

Mandela's Long Walk with African History

The death of Nelson Mandela has provoked an outpouring of mourning, celebration, and commentary around the world that is unprecedented for an African leader. Glowing tributes have gushed from world leaders and major magazines and newspapers have carried special features on his extraordinary life and legacy. He has been showered with lavish praise as a great man, titan, colossus and conscience of his nation and the world for his magnanimity, moral courage, and dignity; for his resilience, patience, and passion; for his charisma, charm, regal countenance and common touch; for his humility, visionary and political brilliance; and above all, for his spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, believed to be the driving force behind the South African "miracle" that steered the beloved country from the abyss of a racial bloodbath. Several countries including Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania have declared three days of mourning, and in several European countries and the United States flags were flown at half mast as part of national mourning for Mandela.

Everyone, it seems, seeks to bask in Mandela's reflected glory, including many African leaders who compare quite unfavorably with him for their mendacity, self-aggrandizement, and dictatorial tendencies. But there are critics, including some in South Africa and among the African left, who accuse Mandela of having failed to dismantle the South African apartheid economy that has left millions of black people especially the unemployed youth in grinding poverty. Reconciliation, they argue, rescued whites from seriously reckoning with apartheid's past and its legacies and deprived blacks of restitution. Mandela's death forces South Africans to reflect on the post-apartheid state he helped create. Deprived of Mandela's aura, some believe, the ANC's monopoly of power will continue to erode. Such critical assessments of Mandela's legacy can only be expected to grow, but for now they are drowned by outflows of endearment.

It is hard to remember that Mandela was once widely reviled in much of Euroamerica as a terrorist as he was revered in Africa and the progressive world as a revolutionary figure. He is now everyone's venerated hero, the man sanitized into a transcendent myth; his place in African history stripped of its messy contexts and multiple meanings; his life and legacy of protracted struggle morphed into a universal redemptive tale of reconciliation. His iconic image of lofty leadership satiates a world mired in pettiness; it is a resounding reproach to the small-minded leaders most countries are currently cursed with. The various Mandelas being commemorated offer different opportunities to people, politicians and pundits in the North and in the South—absolution from the barbarous crimes of imperialism for the former and affirmation of their humanity for the latter and a reminder of the heady dreams of independence.

As with the day he was released from prison in 1990, many will remember where they were when they heard the news of

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Mandela's death. I remember February 11, 1990 as if it were yesterday. I sat glued to the television with bated breath for the live broadcast of Mandela's release. I told my then six-year-old daughter this was one of the most memorable days for my generation

and she would live to remember it, too. I choked with tears of joy, anger, sadness, pride, anticipation and other bewildering emotions as we watched the tall, smiling, dashing, and unbowed Mandela walking out of Victor Verster Prison beside his wife, Winnie, a militant in her own right who had suffered so much and done a lot to keep his memory alive. They walked with defiant dignity, holding hands, their other arms raised with clenched fists. The announcement of his death, although long anticipated because of his age and grave illness, came more unceremoniously. It arrived as a news alert on my iPad as I was working on some memo in my office. But it was no less momentous for it marked the end of an era, of Africa's long twentieth century.

Predictably, the traditional media and social media have been awash with tributes, reminiscences, and verdicts on Mandela the person, the politician, and the symbol. In the United States and Britain, politicians, pundits, and celebrities have been falling all over themselves to find the most laudatory words to describe Mandela as the epitome of global moral authority, of humanity at its best, the last in the hallowed canon of twentieth century saintly liberators from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King. Such encomiums are to be expected for a world hungry for goodness, forgiveness, trust, and optimism that Mandela exuded so masterfully. Conveniently forgotten is the fact the British and American governments upheld the apartheid regime for decades and condemned Mandela's African National Congress as a terrorist organization. We all remember Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's resolute defense of the apartheid regime and fierce condemnation of the ANC and its leaders including Mandela. In the United States, ANC leaders were officially regarded as terrorists until 2008!

The sanctified portrait of Mandela hollows out the exceedingly complex and contradictory man and historical figure that Mandela was and the true measure of his life and legacy. Anyone who has ever read Mandela's two-volume autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and the equally voluminous biographies including Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* and Meredith Martin's *Mandela: A Biography*, knows he was not the caricatured figure of the popular media who rose from clan royalty to the South African presidency and global political celebrity, appropriately purified by 27 years of imprisonment. Rather, his greatness arose from the very complexities and contradictions of his life and times and how he embodied them, experienced them, articulated them, learned from them, manipulated them, deployed them, and tried to transcend them. He was not much of a father for his children, but he became a beloved father of the nation; he had several

failed marriages but the public was seduced by his warm embrace; he was a ruthless political operator as much as he was a self-effacing leader; and his deep sense of empathy cultivated out of the very texture of daily life and struggle under apartheid allowed him to effectively deal with his jailors and negotiate with his Afrikaner opponents in the transition from apartheid to democracy.

Moreover, Mandela's unflinching loyalty to his comrades in the liberation movement sometimes blinded him to their limitations with adverse consequences as exemplified by his two immediate successors; and there was the loyalty he exhibited to the unsavory leaders of states that had supported the anti-apartheid struggle such as Libya's Moammar Gadhafi and Nigeria's Sani Abacha. The early Mandela was known for being impetuous and boisterous; the later Mandela could be fiercely stern, coldly calculating, and compellingly charming to seize opportunities and advance his aspirations. At age 33, he declared that he would be South Africa's first black president, but when he did achieve this goal at 76 he forswore the grandiosity of office so beloved by many leaders in Africa and elsewhere. However, there were constants in his life, too. He remained supremely proud and confident of himself and his African heritage, and his commitment to South Africa's liberation struggle was steadfast.

Many have remarked on Mandela's remarkable understanding of the nature of politics and the performance of power that enabled him to embody the nation better than many of his fellow founding fathers of African nations and his two successors. Above all, he is praised for his lack of bitterness after spending 27 years in jail and his embrace of forgiveness and reconciliation. The manner in which this issue is discussed often serves to advance the redemptive narrative of Mandela's road to political sainthood. Only he and his closest confidants of course know how he truly felt. Post-apartheid reconciliation may or may not have been a romantic attribute of Mandela the man; it was certainly a pragmatic imperative for Mandela the nationalist leader. Mandela's life and legacy cannot be fully understood through the psychologizing and symbolic discourses preferred in the popular media and hagiographies. It could be argued that he and his comrades were able to sublimate their personal anger and bitterness because the liberation struggle was too complex, too costly, too demanding, too protracted, and too important to do otherwise. Reconciliation was both a tactic and a necessity because of the dynamics of the liberation struggle in South Africa.

This is to suggest that like all great historical figures, Mandela can best be understood through the prism of his times and the political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics and conditions that structured it. Mandela changed much in his long life but it was a life defined by the vicissitudes of African nationalism. For those who don't know much about African history, or are wedded to exceptionalist notions of South African history they would be surprised to learn the parallels Mandela shares with the founding fathers of many other independent African nations, in whose rarefied company he belongs. In fact, his historic significance, and the eruption of grief over his death and gratitude for his life in the Pan-African world and elsewhere can partly be explained by the fact that he is Africa's last founding father.

The decolonization drama started in Egypt in 1922 with the restoration of the monarchy and limited internal self-government and finally ended in 1994 with the demise of apartheid in South Africa. In the long interregnum, decolonization unfolded across the continent, reaching a crescendo in the 1950s and 1960s; in 1960 alone, often dubbed the year of African independence, 17 countries achieved their independence. The colonial dominoes began falling from North Africa (Libya 1951) to West Africa (Ghana 1957) to East Africa (Tanzania 1961) before reaching Southern Africa (Zambia and Malawi 1964). The settler laagers of Southern Africa were the last to fall starting with the Portuguese settler colonies of Angola and Mozambique in 1974, followed by Rhodesia in 1980, and Namibia in 1990. South Africa, the largest and mightiest of them all, finally met its rendezvous with African history in 1994. Mandela is cherished because of his and his country's long walk with African history.

Mandela embodied all the key phases, dynamics and ideologies of African nationalism from the period of elite nationalism before the Second World War when the nationalists made reformist demands on the colonial regimes, to the era of militant mass nationalism after the war when they demanded independence, to the phase of armed liberation struggle. Many countries achieved independence during the second phase through peaceful struggle. Others were forced to wage protracted armed struggle. The variations in the development and trajectories of nationalism were marked by the way each individual colony was acquired and administered; the traditions of resistance in each colony; the presence or absence of European settlers; the social composition of the nationalist movement; and the nature and ideologies of the leadership. Similarly, there were different ideological orientations and emphases. Some nationalists espoused secular or religious ideologies; among the former there were competing liberal, socialist, and Marxist ideologies that would later frame postcolonial development agendas.

All along, African nationalism unfolded in a rapidly changing world. Most critical were the effects of the Great Depression and the Second World War; the emergence of the Superpowers and the Third World; and the growth of Pan-Africanism and civil rights struggles in the Diaspora. Independence marked the triumph of the first out of the five humanistic and historic objectives of African nationalism, namely, decolonization. The other four objectives included nation-building, development, democracy, and regional integration. In so much as contemporary Africa is largely a product of struggles for independence and their complex, changing, and contradictory intersections with colonialism, imperialism, and globalization, Mandela's life and legacy as a historic figure are conditioned by the contexts and imperatives of nationalism. Like many of Africa's founding fathers, Mandela's life spanned much of South Africa's existence as a nation, traversed the various phases of the country's nationalist movement, and embodied the trajectories of post-colonial Africa.

Mandela was born in 1918, a mere eight years after the founding of South Africa as a nation out of four separate settler colonies and an assortment of conquered African states and societies, and six years after the formation of the African National Congress. He was thirty when the country's racist settler regime gave way to the uncompromising racial barbarity of apartheid in 1948. In the early 1940s he was one of the founders of the

ANC Youth League in the early 1940s that sought to radicalize and rescue the ANC from its reformist politics. When the ANC adopted the Program of Action in response to the establishment of apartheid, he became the leader of the Defiance Campaign in the early 1950s. In 1955 he was among 156 activists who were tried in one of the largest political trials in South African history that lasted from 1956 to 1961. Following the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, the liberation movement decided to shift to armed struggle and Mandela was charged with the formation of the ANC's Unkotho we Swize (Spear of the Nation).

In 1963 Mandela and nine other leaders including Walter Sisulu, his mentor, and Govan Mbeki, the father of future President Thabo Mbeki, were charged with sabotage at the infamous Rivonia Trial. During the trial, on April 20, 1964, Mandela uttered his immortal words from the dock: "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 I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." Thus Mandela was not an advocate of Gandhi's or King's non-violent resistance, not because he was not a man of peace, but because he correctly understood that in the South African context, fighting against an obdurate racist settler regime required all available tactics from mass protest to armed resistance. For him multiple tactics had to serve the overall strategy of achieving national liberation. In short, as a freedom fighter he was simultaneously a political leader and a guerrilla leader. Under the ANC's broad and tolerant political umbrella he worked with traditionalists, liberals, socialists, communists, and Black Consciousness activists, both before and after his long incarceration.

Mandela outlived apartheid by nearly twenty years. His story can be told of other African nationalists. Some progressed from peaceful protest to armed liberation struggle. They included the nationalists of Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau and Zimbabwe. Many of those who led their countries to independence were also born either just before or after their countries were colonized. Examples include Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first President, born at least six years before Kenya became a British colony in 1895, who outlived colonialism by 15 years by the time he died in 1978; Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana born in 1909 who also outlived colonialism by 15 years; Félix Houphouët-Boigny the first President of Cote d'Ivoire who was born in 1905 and died in 1993, thirty three years after the end of French colonial rule; Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president who ruled for twenty years, was born in 1906 and died in 2001, outliving colonialism by forty one years; and in my own homeland, Hastings Kamuzu Banda who was reportedly born in 1898, a few years after the country was colonized, lived to rule Malawi for thirty years between 1964-1994 and died in 1997.

The long and large lives of many of Africa's founding fathers including Mandela represents a historic rebuke to the destructive conceits of European colonialism. In the notorious words of Ian Smith, the Prime Minister of the settler colony of Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, the European colonists believed colonialism would last at least a thousand years. Set against many of his fellow founding fathers, Mandela stands out for his singular contribution to democratic politics. He relinquished power after only one five-year term in office. Many

others were overthrown in coups like Nkrumah or died in office like Kenyatta and Boigny. Before Mandela, the only other African leaders to voluntarily leave office were Senghor and Julius Nyerere, the founding President of Tanzania.

Mandela's example shines all the brighter when compared to his nemesis in Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, once a widely admired liberation hero who remains president 33 years after independence. Mugabe together with the likes of President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda now in power for 27 years, the same number of years Mandela spent in apartheid jails, and still going, represent the dinosaurs of African politics in a continent that has been undergoing various forms of democratic renewal since the turn of the 1990s, in part influenced by the demonstration effect of South Africa's transition to democracy and Mandela's enlightened exit from office after only five years.

The lateness of South Africa's decolonization, it can be argued, helped compress the sequentiality, as it turned out for the early independent states, of the five objectives of African nationalism. While the latter achieved decolonization, they struggled hard to build unified nations out of the territorial contraptions of colonialism which enjoyed statehood without nationhood. They came to independence in an era when development, democracy, and regional integration were compromised by weak national bourgeoisies, relatively small middle classes, and the Cold War machinations of the two Superpowers, the United States and the former Soviet Union.

Mandela's South Africa benefited from both the positive and negative experiences of postcolonial Africa, the existence of a highly organized and vociferous civil society, and the end of the Cold War, which gave ample space for the growth of democratic governance and the rule of law. But the new post-apartheid state was held hostage to the dictates of the negotiated settlement between the ANC and the apartheid regime arising out of the strategic stalemate between the two sides—by 1990 South Africa had become ungovernable, but the apartheid state was not vanquished as happened in Angola and Mozambique. This, combined with the global triumph of neo-liberalism in the post Cold War era, guaranteed the powerful interests of capital in general and the white bourgeoisie in particular against any serious economic restructuring despite the great expectations of the masses and the ambitions of successive development plans by the new government from the *Reconstruction and Development Program* to the *Growth Employment and Redistribution* to the *Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative*.

Nevertheless, the post-apartheid state achieved much faster growth than the apartheid regime ever did. The country witnessed massive expansion of the black middle class and the ANC government fostered the growth of a black bourgeoisie through the black economic empowerment program much as the apartheid regime before it had cultivated the Afrikaner bourgeoisie through apartheid affirmative action. There was also some reduction in poverty, although huge challenges remain in terms of high levels unemployment and deepening inequality. Interestingly, South Africa now lags behind much of the continent in terms of rates of economic growth, in part because of the lingering structural deformities of the apartheid economy in which the peasantry was virtual destroyed, the

labor absorptive capacity of the economy is limited by its high cost structures, and South Africa suffers from relatively low levels of skill formation for an economy of its size because of the apartheid legacy of poor black education. It is expected that South Africa will soon be overtaken by Nigeria as Africa's largest economy. The continent's rapid growth, reminiscent of the immediate post-independence years, which has been dubbed by the world's financial press with the moniker of a 'rising Africa,' has given rekindled hopes for the establishment of democratic developmental states that might realize the remaining goals of African nationalism.

Thus, Mandela's political life and legacy resemble in significant ways that of other African founding fathers, and South Africa's trajectory mirrors that of other African countries, notwithstanding the differences of national historical and geopolitical contexts. It is worth remembering Mandela's rhetoric of reconciliation was a staple among many African founding presidents in the immediate post-independence years. Jomo Kenyatta used to preach reconciliation, urging Kenyans to forgive but not forget the ills of the past as a way of keeping the European settlers and building his nation fractured by the racial and ethnic divisions of colonialism. Even Mugabe in the euphoric days after independence urged reconciliation between white and black Zimbabweans before domestic political challenges forced him to refurbish his revolutionary credentials by adopting radical land reform and rhetoric.

Reconciliation was such a powerful motif in the political discourses of transition to independence among some African leaders because of the imperatives of nation building, the second goal of African nationalism. It was also a rhetorical response to the irrational and self-serving fears of imperial racism that since Africans were supposedly eternal wards of whites and incapable of ruling themselves, independence would unleash the atavistic violence of "intertribal warfare" from which colonialism had saved the benighted continent, and in the post-settler colonies, the retributive cataclysm of white massacres. Instead of comprehensive accountability for apartheid and its normative institutional violence, which engendered "crimes against humanity", post-apartheid South pursued "truth and reconciliation" that individualized both the victims and perpetrators and shifted the logic of crime and punishment of the Nuremberg Trials for the logic of crime and confession, justified tendentiously in the name of "Ubuntu."

Mandela bookends Nkrumah in Africa's independence struggles. Nkrumah fired the Pan-African imagination, Mandela gave it its most memorable consummation. The former was a key architect of Pan-Africanism, a cosmopolitan intellectual activist whose Diaspora associates included W.E.B. Dubois, George Padmore and C.L.R. James, while the latter was largely a home grown pragmatic revolutionary whose long incarceration and struggles revitalized the intricate Pan-African connections between the continent and its Diaspora.

In the United States, the anti-apartheid struggle offered the civil rights movement its most powerful and successful intervention in American foreign policy. The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) that emerged in the mid-1970s out of

growing black political representation, together with TransAfrica, spearheaded the anti-apartheid sanctions campaign which galvanized the country from churches to college campuses. Over the past two centuries, African American mobilization over Africa has been greatest where the intersection of imperialism and whiteness as concrete and symbolic constructs, national and international projects and policies, have been most pronounced and where Africa advocacy is likely to yield significant domestic dividends.

For the CBC passing anti-apartheid legislation was imperative not only because this was a popular cause in the black community, and increasingly throughout the country, it offered them an opportunity to demonstrate and raise their power and profile in the halls of Congress, which would enable them to advance their domestic agenda. So widespread and powerful did the movement become that Democratic and even Republican politicians scurried to prove their anti-apartheid credentials. In 1986, after nearly two decades of black Congressional representatives sponsoring sanctions bills, the CBC registered a historic victory, when it succeeded in getting the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act passed over President Ronald Reagan's veto. That marked the apotheosis of African American influence on US policy towards Africa, which was not to be repeated any time soon. Mandela's release in 1990 and subsequent visits to the United States were widely celebrated as the return of a native son. This was true in other parts of the Diaspora from the Caribbean to Latin America, Europe to Asia.

It is therefore easy to understand the iconic status of Mandela and the overflow of emotion his death has provoked in the Pan-African world. The fact that President Obama started his politics as a student at an anti-apartheid rally, and his acknowledged indebtedness to Mandela's exemplary life and struggle, offers a poignant thread in the thick ties that bind Africa and the Diaspora in the struggle for emancipation from racial tyranny and dehumanization. For the rest of the world Mandela's life and legacy resonate deeply because his progressive nationalism was fundamentally a struggle for human freedom and dignity, for social justice and equality. It is not hard to see why that would be universally appealing to a world rocked by the horrendous devastations of the twentieth century, a century of emancipatory, ambiguous and destructive mass movements, of mass culture, mass consumption, mass education and mass media, as well as mass war and mass murder. The first part of this long century was dominated by the genocidal regimes of Hitler and Stalin and the overlords of imperial Europe, while during the second half the long arc of history swung towards the liberators from the South such as Gandhi and Mandela and from the imperial heartlands themselves such as Martin Luther King. That, I would submit, is Mandela's global historical significance—he was a major player in the most important political movement of the twentieth century, decolonization. And for that his place in history is assured.

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