

Editorial: South Africa After Nelson Mandela

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Few nations that have made a transition to democracy have emerged with as solid a political system as South Africa's. The five years of Nelson Mandela's presidency, which ends next month, have seen a genuine change of political power, widespread respect for the rule of law and none of the political revenge killings that have marked other societies in transition. South Africa has many problems, such as desperate poverty and terrifying crime. But its suffering would have been infinitely greater absent the moral authority and democratic, inclusive spirit that made Mr. Mandela a giant as leader of the liberation movement and as President.

On June 2, South Africa will hold parliamentary elections, after which the winning party — undoubtedly Mr. Mandela's African National Congress — will name the new president. That will undoubtedly be Thabo Mbeki, Mr. Mandela's Deputy President. Mr. Mbeki has essentially been running South Africa for years, even leading cabinet meetings. He is widely seen as sophisticated, effective and honest. But he has weaknesses that he must overcome if the country's healing is to continue.

The contrast between Mr. Mbeki and Mr. Mandela is visible in their reactions to the report the country's truth commission released six months ago. The commission blamed the apartheid regime for the vast majority of human rights violations and called the A.N.C.'s struggle a "just war." But it criticized the A.N.C. for some crimes. Mr. Mandela embraced the criticism and the report. Mr. Mbeki attacked the report, and said the truth commission had unfairly equated the A.N.C. and apartheid.

The effectiveness of Mr. Mandela's moral leadership comes from his stature. As a leader of the liberation movement who spent 27 years in prison, he could speak for South Africa's blacks. His authority allowed him to bully F. W. de Klerk, the last apartheid President, into taking A.N.C. demands seriously. He did not have to placate the more destructive factions in the A.N.C. After the murder of the beloved Communist leader Chris Hani in 1993, Mr. Mandela's calming speeches averted widespread violence. His conversion to market economics broke the taboo on such views inside the A.N.C., which had favored nationalizations.

Although he established and led the A.N.C.'s first guerrilla army, in 1961, Mr. Mandela spent the racially divisive years of armed struggle in prison. For decades, he has

held that South Africa needs all races to thrive. While Mr. Mandela has occasionally made anti-white outbursts, his emphasis has been on reconciliation, a policy that Mr. Mbeki, more than 20 years his junior, is not expected to follow.

Mr. Mandela's stature could have harmed his country had he been autocratic. Fortunately, he is a committed democrat. His decision to serve only one term set a crucial precedent for transfer of power.

Mr. Mbeki, who spent much of his life in exile as a diplomat for the A.N.C., is a more knowledgeable and experienced administrator than Mr. Mandela. But he has no power base within the party. In an effort to win support, he has appointed some party hacks and curried favor with some of the A.N.C.'s most dangerous demagogues, such as Winnie Mandela. He has also used some of his speeches to the A.N.C. to pander to extremist race-baiting.

This tendency may continue if South Africa's economic problems do not improve. The country's economic policies — largely fashioned by Mr. Mbeki — are unlikely to change. But the poor will undoubtedly have less patience when Mr. Mandela steps down. Mr. Mbeki will have to resist the temptation to exploit racial resentment as a substitute for economic progress.

Mr. Mbeki also needs to overcome an oversensitivity to criticism and an obsession with the press. But even his adversaries call him a democrat, who will not tamper with the basic freedoms South Africans enjoy, in large part thanks to Mr. Mandela.