Celebrating Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela: Past, Present and Future

Neo Lekgotla lago Ramoupi and Justice Mkhabela

The aim of this policy brief is to argue that the celebration of only the ‘positive’ aspects of Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela’s persona is an injustice to his contribution to South Africa history. What should rather be celebrated is Madiba in his totality, including his weaknesses and faults. It is submitted that ‘Our Madiba’ should be put in proper historical context, so that the world can best appreciate and celebrate Mandela in his totality for his contributions to world peace in the past, present and future.

Nelson Mandela: From Prisoner to President

This policy brief is a response to the Aljazeera Opinion piece entitled ‘Nelson Mandela: From prisoner to president’, written by David Africa and published as part of the 93rd birthday celebrations of the former president of South Africa on July 18, 2011.1 This article by Africa was internally debated by the researchers at AISA on 26 July 2011. As historians of Robben Island and the African liberation struggle in South Africa,2 both of which were central to Mandela’s story, it was felt as Africa does, that the people of South Africa need first and foremost to put our ‘Madiba’ in proper historical context, so that the world can appreciate and celebrate Mandela in his totality for his contributions to world peace in the past, present and future.

The Struggle is My Life

Africa writes at the beginning of his article, ‘As the liberation hero turns 93, elites like to view him as a “moderate” rather than a supporter of armed struggle’.3

In the historiography of Mandela – and by extension, of the African National Congress (ANC), of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL), and of South Africa – the liberation struggle and its armed movement are the axis points for any narrative about the name and persona of Mandela, including the Mandela family, and in particular his second wife, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela. That is to say, we cannot comprehend Mandela without talking about him in the context of that important historical past that, despite its interweaving of cruelty and love, brought us to the South Africa that we, as a people, and the world, are enjoying today.
To labour this point, part four of Mandela’s autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, is entitled ‘The struggle is my life’, which is the title of his *Speeches and Writings*, which was compiled to mark his sixtieth birthday, and includes historical documents and a recent account of conditions on Robben Island; it was published in London by the International Defence and Aid Fund in 1978.4

That significant historical past begins with the birth of the boy-child Rolihlahla Mandela on 18 July 1918 at Mvezo, in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. ‘Apart from life, a strong constitution and an abiding connection to the Thembu royal house, the only thing my father bestowed upon me at birth was a name: Rolihlahla.’5 The heritage, traditions and customs of his upbringing, within a communal household of extended family members, are the bedrock on which the life and activism of Madiba, as we know him today, was built. Throughout his upbringing, from that family community to schools and to Fort Hare University College, to Johannesburg, to his various visits to African and European countries, and to Robben Island prison – and other prisons, one notices the awakening of his conscience – social, economic and political.

Consequently, Mandela was one of the youth members who formed the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) ‘on Easter Sunday 1944 at the Bantu Men’s Social Centre in Eloff Street’,6 Johannesburg. While the actual formation of the ANC Youth League took place in Johannesburg, the institution of Fort Hare was the most important breeding ground of student militancy in the country at the time. This was clear from Mda’s statement about Fort Hare: ‘Just the place to start a Youth League because the young people there are the intellectual leaders-to-be, and a growing consciousness of their role in the national liberation struggle will add a new vigour and force to the struggle for national freedom.’7

**Formation of ANC Youth League: ‘Lighting a fire under the leadership of the ANC’**

The rationale for forming the ANC Youth League at the time was, writes Mandela, that ‘[m]any felt, perhaps unfairly, that the ANC as a whole had become the preserve of a tired, unmilitant, privileged African elite, more concerned with protecting their own rights than those of the masses. The general consensus was that some action must be taken, and Dr Majombozi proposed forming a Youth League as a way of lighting a fire under the leadership of the ANC’.8

The militancy and radicalism of the ANC Youth League today and in the past is traceable to its formation at that time by the generation of its founding fathers, Mziwakhe Anton Lembede and AP Mda, who became the Youth League’s first presidents in that sequence; and many others, including Mandela, Walter Sisulu and OR Tambo.

During the apartheid period Mandela was called a ‘terrorist’ because, amongst other things, as he writes, ‘I, who had never been a soldier, who had never fought in battle, who had never fired a gun at an enemy, had been given the task...’ The ‘terrorist’ Mandela is as important as the ‘moderate’ Mandela of today, who is celebrated by the media as if the radical and militant Mandela of the 1940s to 1960s had never existed.
The name of this new organization was Umlhongo we Sizwe (the Spear of the Nation) – or MK for short. The symbol of the spear was chosen because with this simple weapon Africans had resisted the incursions of whites for centuries. But Mandela did not wake up one day and declare ‘armed struggle now!’. ‘The debate on the use of violence had been going on among us since early 1960. I had first discussed the armed struggle as far back as 1952 with Walter Sisulu. Now, I again conferred with him and we agreed that the organization had to set out on a new course. … [W]e decided that I should raise the issue of the armed struggle within the Working Committee, and I did so in a meeting in June of 1961.’ Mandela was raising this again after the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960. As a factor in the decision to start MK, it is important to note the statement made by the ANC president of that time, Chief Albert Luthuli: ‘Who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately and modestly, at a closed and barred door?’

The ‘terrorist’ Mandela is as important as the ‘moderate’ Mandela of today, who is celebrated by the media as if the radical and militant Mandela of the 1940s to 1960s had never existed. The 18 years (1964–1982) that Mandela spent on Robben Island were as a result of his radicalism and militancy. For the oppressed majority, Mandela the person, and the organisation the ANC (and other similar movements), have always been freedom fighters and liberation movements; not terrorists and/or terrorist organisations.

The role of the liberation movements in bombing and attacking the then apartheid regime landed their leadership and the organisations onto the apartheid government’s list of terrorists, with dire consequences, as most Western countries and the United States joined to blacklist the ANC and its military wing, Umlhongo we Sizwe. Given the above trend, it came as no surprise that even 15 years after having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Mandela’s name still lingered on the list of US blacklisted terrorists. Nevertheless the verdict gradually gained ground that those who regarded Mandela as a terrorist were on the wrong side of history, and the US view of Mandela became an obvious embarrassment of its own until the US gradually refrained from keeping his name on the list. In fact, the US now views South Africa as one of Africa’s most important and strategic countries. This signals a reversal of the negative perceptions that were attached to the ANC.

Among Madiba’s greatest gestures of reconciliation was having the courage to ask South
Africans, especially the African and black people, to embrace the Springboks as a national sporting emblem for post-apartheid South Africa. Rugby seemed an unlikely instrument to make the country whole. White people loved the sport. It was, as Mandela said, their ‘religion’. The national team, the Springboks, were the white nation’s high priests. But black South Africans hated rugby, and the Springboks in particular, whose green jersey they saw as a loathsome symbol of apartheid oppression.17

However, sport is a uniting force. In one symbolic move in 1995, elected President Nelson Mandela came out in support of the Springboks and united a divided nation. It was one moment when history and sport merged and put Mandela’s moral authority, integrity, compassion and commitment to reconciliation on global display. It is these attributes that have made him the icon he is today, writes Jonathan Jackson.18

Mandela had spent the prime decades of his manhood, fatherhood, brotherhood, uncle-hood, and grandfather-hood in the prisons of South Africa. Throughout that time, he got used to dressing in a casual manner. After his release, as the first African president of the democratic Republic of South Africa, President Mandela would be seen in what became known famously and affectionately as ‘the Madiba shirts’. Executives of all kinds in the boardrooms of South Africa would copy Madiba’s dress style, and it became the norm in the country to dress in this less formal way. This was one example of a restoration of Africa’s simple ways of respectable dressing that colonialism and apartheid had not accepted. Every time we dress the Madiba way, it is a celebration of the humility of Mandela.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Important Process

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was not perfect, but it was an important process that the country needed to go through in order to begin healing. President Mandela’s speech at the handover ceremony of the TRC Report stated ‘Out of that negotiation process emerged a pact to uncover the truth, to build a bright future for our children and grandchildren, without regard to race, culture, religion or language. Today we reap some of the harvest of what we sowed at the end of a South African famine.’19 Madiba paid tribute to ‘the hundreds who dared to open the wounds of guilt so as to exorcise it from the nation’s body politic; indeed the millions who make up the South African people and who made it happen so that we could indeed become a South African nation’.20

There were criticisms of the TRC, especially its processes, because it re-awakened ‘troubling emotions’. But, as the president said, ‘Though the interim report is formally given to me as president, it is in reality a report to all of us. For that reason it is being released to the public and given to our elected representatives without a moment’s delay. Its release is bound to reawaken many of the difficult and troubling emotions that the hearings themselves brought. Many of us will have reservations about aspects of what is contained in these five volumes. All are free to make comment on it and indeed we invite you to do so. And for those who feel unjustly damaged, there are remedies.’21

‘It is in reality a report to all of us’; that was very important, in particular for white South Africans, who were equally morally damaged by the apartheid state. Had most white South Africans known much of what the TRC revealed, perhaps apartheid would not have lasted for such a long period, while the country’s resources — human and material — could have been shared humbly on the basis of a shared humanity.

‘Part of a Collective’

Madiba has always told us that he is part of a collective. Mandela belongs to the African National Congress, which was formed in 1912, just six years before he was born in 1918, and which turns 100 years in January 2012. Yet the media, which today love Madiba as much as they hated him with a passion yesterday, have succeeded in talking about Mandela in a vacuum. Achmat Dangor, the CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, expressed that ‘Mandela … himself had always been part of a collective.’22

‘My family paid a terrible price, perhaps too dear a price, for my commitment’

In our celebration of Madiba, we must not romanticise him to the extent that we fail to acknowledge that he is human like all of us; and all human beings have faults. Let us take, for example, Madiba’s family, about whom he expresses himself so movingly in the last three pages of his 617-page autobiography; coming at the end, this to us symbolises a continuous loss that cannot be recovered. We will use Madiba’s
own words so that we are not misunderstood or misinterpreted:

‘For myself, I have never regretted my commitment to the struggle, and I was always prepared to face the hardships that affected me personally. But my family paid a terrible price, perhaps too dear a price, for my commitment.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate the point we made at the beginning of this policy brief. We need to put Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela, Our Madiba, in a proper historical context, so that the world can best appreciate and celebrate Mandela in his totality for his contribution to world peace: in the past, present and future. Mandela is not only what the media want us to believe he is; Madiba is his work and activism in totality, less of a ‘terrorist’ and more of a humanist. Yet Mandela was in his time a revolutionary, as well as the icon of reconciliation the world loves to celebrate.

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