

Mandela's legacy: building on sacrifice

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On 18 July 2008 I was discussing with a Dutch young journalist about Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday, and how world media had extensively covered it. I asked him why such simple an event should mobilize world and South African media. 'He is the greatest living hero in the world', said the colleague. A debate ensued. 'What did Mandela do to be called a hero?' I asked. The colleague could not find a quick answer. After reflection he said that Mandela had allowed South Africa to become a multiracial tolerant society by not advocating revenge by the formerly oppressed black community. I asked if Mandela had any choice after all without full control over the country's powerful and white-dominated army, police, judiciary and many other key sectors. Some even would say that justice was not served as criminals received a general amnesty without even appearing to court and confessing their crimes. It can be compared to the Nazi negotiating and obtaining a peaceful surrender after killing millions, simply because they are still powerful and thus harmful if worried. My aim below is not to challenge Mandela's outstanding status but rather to study his political legacy that could likely inspire modern-day

African leaders.

Mandela's post-apartheid leadership is mainly built upon three factors: firstly his charismatic personality, secondly his acceptance of a negotiated transition to multiracial democracy, and, thirdly, his pragmatic post-apartheid political management. I do not want to discuss Mandela's charisma that the 27-year imprisonment strengthened, as he himself described it in his lengthy *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). His acceptance to sacrifice justice for long-term racial reconciliation is much more interesting. The setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the exteriorisation of this reconciliation policy where no justice was expected to be rendered to the long-oppressed non-Whites. Mandela accepted to put in brackets the crimes that he and his fellow Blacks had been victims of, preferring to focus on the hard-won social justice.

Unlike Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe who embarked on a socially justified but badly implemented land redistribution twenty years after vanquishing the Ian Smith White-only government, Mandela did not put on his agenda the redistribution of riches. The consequence is that the black majority came to power while the white minority kept holding full control on the business sector. Over 80 percent of Black, Coloured or Asians are still predominantly poor while the reverse is true for the white 'largely due to the tremendous profits created by slave labour. [\[1\]](#) These contradictions make Mandela's immortal status somewhat sombre even though they allowed him and the African National Congress (ANC) to reduce racial tensions, which was the priority of Mandela's administration.

On the continental level, Mandela's panafricanist immortal status was recently damaged by his deafening and unjustified silence regarding hot issues in Africa. No reaction was heard from him about the Kenyan December 2007- March 2008 crisis. He timidly spoke of 'tragic failure of leadership' in Zimbabwe months after Mugabe had overtly shown his anti-democratic conduct.

[2] Unlike him, Nobel Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu was prompt to put pressure on Mugabe since the beginning, asking for sanction and a foreign peace keeping force, among others. [3] Mandela could have used his status as Nobel Prize winner and elder statesman to influence the situation. He could also have relieved his successor Thabo Mbeki whom presidential function and lack of charisma push to adopt the 'silent diplomacy' strategy that has so far proven inefficient.

This absenteeism makes Mandela different from Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere who were alert on political evolution in other African countries and kept repeating that their respective countries would be free and independent if all Africa were. [4] The latter's panafricanist views and actions granted them extra-national fame as their message was the basis for the Organisation of African Unity that later became the African Union (AU). Their message should be readjusted to become: 'African individual states will be free and democratic if all Africa were'. Nyerere's question in 1965 has a staggering relevance with regard to African leaders' attitudes in current leadership crises: 'Do African states meet in solemn conclave to make a noise? Or do they mean what they say? ... Where can we hide ourselves for shame?' [5]

Mandela could be excused as he has had a totally different experience compared to other African leaders. That experience prompted him to devise a totally different political agenda that placed domestic issues on his four-year term priority list. The evidence is that Mandela's successor Mbeki quickly filled the gap left open by Mandela by fully involving himself in the NEPAD (New Economic Partnership for African Development), in peace keeping missions in Burundi and the DRC, and in mediation efforts in Zimbabwe. Instead of being interpreted as Mandela's weakness, I should argue that it was most likely a strategic choice: concentrating on urgent racial reconciliation issues rather than diverting efforts to long-term panafricanist issues.

In short, Mandela's four-year term is inspiring as it set a clear example for younger African leaders as to how to establish their priority list, accepting to achieve political gains on the one hand while accepting major sacrifices on the other. Mandela's legacy to posterity is to accept and peacefully heal past harms and resist the revenge temptation. Unfortunately, leaders in some African countries unfortunately excel in score-settling and send their predecessors to jail or force them into exile.

Notes

1. Walters, Ronald W., *The Price of Racial Reconciliation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 35
2. The Independent, 26 June 2008, Mandela ends silence on Zimbabwe crisis <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/mandela-ends-silence-on-zimbabwe-crisis-854314.html>
3. AP article published by USA Today on 16 March 2007, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was quoted as saying: 'We Africans should hang our heads in shame...How can what is happening in Zimbabwe elicit hardly a word of concern let alone condemnation from us leaders of Africa?' http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-03-16-tutu-zimbabwe_N.htm
4. Nkrumah, Kwameh, *I Speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1961), p. 131 and Nyerere, Julius K., *Uhuru na Ujamaa : a selection from writings and speeches* (London: Oxford University Press,1968), pp 144-145
5. Nyerere, 1968: 128