

When Mandela Dies

Written by Amanda Gouws

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AMANDA GOUWS, JUN 10 2013

South African politics are closely tied to what is called the “Mandela dividend”. While cynics may think that this is merely a “feel good” idea about an iconic figure, it is definitely more than that.

Nelson Mandela is an icon that has received worldwide acclaim for his principled stance on the implementation of a human rights ideology after apartheid. Both his domestic and foreign policies have been linked to the creation of freedom and dignity for all the citizens of South Africa. In 1993 Mandela warned against the growing dangers of “narrow nationalism” and the risks of not tolerating diversity (see *Foreign Affairs*, 72:5). He called for “human rights to be the core concern of international relations and for South Africa to take up its rightful place in the community of nations”. This idealism has been replaced in the second democratic term with Thabo Mbeki’s realism.

Mandela represents one of the last heroes of the liberation struggle who were prepared to die for their democratic ideals. He also represents the optimism of the first five years of the South African democracy, when there was a belief that everything was possible, a time when the South African government embarked on a project of law reform and activism aimed at the greater good of the people.

Because Mandela was elevated above politics he united the different members of the ruling alliance under the common goal of transforming South Africa into a democratic country. Presidents who came after him were faced with the more onerous task of policy implementation, economic restructuring and global integration. Mbeki’s policies, for example, were far more driven by an ideology of African nationalism that overshadowed moral concerns, especially around HIV/AIDS.

The “broad church” of the ANC served the purposes of Mandela’s presidency when different ideological positions were debated and accommodated in the negotiation process. But these divergent positions also meant that the ANC never turned into a political party proper. Mandela’s successors are now struggling with the door that was left open for factionalism, populism and patronage networks in the ANC.

The harder tasks of nation building and creating social cohesion (more than merely the notion of the rainbow nation) were left to Mandela’s successors – a task that is bedevilled by very high levels of inequality, poverty and a nearly 40% unemployment rate (if we include those who have given up looking for work). High levels of political dissatisfaction are expressed through regular violent service delivery strikes, mining unrest that has wreaked havoc with South Africa’s foreign investment, and high levels of xenophobic violence against foreigners from other African countries. The idealism of the Mandela presidency has given way to realist approaches to state security.

For women the first five years of the Mandela presidency embodied the same optimism of change for the better. Women friendly laws were passed through parliament after gender activists became members of parliament, a national gender machinery that was one of the most integrated in the world was created, and a 30% voluntary quota for women’s representation in the legislative was implemented as the slow move toward gender equality started. Yet, a realist approach to human security is more concerned with security of the state than with the security of individual citizens. In the last ten years gender based violence has spiralled out of control and many gains for women made during the first 5 years of democracy have been rolled back. The populist rhetoric that characterised the first 5 years of the Jacob Zuma presidency opened spaces for a misogynistic discourse around women. This populism has also

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increased a shift to a greater support for custom and traditional culture implemented in a way that forms a binary relationship between culture and universal human rights, especially when it comes to women's liberation in South Africa. The perception is created that women should choose between culture and universal rights.

Mandela was truly a one-term president. While all these changes took place under his successors Mandela did not interfere from the side line. He never dictated to them how to run the government but he, like so many activists who fought for the end of apartheid, must have been deeply disappointed with the quick abandoning of struggle ideals, the watering down of civil liberties and the crass self enrichment of the political elite.

These political shifts in South Africa have already appeared long before Mandela has passed away. So would his passing make a difference? In terms of the real politic of South Africa, it won't, but on a symbolic level it will have huge repercussions. For one, it would mean the end of the Mandela dividend: the goodwill toward South Africa as a consequence of the liberation struggle that was embodied by Mandela. In a sense it will close the door on the idealism of the generation of Robben Island prisoners that spent their lives there fighting for freedom. In its place the harsh judgment of South Africa as just another African country beset by the same leadership problems and human rights violations visible in other African countries may increase. ANC members had a choice to choose a new leader in December 2012 but the resounding support for Jacob Zuma is an indication of the depth and breadth of his patronage.

There are those who wonder if the fragile social cohesion of South Africa will fall apart after Mandela's death, if ethnic identities will be strengthened and ethnic violence will be at the order of the day. That would be giving Mandela too much credit for keeping the nation together. We can, however, never give him enough credit for being the "father of the nation", for his vision and for the willingness to spend 27 years in prison for that vision. Surely, after he dies there will be those who will invoke his name for their own gain, who will claim to be the true followers of Mandela. But they will be shown up as emperors without clothes. His true followers will be those who return to the concerns of the people, the poor and homeless South Africans who are still waiting for democracy, in order to improve their lives. In these leaders Mandela's name will live on.

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