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Reconciliation and nation building: the Mandela way

Ahmed Kathrada



A man reacts as he walks past a newspaper poster with a photo of former South African President Nelson Mandela on it in Mthatha, South Africa on Sunday, July 17, 2011. Millions of South Africans will celebrate Nelson Mandela's 93rd birthday today. Photo: AP

How does one explain the 'miracle' of South Africa's peaceful transformation?

“I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”— throughout my 26 years in prison, this courageous and historic peroration of Nelson Mandela's statement from the dock during the Rivonia Trial kept alive the vision of the society we are striving to achieve. With a possible death sentence looming, he had boldly and clearly reaffirmed African National Congress (ANC) policy, and its commitment to the Freedom Charter, embracing its political, economic and cultural clauses. All the accused approved of the address from the dock.

At home and in exile, in the face of great danger, the ANC leadership stuck rigidly to this policy of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa and acted firmly against any deviation from it.

Hence I emerged from prison full of confidence, albeit with somewhat idealistic — even utopian — ideas about the practical implementation of the policy.

Realities

It did not take long for me to wake up to the realities of South Africa to which we had returned. More than three centuries of apartheid had left a legacy of massive poverty, hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, homelessness and — above all — racial polarisation and State-orchestrated violence.

While the unbanned ANC was engaged in re-establishing itself in branches and regions, the United Democratic Front (UDF) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) continued to lead the oppressed to new heights of disciplined non-violent struggle and political consciousness. On the other hand, the continuing Third Force violence led to the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) process facing collapse on more than one occasion.

That was the situation 12 months before the 1994 elections. Then came the dastardly assassination of Comrade Chris Hani, the widely revered and charismatic ANC and Communist Party leader. This single act propelled South Africa to the brink of a bloodbath, the likes of which had never been seen before. The situation called for utmost calm, courage, statesmanship and foresight. President F.W. de Klerk's government found itself in a state of panic, confusion, helplessness and impotence. In this atmosphere of unprecedented tension, ANC president Nelson Mandela rushed to Johannesburg from the Transkei and was asked to appear on television. His simple, forceful words saved the country from imminent disaster:

“Tonight I am reaching out to every single South African, black and white, from the very depths of my being. A white man, full of prejudice and hate, came to our country and committed a deed so foul that our whole nation now teeters to the brink of disaster. A white woman, of Afrikaner origin, risked her life so that we may know, and bring to justice, this assassin ... Now is the time for all South Africans to stand together against those who, from any quarter, wish to destroy what Chris Hani gave his life for — the freedom of all of us.”

The country responded positively to his appeal for peace, and that night, a full year before his official inauguration, Mandela effectively became the new president of South Africa. Not a single individual in government ranks, nor even in the liberation movement, had the stature of Madiba, and no one else could have commanded the respect needed to avert disaster.

During the five years of his presidency Madiba concentrated on spreading and consolidating a message of forgiveness, reconciliation, unity, peace and nation building.

Among the first steps

Among the earliest gestures was to invite the wives and widows of former Prime Ministers and Presidents to tea, and to take a special trip to the white Afrikaner enclave of Orania to pay a courtesy call on Betsie Verwoerd, the ailing widow of the assassinated architect of apartheid, Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd.

I am frequently asked to explain the so-called “miracle” of our peaceful transformation. In keeping with what I believe is our government's policy, my response has been that it should be presumptuous of us to prescribe to other countries how they should solve their problems. We recall that, with only a handful of exceptions, virtually all wars and conflicts end at the negotiation table. All we can do is to relate our experiences — how in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, with a background of over three centuries of white rule and great deal of violence and bloodshed, the ANC and the incumbent government had agreed to enter into discussions; how these talks had led to the formal CODESA Conference, at which the basis of the interim Constitution was agreed upon. This in turn had led to the first democratic elections of 1994.

On her visit to Robben Island in 1996, Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway suggested the establishment of a conflict resolution centre on the island. Prime Minister Gujral of India, on his visit to Robben Island in 1997, echoed this idea. Sadly we haven't made much progress. In my view, with its recent history and the universal interest it attracts, Robben Island would be the ideal venue for such a centre.

(Ahmed Kathrada, a South African political leader, is a close associate of Nelson Mandela, who turns 93 today. Mr. Kathrada spent 26 years in prison — for his opposition to apartheid — 18 of which were on Robben Island. He is in New Delhi to take part in Mandela Day Commemoration today.)