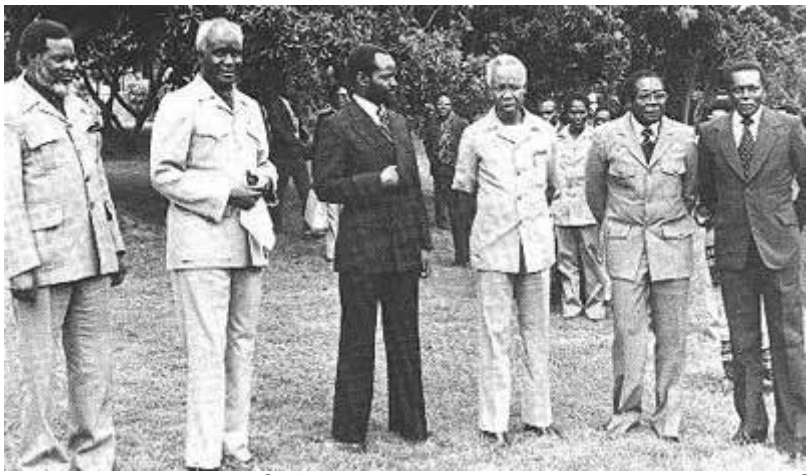
Mandela's Long Walk with African History – Part 3

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza explores the role of reconciliation in the political discourse of transition to independence among some African leaders. This is the last of three posts in which the historian posits South Africa's founding father alongside some of the major events of the 20th century.

Click to read the first post in this series
Click through to read Part 2 of this series

The lateness of South Africa's decolonisation, 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 decolonisation, 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.



Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (2nd and 3rd from the right) were also advocates of reconciliation post-independence

Mandela's South Africa benefited from both the positive and negative experiences of postcolonial Africa, the existence of a highly organised 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 of 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 *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 virtually destroyed, the labour 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 realise 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 individualised 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 revitalised 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 galvanised the country from churches to college campuses. Over the past two centuries, African American mobilisation 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 dehumanisation. 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 20th century, decolonisation. And for that his place in history is assured.

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza is Vice President of Academic Affairs and Professor of History, Quinnipiac University, Connecticut, United States of America.

December 13th, 2013 | International Affairs | 3 Comments