

OPINION AND ANALYSIS

Nelson Mandela: The legacy of a political luminary

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WITH THE 5th of December marking the first anniversary of Nelson Mandela's death, the world's attention will return to focus on South Africa and the commemoration of its first democratically elected president. This offers a time to reflect on the legacy and historical role of South Africa's "iconic" figure. Mandela is inextricably linked with the Republic's transition from apartheid to non-racial democracy. Mandela boasted a persuasive aura, with an unmatched ability to provide South Africans of all backgrounds with a national figure that symbolised hope and unity. While we should try and understand the personality and his role, we should also understand Mandela within the context of his political movement, the African National Congress (ANC).

Idolising South African politics

Mandela has been likened to the father of South Africa's democracy. He became synonymous with liberation and freedom, and in spite of all the tough efforts by his movement, Mandela has always been singled out for special treatment and super-stardom. The label "father of the culture of human rights and the rule of law" was tagged onto him.

During the transition period – 1990-94 – and the vital first five years of black majority rule, Mandela reached out to all racial and cultural groups, including the former white oppressors. In spite of deep frustrations he often felt during the negotiation period, he often showered praise on former state president F. W. de Klerk and other Afrikaner leaders.

In his presidential inaugural address on 10 May 1994, the narratives of rights, unity and reconciliation rang loud throughout that speech. He even went out of his way, while President, to meet with the widows of former oppressive white Prime Ministers like Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of "grand apartheid" who mastered the homelands or "Bantustan" system in the country.

Mandela earned himself further good standing with white liberals and the white dominated corporate class when, as early as 1991, he denounced the prospects of economic nationalisation when the ANC gained power.

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He reached out to fellow black leaders from the Pan-African Congress (PAC) and the Inkatha freedom Party (IFP), emphasizing the need for unity and reconciliation amongst blacks as well.

When the transition was on the abyss, and when the general secretary of the South African Communist Party, Mr. Chris Hani, was gunned down by a white reactionary assassin in 1993, Mandela quickly moved to calm black militants. He successfully coaxed the nation, during a national television broadcast, when he passionately accounted that a white Polish migrant had gunned down a great leader of “the revolution”.

In October 1993, the Nobel Committee announced that both Mandela and De Klerk would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their roles in steering the South African negotiation process that would lead to the end of apartheid, and ushering in a democratic dispensation.

Mandela was determined that the new South Africa would turn its back on its repugnant past, and embark on the long journey of building a new, united nation out of the ashes of decades of white minority oppression. There is little doubt that Mandela’s political discourse revolves around concepts such as reconciliation, rainbow nation and nation building. In this discourse too, he was targeted for special treatment.

A pro-human rights foreign policy?

In terms of foreign affairs, South Africa has succeeded in presenting itself to Africa and the world at large as both a role model and a master of the smooth transition. In many senses we have seen the personification of South African politics and international relations, with Mandela again placed at the centre of the Republic’s diplomacy. Determined to make a fundamental break with the apartheid past, Nelson Mandela and his government were determined to transform the Republic into a “respected” and “responsible “world citizen” and a “full and respected member of the family of nations”. Mandela, we were told, espoused a “pro-human rights”, “good world citizen” foreign policy.

Just like in domestic affairs, Mandela’s notion of “a pro-human rights” foreign policy allowed him to be portrayed as the symbol of humanity, hope and of idealism.

Alongside his “pro-human rights” posture, Mandela emphasized an “Africa first” policy, a non-aligned stance; promoting economic diplomacy; and stating that our foreign policy stood on “two legs: one leg in the North, and one leg in the South”. Together with the ANC leadership, Mandela also articulated a “universality doctrine”, the idea of South Africa reserving the right to maintain friendly relations with as many states as it chose to, irrespective of ideological or political orientation. Inspired by this universality impulse, Mandela did not take kindly to being lectured to by outsiders. Protestations by Washington and others notwithstanding, he engaged Libya’s Muammar Ghaddafi over the Lockerbie Flight Pan-Am 103 disaster, negotiated with Iran on its nuclear programme, insisting that Tehran, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the P-5 members of the UN Security Council had obligations in respect of nuclear disarmament; and he engaged Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha in efforts to spare the lives of Ken Sarowiwa and 9 Ogoni leaders, albeit that this latter attempt came to little. He fundamentally believed in diplomacy and the peaceful settlement of disputes and often challenged the western powers’ penchant for gunboat diplomacy. He was a staunch defender of multilateralism and the centrality of the UN in world affairs.

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A foreign policy legacy

Many have used Mandela's apparent lack of bitterness after long years of incarceration to falsely assume that Mandela's prioritisation of reconciliation and nation building as a reflection of personal character.

In Mandela's case, he came to personify this role of the "icon of reconciliation" born out of a combination of both his personality and the decisions and tactics of his movement. The policies of reconciliation, nation building and the rhetoric of rainbow-ism, as well as the pro-human rights and cosmopolitan foreign policy, may very well turn out to be the greatest legacies that the Saint-like Mandela will leave as legacies to his own nation and to the world.

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