

NELSON ROLIHLEHLA MANDELA – A REFLECTION

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Chair: SALO

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How do we honour this life that was lived for us, that was lived for the world? This life that has been unexpectedly long and yet invariably too short?; this life that bore so much pain and yet finally, offered healing; this life that was imprisoned for so long and yet signaled freedom; that embodied struggle and, eventually, victory and yet witnessed too the erosion of the promises of that victory.

First let us simply pause to offer our thanks for that life, and to offer comfort to Madiba's family and friends. Let us take the time to recall the ways in which Mandela's life enriched ours – here in South Africa and indeed, around the world.

Mandela himself was consistent in refusing any sort of messianic magic attributed to him individually. He always insisted that leadership was collective and that the struggle was the work of the people. In the heady days of his release from prison in 1990, Peter Mokaba was surely wrong that the crowds of “comrades and combatants” attending the Soweto rally to celebrate Mandela's release, who had “toiled in the valley of darkness” were thinking that “now that their messiah and saviour is released, they want to be shown the way to freedom”.

One of the ways we are humbled by Mandela's life is getting the measure of his gracious humanity that didn't just survive his persecution and long imprisonment under apartheid, but seemed to grow to its full realisation despite it. Who can forget his early act as President inviting Betsie Verwoed to tea? Some are tempted to see in this gesture Mandela's culpability for a weak and shallow politics of reconciliation that trumped a more radical transformation in the bigger scheme of our transition out of democracy. But this misses the point that for Mandela, like Biko and Freire too, the struggle against the oppression is a struggle for the full humanisation of both the oppressed *and* the oppressor. What Mandela's post-apartheid grace demonstrated was not weakness but the quietly-confident strength of liberated people.

Premesh Lalu who teaches history at the University of the Western Cape rightly worries that “there is danger that Mandela will be honoured, even monumentalised, but not meaningfully remembered. Part of the problem it seems is that the anti-apartheid struggle to which Mandela contributed so substantially has been recalled as an event, as a passing phase”¹. So while we celebrate the astonishing achievement that 1994 signaled for us in South Africa, let's remember that it was not so much the end of struggle but another beginning of our ongoing and collective task.

The Fanon-scholar, Nigel Gibson, commented that Mandela “is a central actor in what South Africa has become” - and if we are honest about what we have become, it must include the challenges we still face. Some of our challenges, like the central scandal of inequality, have worsened since apartheid while others remain scandalously reminiscent of apartheid, like townships across the country seething with anger and popular protest while the political elite reacts with patronising contempt and repression.

1 (“Mandela is very much with us! “, <http://www.epw.in/web-exclusives/mandela-very-much-us.html>)

Surely then the best way to honour the life and contribution of Mandela is to join that struggle for freedom and dignity anew? And doing that in our time means opening and entering new spaces of struggle, politics and protest, spaces that were perhaps not politically possible for Mandela himself as a loyal ANC member and leader. Thinking back to his role in the rebellious Youth League that openly took on the establishment ANC of its day, we can see that this is precisely what honouring the legacy *must* mean.

In his autobiographical *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela describes encountering democracy as a young boy observing proceedings at the Thembu regent's court where “everyone was heard, equal in their worth”. This is a really important reminder that the heart of democracy is precisely the principled idea that everyone is equal and it's a principle that has value in – and only in – action. Genuine democracy is not limited or tied to procedures of representation or forms of organisation. It is enacted in the ways we value our sisters and brothers and in the dignity we accord everyone in everything.

These principles, and the struggles to advance them, are not uniquely South African. It is surely one of Madiba's enduring hallmarks that, committed as he was to the country of his birth, he understood and articulated a higher universalising vision of the ethical core of our struggles and aspirations here. That is the reason his life and death has global impact. It is also why we cannot fail that legacy by abandoning all those who continue to struggle for justice and dignity.