

Mandela Fades Amid Battles Over Who Will Claim Legacy

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JOHANNESBURG — “Smile!” the visitor implored, an edge of forced bonhomie in his voice, as he held up a cellphone camera to take a snapshot.

But the face of Nelson Mandela, the 94-year-old leader of the struggle against apartheid who became South Africa’s beloved first black president, remained impassive as stone. He looked confused and irritated, as if his rheumy eyes failed to register the faces of the top leaders of the African National Congress who came to see him last month, even though he had known them for decades.

These images, captured by a government camera crew and broadcast nationwide, were the first to appear in more than nine months of the ailing Mr. Mandela, who has been in the hospital four times in less than a year. Far from being honored, Mr. Mandela’s relatives were furious over the broadcast, saying party leaders had invaded his privacy and exploited his frailty to reap the political benefits of being seen in his hallowed company at least one more time.

“I was really, really livid,” said Makaziwe Mandela, Mr. Mandela’s eldest daughter, arguing that the filming took place against the family’s wishes. “They should have had the sense to not publish those pictures.”

As Mr. Mandela fades away, the struggle to claim his legacy, his image, his moneymaking potential and even the time he has remaining has begun in earnest.

The governing African National Congress, which Mr. Mandela led for decades, is accused of using him as a prop to remind voters of the party’s noble roots at a time when it has come to be seen as a collection of corrupt, self-serving elites. The party’s main rival, the Democratic Alliance, has come under fire, too, for using a photo of him embracing one of its white progenitors, spurring complaints that the opposition is trying to co-opt Mr. Mandela’s image to unseat his own party.

And all the while, his descendants are engaged in a very public fight over Mr. Mandela’s financial legacy. Angry that a trust set up for their welfare and upkeep is partly controlled by someone they consider an outsider, his friend George Bizos, the family has gone to court to remove Mr. Bizos as a director.

“Everyone wants a piece of the Madiba magic,” said William Gumede, who has written extensively about Mr. Mandela, using the former president’s clan name. “This is just a preview of what will come when he goes.”

The phrase “when he goes” is the polite euphemism used by anyone who dares to hint at the inevitable death of Mr. Mandela, a revered figure across the globe. Speaking about the death of an elder is considered taboo in most of South Africa’s rainbow of cultures. But Mr. Mandela’s age and fragile health have led to the increasingly acrimonious war over how he will be remembered — and what he has to pass on.

Last month, two of Mr. Mandela’s daughters sued Mr. Bizos and two other associates of their father to force them off the boards of two companies set up to sell a series of paintings Mr. Mandela had made with his handprints, one of several commercial ventures devised to raise money for him and his heirs. The Mandela family includes a sometimes squabbling assembly of three daughters from two marriages, 17 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.

The suit asserts that Mr. Bizos and two other people were improperly appointed to the boards. Mr. Bizos, a prominent human rights lawyer, appears stung by the effort to oust him; he helped defend Mr. Mandela against charges of sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the state 50 years ago and remained a close friend. The newspaper The Star quoted Mr. Bizos as saying that Mr. Mandela’s daughters “wanted to get their hands on things that should not be sold and the money in the companies.”

In a statement, Mr. Mandela’s grandchildren angrily rejected efforts to “paint our family as insensitive money grabbers with no respect,” adding that “most of us are gainfully employed, work for our own companies and run our own projects.”

Makaziwe Mandela said in an interview that “this issue that we are greedy, that we are wanting this money before my dad passes away, is all nonsense.”

She added that Mr. Bizos was “making himself as if he is the super trustee, above everybody else,” and pointed to documents that created the trust, which stipulate that money from it can be used for almost any purpose by Mr. Mandela’s descendants — buying a house or a car, starting a business, paying tuition or even taking a vacation.

Despite her father’s fame, she said, the family is not wealthy.

“This idea that somehow because we are Mandelas we are born with a diamond spoon is actually a very false idea,” Ms. Mandela said.

Ms. Mandela, who has a Ph.D. in anthropology, serves on several corporate boards and runs a wine company with her daughter, Tukwini, called House of Mandela. She said many people made money off her father’s name and image, so why should the Mandelas be prohibited from using their name?

“I don’t hear anybody criticizing the Rothschilds for using their name,” Ms. Mandela said.

The Mandelas are hardly immune to money troubles. A court ordered that a tea set, paintings and furniture owned by Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Mr. Mandela’s second wife, be auctioned off next week to pay a \$2,150 debt she owes to a private school for tuition and boarding for a relative, according to news reports.

Beyond commerce, many have tried to make political hay with Mr. Mandela’s name. The main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, recently printed materials using a photograph of Mr. Mandela embracing Helen Suzman, a pioneering white anti-apartheid politician whose party was a precursor of the alliance. The image was part of an effort to dispel the notion that the party is dominated by white people, or that it somehow supports the return of apartheid. (A recent survey found that many young black people believed this, though it is untrue.)

The A.N.C. cried foul, with one senior leader calling the use of Mr. Mandela’s image “a cynical and opportunistic exercise in propaganda.”

Helen Zille, the leader of the opposition, hit back, saying: “We cannot just sit back and allow the A.N.C.’s propaganda to falsely paint the D.A. as the party of apartheid. And we will reject the A.N.C.’s lie that if we win an election we will bring apartheid back.”

Protecting Mr. Mandela’s image has always been an onerous task. His face and name are everywhere — on South Africa’s currency, on T-shirts and clock faces, on bronze statues and in songs. While Mr. Mandela never shied from using his image and name to further causes he supported — like children’s rights, H.I.V. and AIDS research and peacemaking — fighting unauthorized commercial use costs the Nelson Mandela Foundation hundreds of thousands of dollars every year.

In many ways, Mr. Mandela’s image has never really been his own. After he was convicted in 1964, the man himself disappeared from South Africa entirely. His image, in silhouette or with prison bars superimposed over it, became an icon of the A.N.C. and its struggle against apartheid. College students across the globe tacked up posters of his face on their dormitory walls as part of the Free Mandela campaign.

“As soon as Mandela was in jail, the A.N.C. decided that he would be our hero,” said Sisonke Msimang, an activist who spent her childhood in exile because of her family’s prominence in the A.N.C. “He would be the face of our international campaign.”

When he was finally to be released from prison in 1990, one American magazine ran an article asking, “What will he look like?”

These days, Mr. Mandela wishes only to be left alone to enjoy his family, said Ms.

Mandela, his daughter. “We never had Tata, even when he went out of jail,” she said, using the Xhosa word for father. “This is the only moment we have as a family to dote on him. It is our time. I think we should be given the time to enjoy whatever years Tata has left in front of him.”