

“For my generation, the death of #Mandela marks the end of Africa’s liberation struggle” – Thandika Mkandawire

LSE’s African Chair Thandika Mkandawire suffered imprisonment for his role in the struggle for the independence of Malawi and 30 years of exile. In this post, he writes about the role Nelson Mandela played in inspiring his generation of political activists.

It is difficult to write about Nelson Mandela without sounding sycophantic or as if engaged in uncritical hero worship. Mandela’s stature and personality left little room for other sentiments other than those of profound admiration and gratitude. The post-World War II era produced some memorable African leaders who grace the pantheon of champions of the African liberation struggle. There is little doubt that Nelson “Madiba” Mandela ranked among the best of these.



In this brief note, I will simply point to the influences the man had on my generation (politically speaking). For much of the last century during which I grew up, Africa was involved in ridding itself of colonialism and racist rule. From the 1960s onwards, the walls of colonial domination crumbled one after another as the colonialists granted independence or simply ran away as did the Belgians while ensuring that King Leopold’s ghost would continue to haunt the heart of Africa that Congo is. And so for my generation, the death of Mandela marks the triumphant end of Africa’s liberation struggle.

The name Mandela became first inscribed in the annals of African liberation as nothing particularly unusual at the time. The late fifties was an era of trials and detentions in the colonies. The **Treason Trial**, which took place from 1956 to 1961, was closely followed by those of my generation largely through Drum Magazine. Mandela was one of 156 people arrested and tried for high treason. During this period leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta, Dr Hastings Banda, Kenneth Kaunda, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo were in and out of courts, detentions centres or prison. Some,

like Patrice Lumumba, were assassinated. Personally, I did a prison stint in 1961 and emerged as a “Prison Graduate” after three months of incarceration on trumped-up charges of inciting violence. We took it for granted then that being jailed for nationalist activities came with the territory.

The rapid pace of decolonisation was brought to a halt on the shores of the Zambezi River by the recalcitrant racist regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia and the decrepit, fascist Portuguese regime of Salazar who continued to insist on maintaining its colonies.

We anxiously followed the fate of Mandela when he went underground as the “Black Pimpernel”. His arrest in 1962 and his conviction for life in 1964 together with the assassination of Lumumba and the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in Zimbabwe in 1965 were major reversals to the liberation of the continent. These were only countered by the emancipation of the “Protectorates” of southern Africa a few years after Mandela’s sentencing. It did appear then that not only would the wave of liberation be derailed on the banks of the Zambezi river but that it would be reversed by neocolonial machinations that included the assassinations of African leaders and coup d’états. South Africa took the war outside its border, hunting down exiled leaders.

If the life imprisonment of Mandela seemed like a major reversal for African nationalism and a victory for the remaining racist and fascist regimes, the Nelson Mandela statement at the dock of the court on 20 April 1964 was one the most inspiring statements for my generation.

“This is the struggle of the African people, inspired by their own suffering and experience. It is a struggle for the right to live. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society, in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunity. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But, if needs be, my Lord, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

We read it as a call for the final push in southern Africa through armed struggle. We also understood it as meaning that the usual path of “protest-detention-talk-statehouse” that had been taken by many nationalist leaders was closed for the remaining colonial regimes of the region. It was clear now that the struggle for liberation in southern Africa had taken a dramatically different turn – that of armed struggle and indeed the liberation movements of Lusophone Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe took this position and we were to witness an acceleration of armed struggles in the region. Three decades later came the end of apartheid, a remarkable achievement in Africa’s tormented history.

Mandela’s release on 11 February 1990 marked the beginning of the final chapter in the struggle for the liberation of the continent from colonial domination but it was also a spur to the struggle for the “Second Independence” – the struggle for the end of authoritarian rule and democracy – that was being wedged throughout the continent. It emphatically underscored the fact that the incarceration of a person for political reasons had no moral basis. Political prisoners in every African country became “our Mandelas” calling for release. In Malawi one political prisoner released in 1994 had spent as much time in jail as Mandela.

There were so many features in the amazing life of this outstanding man. Highlights will differ from one commentator to another. One of the most highlighted areas has been the spirit of reconciliation exuded by a man who had been incarcerated for close to three decades. Important though this aspect was in light of the racial animosity and fears that apartheid had generated, it was not unique to Mandela.

From its original articulation by Jomo Kenyatta, “reconciliation” became the slogan of all the leading nationalist movements in white settler-dominated countries. It is often forgotten that even Mugabe was feted in the capitals of Europe for precisely conveying that message.

The focus of the West on reconciliatory overtures occluded other aspects of the leadership of these men – the avaricious accumulation of wealth in case of Kenyatta and the brutal repression of fellow citizens on the part of Mugabe. In all these cases, reconciliation skirted the issue of justice. And within South Africa the terms of reconciliation are still a hotly debated issue. So there must obviously be something more to Mandela than the “spirit of reconciliation”.

Four things struck me as why the man is the most admired among Africans. One was Mandela’s deep commitment to the liberation of the African people, a commitment baldly stated in court and underscored by his years on Robben Island.

The second was Mandela’s deep sense of duty and a warm sense of respect for the people he led and the movement to which he had been of selfless service. Contrast that to the arrogance of some of the triumphant nationalist leaders who rewrote history for their own purposes and reduced the movements that had brought them into power into massive voices of sycophancy and intolerance.

The third feature was Mandela’s eminently sane relationship to power. It never got into his head. And for all his regal bearing putatively born of his royal upbringing one felt he was a humble and loyal servant of a movement to which he has given so much. Mandela contributed by example in his exercise of power. One unfortunate outcome of the heroic struggles for liberation and the enormous personal sacrifices incurred by individual leaders was the production of “heroes” who in turn produced, wittingly or unwittingly, hero worship. A number of leaders conducted themselves with a sense of entitlement to the throne on the basis of their contribution and sacrifices. Mandela emerged from all this with a remarkable sense of duty and recognition of the many others that had contributed to the struggle. He graciously retired from office after only one term of leadership, a remarkable gesture, given Africa’s experience with national heroes turned “life presidents” and his enormous popularity. Mandela’s gesture cast the searchlight on the “Life Presidents” on the continent and exposed much of the pomp and grand standing for what it was – waste and arrogance

The fourth was his commitment to democracy and rule of law. In a sense Mandela normalised the idea of democracy in Africa. No leader could proudly proclaim himself (it was always a he) a dictator by claiming that African culture sanctioned it without looking extremely foolish.

Mandela was the one individual of and to whom it can be said the African continent was unanimously proud and infinitely grateful.

Hamba Kahle, Madiba

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