his term of office, the majority of people were hopeful that a better life for all will change their socio-economic circumstances.

His leadership qualities inspired confidence in the country, the African continent and globally as well. He became the famous prisoner who walked out of jail to become the head of state. This was a rare and unique moment in history. As he had articulated it well in his famous book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, which involved struggle and sacrifice. What distinguished his leadership over the period was the fact that it involved sacrifice inspired by service to the people rather than material accumulation for personal gains as would be seen later.

Mandela Legacy

Mandela had the capacity to reconcile the different racial groups in the country as he inspired confidence amongst the different section of the society. Apart from him as an individual, there were men and women who shared his vision of a better South Africa for all people who live in it. The reconciliation project was able to win the trust of even white people who were sceptical of the transition period. For the country to move forward, a truth commission along the lines of the Nuremberg trial in Germany was instituted. The South African Truth and Reconciliation differed in that confession of truth would be met with the granting of an amnesty. Many black and white people who had committed serious crimes during the apartheid era were given amnesty meaning that they would not be taken to jail. The challenge that persisted was that the majority of victims who suffered as a result of apartheid did not receive reparations, one of the shortcomings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Mandela also inspired democratic initiatives on the African continent as well as globally. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated that, “He is God’s gift to South Africa and he is our gift to the world” (Du Preez-Bezdrop, 2006). Africa which was involved in years of conflict felt inspired by his leadership qualities. The new South Africa came to play an important role on the continent as part of South Africa’s foreign policy. Involvement of South Africa in internal African conflict became a challenge as this needed resources and the question of creating a balance between domestic and external projects. Under his deputy-president, Mr Thabo Mbeki, South Africa established a positive image on the African continent in the building of democracy and the attempts to resolve conflicts.

During his term of office, appointment of leaders was smooth and not contested as would be the case in the following years. This means that the head of state handled issues appropriately. The government had the ability to fulfil its responsibilities without the courts running the affairs of the state as would be the case in the following decades.

Another important Mandela legacy was over the rights of children which is enshrined in the Constitution. Mandela showed interests in children. He established the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund. This became a successful campaign to raise funds from donor communities to develop institutions such as schools and hospitals to better their lot. A children’s hospital has been built in the Western Cape and this is a special facility to provide specialist medical service to children across the continent.

Just before Mandela became the president of the country, he married the widow of former Mozambican president, Graça Machel. After his death, conflict over his estate became an issue of national concern. He inspired so many in the country and the world over, but was a failure in manging a family. Njabulo Ndebele’s title of his book, *Cry of Winnie Mandela*, a novel, is such

a poignant expression of the complex. Mandela like other men had disappointed women who had “waited” for years for their “return” during the hardships but later “disappeared”.

The lasting legacy that Mandela helped built for South Africa was the image of the country that for decades was ravaged by colonialism and apartheid. South Africa had become a pariah state across the globe because of her racial policies. Consolidating democracy remains the challenge the country is faced with but more important is redressing the inequalities in the country to restore lasting peace and justice.

Conclusion

Writing about the legacy of Nelson Mandela is such a complex subject without touching the history of the country. In other words, the history of the country forms the context through which one would understand the Mandela figure in context. Mandela contributed immensely to the liberation of the country through sacrifice and struggle but this was a collective project for which some paid the price.

South Africa was given a proud legacy by veterans of the calibre of Kadalie, Plaatjie, Sobukwe, Biko, Ngoyi, Tambo, Matthews, Mbeki, Hani etc. The Mandela legacy is to be protected for the good of the country. South Africans have all become citizens rather than mere subjects as was the case in the colonial –apartheid era and therefore need to use their citizen-hood in the interest of the country and not for personal interests.

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