

Nelson Mandela's Legacy for African and International Politics

Written by Daniel Lieberfeld

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DANIEL LIEBERFELD, MAR 14 2014

This article considers Nelson Mandela's African and international legacy in terms of his contributions to South Africa's liberation struggle, to the negotiated settlement that led to non-racial democracy, to post-conflict reconciliation initiatives, and to conflict-settlement processes beyond South Africa.

Contributions to the Liberation Struggle

The dominant ideological streams of Mandela's African National Congress (ANC)—rights-oriented Charterism, Communist non-racialism, Gandhian non-violence, and Christian reconciliation—enabled the organization to gain support from liberal democracies, the Soviet Union and East Bloc, the Third World, and from Church groups and other NGOs. Mandela's personal diplomacy was particularly important in winning support for the ANC from African states in the 1960s. Given the dominant pan-Africanist ideology of the era, the ANC's non-racialism put it at a disadvantage relative to its breakaway rival, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), in appealing to African governments for support. However, after going underground and slipping out of South Africa, Mandela was able to convince the African leaders he visited in 1962 that PAC leaders' assertions that the ANC was controlled by white and Indian Communists, and thus unrepresentative of Black South Africans, were not the case.

Captured after his return to South Africa, Mandela became the icon of resistance to apartheid. Mastery of political symbolism was apparent at his trial, which he attended in traditional African dress in order to bolster the ANC's African nationalist credentials and to distance the organization from charges of Communist control. His three-hour speech from the defendant's dock justifying the ANC's political program, led many foreign observers to see him as a South African George Washington.

Convicted of sabotage, Mandela and his co-defendants were imprisoned on Robben Island. There, he was able to maintain good personal ties with PAC leaders and later with activists in the Black Consciousness Movement, despite ideological differences. Mandela treated prison as a laboratory for seeing what could be achieved in national politics. He wrote, "Here in prison policy differences do not prevent us from presenting a united front against the enemy. This experience can be generalised and applied to our political work outside jail."^[i] In prison, he therefore prioritized unity among members of anti-apartheid organizations. Mandela also maintained positive relations with leaders of South Africa's Black "homelands," despite the ANC's condemning them as puppets of the White regime.^[ii]

Contributions to Negotiated Settlement

While government officials pondered how to get rid of Mandela, his stature as the world's most famous political prisoner nullified the possibility of doing so and his ongoing incarceration became a focal point of international pressure on the regime. By the mid-1980s, mass protests caused the government to declare a State of Emergency, but the ANC had no path to insurrectionary victory. Recognizing the stalemate and its potentially destructive consequences, Mandela took the initiative and met with government representatives, notably from the National Intelligence Service, to discuss how to begin an official negotiation process. Doing so entailed very serious personal risks as hard-line leaders of the South African Communist Party (SACP) accused Mandela of violating a norm of

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consultation and consensus decision making.

Mandela made a point of learning the Afrikaans language of the prison guards and government leaders, part of his project of analyzing his Afrikaner adversaries via their culture and, where possible, winning them over. Indeed, his Afrikaner nationalist interlocutors came to see Mandela as reasonable. Mandela signaled such reasonableness in his 1989 letter to State President P. W. Botha, speaking of the need to address "the demand for majority rule in a unitary state, [and] secondly, the concern of white South Africa over this demand, as well as the insistence of whites on structural guarantees that majority rule will not mean domination of the white minority by blacks."^[iii]

The move to negotiation was based in part on the mutual feeling among leaders of the ANC and the ruling National Party that they were all better off without international mediation of the sort that had led to the settlement of the conflict in Namibia in 1988. This shared interest in a bi-lateral accord, along with the failure of NP efforts to cultivate any viable alternative Black representatives, and the deteriorating economic and demographic trends in the country, pushed the government and ANC to start a negotiation process, albeit while retaining capacities for violent coercion.^[iv]

Along with other ANC leaders, Mandela also recognized that South Africa's capitalist economy meant that an eventual ANC government would need White controlled industry, particularly the mining and agricultural sectors, which meant avoiding nationalization and policies that would prompt an exodus of White South Africans. ANC leaders were familiar with the ruinous effects of such policies in Zambia, Angola, and Mozambique from having lived in those countries while in exile.

Contributions to Post-conflict Reconciliation

On his release from prison in 1990, Mandela was received as an international hero and in 1994, in its first non-racial elections, was elected South Africa's president. His personal history, motivations, and expertise enabled him to embody the ideal of inter-group reconciliation in South Africa and worldwide, to an extent that is perhaps without historical equivalent. To Afrikaner Whites, the dominant ethnic group in South African politics since 1948, Mandela affirmed that their language was a true tongue of Africa. In his first State of the Nation address as president, he recited, in Afrikaans, Ingrid Jonker's poem about the 1960 massacre of Black protesters at Sharpeville. Jonker, Mandela asserted, had been an Afrikaner and also an African and these identities were compatible.

Mandela also saluted Afrikaner fighters of the Anglo-Boer war, claiming them as an inspiration for his own post-Sharpeville guerrilla initiative. Among the former adversaries whom Mandela invited to break bread with him were Betsie Verwoerd, widow of the most fervent champion of apartheid, and Percy Yutar, a state prosecutor who had once sought the death penalty against Mandela. Mandela famously donned the jersey of the Springboks, an historically Whites-only team and a touchstone of Afrikaner nationalism, at the 1995 World Rugby Cup. Mandela also accepted the final report of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which had been rejected by other ANC leaders as being overly critical of human-rights violations on the ANC side. (Former Presidents P. W. Botha and F. W. de Klerk also rejected the Report's assertions that they were responsible for apartheid-era rights abuses, including approving killings of anti-apartheid activists.)

Mandela's legacy as president includes the important precedent he set of serving only for a single term of office. His example is particularly salient in Africa, where heads of state have rarely yielded power voluntarily.

Contributions to Settlement of Other Conflicts

Besides serving as a model of integrity and incorruptibility, of willingness to reconcile with former adversaries, and of personal sacrifice in the cause of dismantling an entrenched system of racism and oppression, Mandela also promoted negotiated settlements of political conflicts in other countries.

Visiting Indonesia in 1997, Mandela insisted on meeting with the jailed leader of East Timor's resistance movement, Xanana Gusmão. Mandela pressed Gusmão and Indonesian President Suharto to begin a dialogue, telling Gusmão

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“every freedom fighter must remain true to his or her principles, without which he or she ceases to be a freedom fighter, however... without abandoning those same principles, one must remain focused on achieving peace. And peace can only be attained through dialogue.”[v] While Gusmão's release took another two years, Mandela's initiative raised the international profile of the struggle over East Timor, thereby hastening its resolution.

Also in 1997 Mandela mediated a conference on the conflict in Northern Ireland attended by a delegation from the Irish nationalist Sinn Fein and IRA, as well as from the Democratic Unionist Party, the largest loyalist party. Mandela admonished the nationalist delegation that the IRA had to declare a ceasefire to join the negotiating process, while also telling the loyalists to decouple the issue of an immediate ceasefire from the issue of arms decommissioning, which they should address during formal negotiations. This approach was adopted in the Good Friday Agreement a year later.[vi] In 1999, Mandela also helped resolve the deadlock between Libya and Great Britain concerning a judicial trial for those responsible for the bombing of PanAm flight 103. Mandela remained loyal to dictators like Libya's Colonel Gadafy and Cuba's Fidel Castro, owing to their long-standing support of the ANC. However, he rather belatedly condemned “the tragic failure of leadership” in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. After remaining silent during his presidency, Mandela called for recognizing South Africa's AIDS epidemic and prioritizing measures to combat it, Mandela's only surviving son (together with his daughter-in-law) having succumbed to the disease in 2005.[vii]

While Mandela could not directly influence major matters of international politics, he was forthright in his condemnation of United States foreign policy under George W. Bush and of Israel's ongoing military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. On a visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories in 1999, Mandela told Israeli leaders that peace depended on complete Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian areas and also told Palestinians that Arab leaders must unequivocally recognize the existence of Israel with secure borders.[viii]

After stepping down as President in April 1999, Mandela took over as chief mediator of the civil war in Burundi upon former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's death. Mandela applied several lessons from negotiations in South Africa to the Burundian conflict, while remaining open to alternative approaches. In particular, Mandela pushed hard for the inclusion of rebel groups and advocated ethnic power-sharing arrangements such as a rotating presidency and equal Hutu-Tutsi representation in an integrated army. He unblocked the talks by instituting decision making by “sufficient consensus” of the largest and most representative parties; imposed a deadline for agreement; involved African governments and the United States and European countries as sponsors and donors; and pushed Thabo Mbeki, his successor as president, to commit South African troops as peacekeepers. The resulting Arusha Accords of 2000, while based on Nyerere's groundwork and marred by the non-participation of some rebel factions, were largely the product of Mandela's procedural and substantive innovations, his capacity to speak truth to politicians and exert moral pressure on recalcitrant parties, and his involvement of leaders of powerful states in and outside of Africa. Burundian officials assessed that without Mandela no agreement would have been reached.[ix]

Conclusions

Mandela's policy initiatives in regional conflicts were not always successful, as in the DRC and in South Africa's neighbor, Lesotho. Nor were his attempts to promote human rights appreciated by despotic governments on the continent. However, his principled pragmatism, optimism concerning even long-time adversaries, nuanced and balanced approach to complex problems, and ability to channel his sense of moral indignation into productive dialogue won him admirers around the world. Although in important respects Mandela's philosophies and policy preferences reflected those of the ANC's mainstream, he took initiatives on negotiation on his own. His strategy of outmaneuvering apartheid's administrators by understanding their language and culture and by experimenting with prison as a laboratory for race relations in a future South Africa was his own. His maintenance of positive working relationships among organizations in the liberation movement and with adversaries outside it was something no other leader did as much of, or, as effectively. Mandela's initiatives at reconciliation proceeded from personal conviction and an unparalleled capacity for political symbolism.[x] He was also exemplary in using his moral stature, his direct and forthright manner, and skills in interpersonal persuasion, to help settle conflicts outside his own country.

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[iii] "Notes prepared by Nelson Mandela for his meeting with P. W. Botha 5 July 1989" Accessed at: <http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv01538/04lv01600/05lv01640/06lv01642.htm>, 9 March 2014.

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[vii] Stephanie Nolen, *Globe and Mail*, "Mandela arrived late to the fight against HIV-AIDS," 5 December 2013. Accessed at: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/nelson-mandela/mandela-arrived-late-to-the-fight-against-hiv-aids/article548193/>, 9 March 2014.

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[ix] Kristina Bentley and Roger Southall, *An African Peace Process: Mandela, South Africa, and Burundi*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2005, Chapter 8, "Madiba Magic? Nelson Mandela's role as mediator."

[x] Daniel Lieberfeld, "Nelson Mandela: Personal Characteristics and Reconciliation oriented Leadership" in Baba Jallow, ed., *New Studies in African Leadership* (forthcoming).

About the author:

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Dr. Daniel Lieberfeld is Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies at Duquesne University's Center for Social and Public Policy in Pittsburgh, PA (USA). His book *Talking with the Enemy: Negotiation and Threat Perception in South Africa and Israel/Palestine* (Praeger, 1999) examined the motives for negotiation in long-standing violent conflicts. He has published articles on South Africa and on international politics in such journals as *Peace & Conflict*, *Politikon*, *Middle East Politics*, the *Journal of Peace Research*, the *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Social Movement Studies*, *Negotiation Journal*, *Peace Review*, *International Negotiation*, and *Media, War & Conflict*.