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Mandela's legacy as South Africa goes to the poles (Part I)

It has been about five months since one of the great sons of Africa, the long serving prisoner who ended being the first black president of South Africa passed away. The world has said much good things about him both as a person and as a leader. I happened to be one that speaks a lot good about him, as Mandela the person and not the leader. Now that the dust has settled down and South Africa (SA) is preparing to elect its president, I may start wondering why so much has been said about Mr. Nelson Mandela, perhaps undeservingly. As an African who is proud of its colour, culture and astounding African history, I always had the burning desire to see a SA free from apartheid as well as Mandela and his inmates released from Robben Island prison. Consequently, I have shown my keen support in many of the gatherings, discussions, seminars and events in the struggle years where ever and whenever I could. The purpose of this piece is not to criticise Mandela the person. How could I when I had the highest respect and admiration for him as a revolutionary freedom fighter that, in the formative years of the African National Congress (ANC), was highly committed to bring about lasting and appreciable changes to the majority of South Africans. My intention here is to look his leadership contribution in the prism of the media outlet that the world was bombarded with.

It is true that Mandela had a significant role in the fight against apartheid, and as such, he deserved credit for his courage and resolve. But to portray him as the one and only that has brought down apartheid to its knees is utterly upsurd and hurting. As I see it, Mandela was one among the very many that ended up in prison. But the greatest of them all, Walter Sisulu was also in prison. So were Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Joe Slovo and many others. Soon after the arrest of most of the ANC leadership, there were those who decided to remain in the country and continue the struggle from within including Mrs Winnie Mandela and the late Steven Biko. Some found it untenable to live in SA and left instead to wage the political struggle from a foreign base. The greatest among these was the late Mr Oliver Tambo. In order to put the discussion in perspective, I would like to briefly outline the way the anti-apartheid movement walked its way to victory, of course, as I understood it.

The struggle within

After Messrs Mandela, Sisulu, Kathrada, etc. were sent to a long prison sentence, the movement was effectively circumsised. There was no mention of Mandela and ANC for some considerable time. Winnie Mandela tried to fight back but to no avail. She even became a target herself by the apartheid government who harassed, beaten and raped her. She was then taken away from Johannesburg, kept under house arrest and forbidden to involve herself in all sorts of political activities. It was only after her return from house arrest that she started the "*Amanda, Free Mandela*" movement. She came out leading demonstrations after demonstrations demanding for the release of Mandela and advocating equal rights for all South Africans irrespective of colour or creed. This strategy effectively popularised the "Mandela" name among the youth that did not know him. So "Mandela" became a household name with which they associated South African race-equality struggle and ANC leadership. Walter Sisulu had earlier been a leader and could have been a household name in SA as well. But he did not have Winnie to popularise and promote his name. The same is true with Kathrada, Govan Mbeki and others for that matter. It was sad that Mandella was imprisoned thus limiting his freedom and movement. But Winnie was at the receiving end of the apartheid brutality on a daily basis for 27 long years. So, as I see it, Winnie's selfless and unflinching dedication to the struggle was immense that dwarfed the contribution made by Mr Mandela.

The Diasporas movement

As mentioned above, Oliver Tambo left to continue the struggle from outside. Of course, he chose to do a task that was even harder. He had to start from absolutely nothing and fight a formidable apartheid government that was prepared to spend enormous amount of resources on security and espionage if it meant to decisively crush the movement. When Tambo started the journey, he neither had the financial means nor an international diplomatic support. But with dedication, hard work, wisdom and some support from some African quarters, he

was able to build one of the most sophisticated political organisations in the world. He managed to open closed doors of the Western countries and also international organisations. He succeeded in changing public opinion in favour of democratic SA free of apartheid rule. He travelled to all corners of the world knocking at closed doors and made their leaders aware of the cruelty of his country's system of government. He even succeeded in bringing Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, the ex-prime minister of the United Kingdom who had earlier pronounced ANC to be a terrorist organisation and illegitimate, to his side that recognised it as a legitimate one.

Mandela's release and ascend to presidency

It should be known that the anti-apartheid struggle was not waged by ANC alone. ANC is an umbrella organisation advocating a non-violence struggle to which Mandela, Sisulu, Kathrada, etc. ascribed. But there were also other groups that waged armed struggle. The latter intensified the struggle as a result of which they inflicted heavy damage on the apartheid government. Towards the end, it reached to a point where the apartheid government could not bring down the groups under control. This intensified activities by the armed groups sent fear among the white minority and the government that it may end up like Zimbabwe. If so, the white minority could lose everything that the apartheid system worked for. They desperately needed to maintain all power including the economy and security. It is well known fact that almost all Western countries' multinational companies (mostly British and American) had mines, manufacturing, financial services, and etc. interests in SA. So, a situation like Zimbabwe meant that their economic interests may be nationalised and lost. This situation for them was really unthinkable event to imagine. The fear of losing influence and strategic interest was imminent as well. In order for these interest groups to safeguard their interests, it was necessary to devise a way that would keep the status quo except for two issues that the white minorities were prepared to relinquish. These are the release of Mandela and allowing Black South Africans the right to vote. The architects of the design thought that these two issues would make the black majority happier and make them think they had won the struggle. While this was good achievement by itself, I don't think even for a second that this was what ANC fought for. As long as voting right is not translated into bread, in other words, as long as South African (SAn) blacks have not become equally beneficiaries of the economy, it seems to me that the struggle has not attained its objectives.

We know that the prisoners including Mandela were political prisoners. We also know that governments don't just release political prisoners without certain form of agreements or deals. So Mandela's release can't be any other than conditional on honouring a deal on his part. The minority government could have made a deal with Sisulu as well. But as mentioned above, Sisulu did not have Winnie to popularise his name. Besides it is highly unlikely that Sisulu would do what they wanted him to do. As such, he could not be their choice. Same is true with the others including Kathrada and Mbeki. We have to remember that Winnie had already done the ground work in building Mandela's image that the government had taken notice of. ANC leader Tambo and his associates in the Diasporas also used Mandela as an ANC leader. So the authorities had to go for Mandela. I am not trying to say that he should not be an ANC leader in their long and arduous campaign. Of course, he should be the leader as long as the SAn people wanted him. But my concern is why the West's media highly inflate his image and his contribution to the struggle beyond imagination when his contribution was minimal. Some would argue that he was in prison for 27 years and, therefore, is a winning card. I don't think that long prison sentence should be a necessary and sufficient condition to unreasonably boost one's image. But so were the other ANC members in prison for that length, some even for longer.

Mandela's contribution while in freedom

So why is the media euphoria around him? Some even went as far as equating him to Jesus Christ? What did he do to SA and SAn people? Is there any contribution he made to Africa and the world at large?

At independence, people had very high expectations both within the minority whites and among the majority blacks. Then the question that follows is what positive changes have his leadership brought to SA. One important contribution was that there was a peaceful transition to an all inclusive SA. This has remarkably been achieved as seen from the political side. On the economic side, there are now a handful of very rich black SAns. They have made their wealth either through corruption or cutting deals or by associating themselves with the

ANC and government big guns. The great majority are, however, still very poor. Soweto is still Soweto. There is chronic poverty among blacks. Infrastructure such as roads, schools and health services are still problematic. In fact, most blacks openly argue that the change did not bring any visible benefit to them other than voting rights and the right to reside in an area of their choice in the country as opposed to the previous "homeland" system. The latter was not meant for them though as it is a choice that required significant amount of money.

Criminality in the country has also reached to high levels. The government is incapable of bringing down the level of criminality in certain areas in SA. For instance, Johannesburg is often referred to as one of the unsafe cities to move around freely. So, it can't be said that Mandela has brought material and social well being to the SAn blacks that they desperately needed.

African media outlets have also been echoing the West in promoting Mandela. For instance, ERTA has given huge coverage over many weeks. What did ERTA see in him that some of us did not see? It is true that Mandela has visited Addis soon after his release. It seems to me that his arrival in Addis was to thank the then Ethiopian President Mengistu for his significant contribution to the SAn struggle both materially, diplomatically and politically. That is it. I can't even remember Mandela taking part at the African Union Annual Heads of States meetings at the headquarters in Addis. Well then, if he had a leadership quality that the West tried to impose on him, why didn't he come to the major African forums including the AU and make convincing and intelligent speeches? Leadership qualities require one to be a thinker and a visionary that, unfortunately, Mandela didn't have. Obviously, he was a lawyer by training but was neither a thinker nor a visionary. No matter how much the media tried to give him qualities that didn't belong to him at all, he miserably failed Africans in as much as he failed SAns.

I applaud him for sending peacekeeping troops to Burundi and Sierra Leone but the Darfur, Ethio-Eritrea, Djibouti-Eritrea, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan (north-south) conflicts all took place under his watch without doing anything. What did he do to bring peace in these conflict areas if he really was a peace maker and a true leader? Absolutely nothing. He was there when the Rwanda genocide as well as Burundi's, albeit in smaller proportion, happened. Again, nothing came from him. He may have tried but as long as his efforts did not materialise, I can't say he had a good leadership quality. Emperor Haileselassie, in spite of his cruelty to his own people, was a true son of Africa who was concerned about African culture, freedom, history, peace and security. When the border conflict between Algeria and Morocco escalated, he found it distasteful to let foreign peace keepers come and interfere in Africa for the simple reason that foreign troops specially those of the West would erode Africa's culture, religion, and way of life. Most often, they introduce prostitution, drugs, illicit transactions and irregular relationships including rapes in the countries where they are assigned. Besides, they never solve conflicts. If they do, the Belgian and French contingencies as well as the UN peace keeping mission that were in Rwanda at the time wouldn't have allowed the genocide take place in front of their eyes. So Haileselassie quickly brought the conflicting countries together and solved their differences. They did and that peace has lasted so far. He brought peace to the internal conflict in Sudan that lasted long until the North who calls themselves Arabs broke the Addis Ababa peace treaty in favour of imposing islamic Sharia law in the country including on the Sothern Christian majority. Similarly, he brought peace between Cameroon and Nigeria in their border conflict. He also did his best for the Nigerian-Biafra conflict to come to an end and alleviate the suffering of Nigerian people. I can mention many more but that is not my point. My point is to show leadership at its best that Mandela terribly lacked. For instance Ethiopia and Eritrea, in their so called border conflict, did not need to go to Algiers, to present their case to the Arabs and for the Arabs to bring Arab solution to an African problem. It may have comforted the Eritrean leadership as the Eritrean project has always been an Arab, primarily Egyptian project rather than Eritrean peoples' project. But going to Algiers was distasteful for the Ethiopians, and it seems Ethiopia has been there as a result of arm twisting, blackmailing and threats of withdrawing project support by the West. So, if Mandela was a wise leader concerned with African peace and security, he could have tried to bring amicable African solution to these brotherly people rather than being onlooker.

Is there anything put forward by him that would benefit Africans that they can associate his name with as a legacy? Practically nothing. Even while out of office, as an old respectable statesman that amassed fame and respect, he could have bridged the gap between the contesting Zimbabwean leaders. Some speculate that the

opposition leader obviously was a hungry man for power who would compromise the interest of Zimbabwe. Mandela could have called him to give him a piece of elderly advice on how to bring peace between him and his rival, the president. Thanks God Mr Morgan, after a long and arduous fight, accepted shared responsibility. Mandela may have been behind the settlement but I am not aware of it. Ex president Mbeki has worked hard and demonstrated far better wisdom though. So how can the African media make mass euphoria and noise for a man that virtually did little at best and nothing at worst to Africa?

Also on the international arena, is there any contribution of significance that we can remember him for other than his dancing, smiles and his signature designer shirts? I can't think of one. As far as I am concerned, two significant contributions come to my mind. His first greatest achievement is that he is the first black president of a country that has moved on from its apartheid past. His second achievement, perhaps most significant, is that he saved the status quo albeit in different form. But that must have been in the design for his release so nothing to be surprised about. This latter achievement, I suspect, may be the main reason why they gave him much praise perhaps out of gratification.