A Day In The Life Of Mandela: Charm, Control, A Bit Of Acid

By BILL KELLER

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CAPE TOWN, Sept. 8 — Nelson Mandela, South Africa's indispensable man, settled into the seat of his presidential jet. He propped his chronically swollen feet on two pillows, accepted a bowl of cereal and a plate of fruit, and commenced a daylong demonstration of his art of the presidency.

It was 6 A.M. on his 122d day as liberator-turned-chief-executive, and he had agreed to let two reporters watch him do his job. Never a man oblivious of his audience, Mr. Mandela promptly embarked on a campaign of seductive engagement: deliberate charm, disarming confidences, a command of details mustered in defense of crisp convictions.

Admirers who regard the man as a modern saint might have had moments of doubt. In the course of this day he would display an occasional meanness toward his predecessor and now deputy, F. W. de Klerk, and a surprising solicitousness of corporate big shots who have quietly donated money to his cause.

But the day would leave little question of the patriarchal authority that sometimes seems to be the main force binding this country's improbable governing fusion of races and interests.

As he poked at the fruit, Mr. Mandela recalled the paternal scolding he had delivered the night before to one of his closest allies, the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

Dressed in a union cap and T-shirt, the President had told the unionists the last thing they wanted to hear: Ease up on the strikes; you are scaring foreign investors. Prepare to "tighten your belts" and accept low wages, because that is how some Asian economies became tigers.

He warned union workers against putting their own modest advantages above the needs of five million blacks with no jobs at all, for whom the President is convinced the only hope is to make South Africa a mecca for foreign capital. But Mr. Mandela knows that many in the unions — and some senior figures in his own party — regard such thinking as sacrilege.

“You still have this question of populism — ‘Let the workers strike!’ ” Mr. Mandela said now, flying from Pretoria to Cape Town. “They say, ‘We want only investors who will invest at all costs.’

“I’m trying to warn against that type of thinking. That is irresponsible. We must move from the position of a resistance movement to one of builders.”

South Africa is not a one-man show. In his Cabinet and Parliament, and in the provincial governments, Mr. Mandela has a strong cast, including two possible successors — Thabo Mbeki, a former exile and liberation diplomat who now serves as the first of two Deputy Presidents, and Cyril Ramaphosa, a tough-minded labor leader during the apartheid years who refused his pick of Cabinet posts to remain as head of Mr. Mandela’s party, the African National Congress.

But probably none of them has the weight to say what Mr. Mandela said the night before to the unionists, and to expect the respectful hearing he got.

At 7:50 A.M. today, his Falcon 900 landed at an air force base outside Cape Town, and the official day began.

There is little of Nelson Mandela in the Cape Town office that he inherited from the last presidents of apartheid.

The only personal touches among the African artifacts installed by the National Gallery to “indigenize” the suite are a photograph of the little cottage where he grew up in a remote rural village, the scion of tribal royalty, and four pictures of two young boxers sparring in Soweto in 1959, one of them recognizably the young Nelson Mandela.

The vibe, however, is pure Mandela. The staff around him is conspicuously and comfortably multiracial. The working style is courteously informal. Each visitor, including Cabinet ministers and diplomats, is invited to shake hands with the woman who serves them tea.

8:30 A.M. “This is the office where I saw P. W. Botha in July 1989,” Mr. Mandela said, folding his long, erect frame onto a cream-colored upholstered sofa. That meeting with the President who preceded Mr. de Klerk was a watershed in the long negotiations toward democracy.

Mr. Botha was known for good reason as “the Great Crocodile,” but Mr. Mandela recalls him as “a charming man” who poured tea for his guest and addressed him with respect.

Mr. Mandela places a premium on personal contact in affairs of state. Manners count, and loyalty, even the easy loyalty of a kind word or a generous check, is remembered.

When he upbraided the labor leaders the day before, he did not mention another

reason their militancy has worried him: some employers who have been the targets of strikes have been secret benefactors of the African National Congress.

Before the election campaign, Mr. Mandela went to 20 titans of corporate South Africa and asked each for at least a million rand — about $275,000 — to build up his party and finance the campaign.

All but one, he said, complied. A few, like Raymond D. Ackerman, the head of the Pick ’n Pay grocery chain, gave double the minimum request, Mr. Mandela said. So it rankled him that Mr. Ackerman’s stores had just borne the brunt of a raucous strike by store clerks.

“The right to strike is in the Constitution,” he said. “But for them to target people who have been assisting us creates difficulties. Without funds we could not have built the organization, we could not have won the election.”

South Africa has no law requiring that political gifts be disclosed, and no tradition that frowns on officials giving access, even sympathy, to contributors.

With the election over, wealthy executives seeking to impress Mr. Mandela with their commitment to the new order are now being invited to donate to the President’s Fund, a charitable trust Mr. Mandela began with a large contribution from his own salary.

The President uses the fund to start projects he likes, mostly for children. For example, he persuaded the Anglo American Corporation, the gold-and-diamonds colossus, to give his fund a mining compound it was not using. He then called the Finance Minister and extracted $8 million in state money to develop the property as a home for delinquent children.

The arrangement enhances Mr. Mandela’s personal influence, and gives contributors an entree. When Mr. Ackerman, his benefactor from Pick ’n Pay, phones later in the day with a problem, Mr. Mandela instantly takes his call.

9 A.M. Two officials from the Foreign Ministry brief Mr. Mandela on Lesotho, a tiny kingdom entirely surrounded by South Africa, where the king has recently thrown out the elected government. Under gentle pressure from Mr. Mandela, the king has agreed to restore democracy, but now the military is balking. Mr. Mandela and his aides consider how to approach the recalcitrant generals.

The President has quietly engaged himself in the problems of the region, taking a personal hand in Lesotho, visiting Mozambique and Zimbabwe, playing matchmaker among the rival parties in war-battered Angola.

Lesotho, he said, seems near solution, and he has stepped up his mediation. But in Angola, he said, there is little more he can do because he fears Jonas Savimbi, the rebel leader, is not ready for peace.

“I don’t think he wants to play second fiddle,” Mr. Mandela said. Reciting a lesson from South Africa’s own experience, he added, “Intervention only works when the people concerned seem to be keen for peace.”

The Japanese Ambassador arrives at 9:35 leading a business delegation to pose for pictures with the presence-in-chief.

Mr. Mandela gets 200 requests a day for such photos. Mary Mxadana, his formidable personal secretary, turns down almost all, accepting only those she senses will appeal to Mr. Mandela: the blind marathon-runner raising money for charity, the occasional beauty queen, golf and rugby champions. Mr. Mandela cannot resist children or people who, like the Japanese, bring money to South Africa.

“Well, it’s a real pleasure to meet you, and we appreciate the aid,” he says, pumping hands with the beaming businessmen.

10:15 A.M. Much of the morning, untypically, is given over to ceremony. Five new ambassadors present their credentials, part of an incoming diplomatic tide that has followed South Africa’s readmission to the world.

For a novice president and a man who spent more than a third of his life in prison, Mr. Mandela displays a dazzling familiarity with the world. He has visited all five of the places represented today — India, the Vatican, Botswana, Tanzania and Belgium — and banters familiarly about the kings and presidents he knows.

“Does the Pope still play his guitar?” Mr. Mandela inquired over tea with Archbishop Ambrose De Paoli, the new Vatican nuncio.

The blank look on the diplomat’s face suggested he was unaware of the Pope’s musical hobby. But Mr. Mandela’s recall is famous, and no one could be sure that he had not, indeed, been serenaded by the Pope.

For all his hobnobbing with the world’s political nobility, Mr. Mandela is careful to avoid the ostentation of power. South Africans were infuriated recently when President Robert Mugabe, visiting from neighboring Zimbabwe, tied up Johannesburg traffic with a noisy, flashing-lights, screaming-sirens motorcade, a custom almost everywhere in Africa except here.

Mr. Mandela often works in a well-tailored African shirt rather than the three-piece gray suit and tie he has donned for the diplomats this day. But others in his government have not been so proletarian, prompting a swell of indignant articles about lavish salaries, Concorde trips and free-spending bodyguards.

“We have this problem,” Mr. Mandela said. “We have the high salaries and we are living in luxury. That destroys your capacity to speak in a forthright manner and tell people to tighten their belts.”

11:55 A.M. The local press corps is loitering outside for a comment on the latest Zulu problem.

The Zulu king has invited Mr. Mandela to attend an annual celebration honoring Shaka, the founder of the Zulu nation. But Mangosuthu G. Buthelezi, who serves as the king's prime minister, has objected.

Before the election, strife between Mr. Mandela's followers and the Zulu nationalists loyal to Mr. Buthelezi cost thousands of lives and threatened to ruin the elections. Now Mr. Buthelezi sits in the Cabinet, but he remains jealous of his tribal prerogatives, and the fear of new violence lingers.

Mr. Mandela steps before the reporters and ducks a question about whether he will attend the Shaka Day ceremony.

Later Mr. Mandela says that he believes his aggressive courtship of Mr. Buthelezi has produced a cordial, constructive relationship, but one that requires constant attention.

Mr. Buthelezi, the President notes, was the nephew of a Zulu king. He was raised in the royal court, but treated as an outsider.

"He was deprived of parental love and care, so he grew up with this insecurity," Mr. Mandela explained. "Once you understand that, Buthelezi is a very fine person. When we are together, he is very, very courteous. But when he is away from you, he behaves totally differently because he does not know if he is still your friend or not."

The two Deputy Presidents, Mr. Mbeki and Mr. de Klerk, arrive at 12:45 from offices nearby to talk about more money in the budget for the police. The night before Mr. Mandela sat up late with his Minister of Safety and Security, listening to horror stories about the spread of crime syndicates and the low morale of the police force.

Before getting down to business, Mr. Mandela and Mr. de Klerk joke stiffly about the security entourage that followed Mr. de Klerk on his vacation. "They're wasting money," the former President tells the current one. "I feel so safe nowadays."

The banter betrays a new chill in Mr. Mandela's relationship with the man who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with him. Mr. Mandela has never had great affection for Mr. de Klerk, and now he finds that slapping down the former President plays well with those in his own party who fear he is too cozy with the white establishment.

So, while effusively praising the other members of Mr. de Klerk's party who sit in the Cabinet — "You would think they were members of the democratic movement" — Mr. Mandela portrays Mr. de Klerk as a small-minded, partisan conniver.

"His tactic is to praise the President and then attack and undermine the A.N.C.," Mr. Mandela said later.

He also pokes fun at Mr. de Klerk for being so slow to vacate the presidential

mansion in Pretoria (“He is still there,” the President says, rolling his eyes), and he blames Mr. de Klerk for impeding efforts to create a more frugal style of government.

At one point, Mr. Mandela discloses that he has just stripped Mr. de Klerk of his assignment overseeing administration of the intelligence service, a demonstration of mistrust.

1:15 P.M. “I’m not sure you’re allowed to kiss the Speaker,” says the Speaker of Parliament, Frene Ginwala, as the President busses her vigorously on both cheeks.

Mrs. Ginwala is an old friend and a new adversary, for she represents a Parliament increasingly unwilling to defer to Mr. Mandela’s executive power. Mr. Mandela, she says, “feels this as a tension, when it is in fact an issue of separation of power.”

Over a lunch of chicken and rice in Mr. Mandela’s office, they discuss procedural matters, then finish with a genial joust.

“The executive in our case actually controls the legislature,” Mr. Mandela points out, citing the Constitution.

“I’ll battle you on that one,” Mrs. Ginwala replies amicably, noting that the Constitution is soon to be rewritten.

Like the rambunctious unions, the A.N.C. caucus in Parliament is an independent force that requires delicate handling.

“The concept of a government of national unity has not sifted down to the grass roots,” Mr. Mandela said before lunch, speaking of his caucus. “There is still a lot of resistance — and for good reasons.” Many in Parliament, after all, suffered imprisonment, torture, exile and the death of loved ones at the hands of the party that now shares power.

The Surgeon General briefs Mr. Mandela after lunch on the military medical system available to treat him in the event of an emergency. But the President interrupts to inquire about procedures used to screen blood for the AIDS virus, and again to reminisce about a doctor who tested him in prison with a faulty blood-pressure gauge: “He said, ‘Mr. Mandela, according to this instrument you should be dead.’ ”

To all appearances Mr. Mandela, who is 76, is in robust health. He wears hearing aids, and he has to mop his eyes from time to time with a handkerchief. While removing cataracts recently, a surgeon also unplugged tear ducts that had been clogged during Mr. Mandela’s years laboring in a dusty prison limestone quarry. For years, Mr. Mandela could not cry. Now he cannot help it.

His aides work to guard him against fatigue, but his energy remains astonishing. This morning he was up by 5 A.M. for a long walk, as he has done since his days as an amateur boxer. He eats and drinks little, a habit acquired during 27 years in prison.

With the surgeon general, he jokes about his gravest health concern — trying to get his two Deputy Presidents to give up smoking.

3:50 P.M. Fink Haysom, the President's legal counsel, arrives with documents for signing. Among them are letters to retiring officials of the intelligence service, thanking them for their years of service. Much of that service, Mr. Mandela remarks, was devoted to keeping people like him from power.

"This might be a fellow who was putting bombs in installations and injuring innocent people," Mr. Mandela says, as he signs a farewell.

Mr. Mandela insists he has no fear of the securo-crats, but he does not entirely trust them either. Like much of the vast civil service he inherited, they were schooled in the tasks of racist government, and are slow to change course. Despite frequent demands, he said, he has yet to extract a complete report on domestic spying, telephone taps, paper-shredding and other activities.

"When I first took over, they would give me a briefing and tell me about the World Health Organization, all these things that were peripheral and far away," he said. "I called them and told them, 'You are taking a chance.' "

Things have improved slightly. "They have come back with a report now which covers at least what I already knew," he said.

4:30 P.M. Mr. Mandela gives an interview to an American reporter, then departs for a plane back to Pretoria. But a delegation from Lesotho has arrived unexpectedly to pursue a peace settlement.

"Shall I feed them dinner?" his secretary asks.

"That puts them in a better mood," Mr. Mandela concurs.

He had planned an evening with his children and grandchildren, but instead he will dine with the delegation. The main item on the menu, of course, will be the Mandela charm.