

Mandela's Death Leaves South Africa Without Its Moral Center

By LYDIA POLGREEN

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JOHANNESBURG — Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president and an enduring icon of the struggle against racial oppression, died on Thursday, the government announced, leaving the nation without its moral center at a time of growing dissatisfaction with the country's leaders.

"Our nation has lost its greatest son," President Jacob Zuma said in a televised address late Thursday night, adding that Mr. Mandela had died at 8:50 p.m. local time. "His tireless struggle for freedom earned him the respect of the world. His humility, his compassion and his humanity earned him their love."

Mr. Zuma called Mr. Mandela's death "the moment of our deepest sorrow," and said that South Africa's thoughts were now with the former president's family. "They have sacrificed much and endured much so that our people could be free," he said.

Mr. Mandela spent 27 years in prison after being convicted of treason by the white minority government, only to forge a peaceful end to white rule by negotiating with his captors after his release in 1990. He led the African National Congress, long a banned liberation movement, to a resounding electoral victory in 1994, the first fully democratic election in the country's history.

Mr. Mandela, who was 95, served just one term as South Africa's president and had not been seen in public since 2010, when the nation hosted the soccer World Cup. But his decades in prison and his insistence on forgiveness over vengeance made him a potent symbol of the struggle to end this country's brutally codified system of racial domination, and of the power of peaceful resolution in even the most intractable conflicts.

Years after he retreated from public life, his name still resonated as an emblem of his effort to transcend decades of racial division and create what South Africans called a Rainbow Nation.

"His commitment to transfer power and reconcile with those who jailed him set an example that all humanity should aspire to," a grim President Obama said Thursday evening, describing Mr. Mandela as an "influential, courageous and profoundly good" man who inspired millions — including himself — to a spirit of reconciliation.

Mr. Mandela and Mr. Obama both served as the first black leaders of their nations, and both men won the Nobel Peace Prize. But the American president has shied away from comparisons, often noting that his own sacrifices would never compare to the ones that Mr. Mandela endured.

Mr. Obama said that the world would “not likely see the likes of Nelson Mandela again,” and he noted that the former South African president had once said that he was “not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.”

Mr. Zuma did not announce the specific cause of Mr. Mandela’s death, but he had been battling pneumonia and other lung ailments for the past six months, and had been in and out of the hospital. Though his death was announced close to midnight, when most in this nation of early risers are asleep, a small crowd quickly gathered outside the house where he once lived in Soweto, on Vilekazi Street.

“Nelson Mandela, there is no one like you,” they sang, stamping their feet in unison to a praise song usually sung in joy. But in the midnight darkness, sadness tinged the melody.

“He was our father, our mother, our everything,” said Numfundo Matli, 28, a housekeeper who joined the impromptu celebration of Mr. Mandela’s life. “What will we do without him?”

His death comes during a period of deep unease and painful self-examination for South Africa.

In the past year and a half, the country has faced perhaps its most serious unrest since the end of apartheid, provoked by a wave of wildcat strikes by angry miners, a deadly response on the part of the police, a messy leadership struggle within the A.N.C. and the deepening fissures between South Africa’s rulers and its impoverished masses.

Scandals over corruption involving senior members of the party have fed a broader perception that Mr. Mandela’s near saintly legacy from the years of struggle has been eroded by a more recent scramble for self-enrichment among a newer elite.

After spending decades in penurious exile, many political figures returned to find themselves at the center of a grab for power and money. Mr. Zuma himself was charged with corruption before rising to the presidency in 2009, though the charges were dropped on largely technical grounds. He has faced renewed scrutiny in the past year over \$27 million spent in renovations to his house in rural Zululand.

Graphic cellphone videos of police officers abusing people they have detained have further fueled anger at a government seen increasingly out of touch with the lives of ordinary South Africans.

Mr. Mandela served as president from 1994 to 1999, stepping aside to allow his

deputy, Thabo Mbeki, to run and take the reins. Mr. Mandela spent his early retirement years focused on charitable causes for children and later speaking out about AIDS, which has killed millions of Africans, including his son Makgatho, who died in 2005.

Mr. Mandela retreated from public life in 2004 at the age of 85, largely withdrawing to his homes in the upscale Johannesburg suburb of Houghton and his ancestral village in the Eastern Cape, Qunu.

Just after 1 a.m. in Soweto, Lerato Motau walked down Vilekazi Street, clutching a handful of red and white roses plucked from her parents' garden. Ms. Motau, 38, had grown up down the street from the Mandela home, and had many memories of Mr. Mandela's visits after he was released from prison.

"He always had time for us kids," she said, holding the hand of her own 12-year-old daughter, up past her bedtime to witness history just as Ms. Motau was when Mr. Mandela was released from prison when she was in school.

Ms. Motau's father, Shadrack Motau, had accompanied Mr. Mandela on a tour of the neighborhood after his release. Early Friday morning, his eyes filled with sleepy sadness as he flipped through old photographs of Mr. Mandela with his daughters.

"The man had so much humility," Mr. Motau said. "He treated everyone with respect and dignity, from statesmen to children."

At a bar in the upscale suburb of Greenside, where a multiracial gaggle of college students home for the holidays drank beers and shots of tequila along a popular strip of bars, news of Mr. Mandela's death traveled quickly from one barstool to the next.

"I can't believe he's gone," said Kate Reeves, an 18-year-old first-year student at the University of Cape Town who lives in the same wealthy suburb where Mr. Mandela died. She clapped her hand to her mouth and fought back tears, reaching for her friend and college classmate Sandile Makhatho for a hug.

"This is the saddest day of my life," she said. Indeed, the friendship between Ms. Reeves, who is white, and Mr. Makhatho, who is black, would scarcely have been possible in the days before Mr. Mandela led the fight to end apartheid. Both are members of the "born free" generation, who never really knew apartheid.

"I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for Nelson Mandela," Mr. Makhatho said.

On talk radio, South Africans from around the world called in to share their memories of the man they called the father of the nation. From Brisbane, Australia, a woman spoke to Radio 702, a news station, to say that she had awakened her children to pray for Mr. Mandela. A black South African living in Alabama spoke of his experiences of race in America.

Ahmed Kathrada, an activist who was imprisoned at Robben Island along with Mr.

Mandela and was one of his closest friends, called in to the radio station to share his heartbreak at the loss of his old friend.

“He was my elder brother,” Mr. Kathrada said, his voice breaking with emotion. “Now I don’t know who to turn to.”

Michael D. Shear contributed reporting from Washington.