

The Contradictions Of Mandela

By **ZAKES MDA**

December 5, 2013

I remember Nelson Mandela. No, not the universally adored elder statesman who successfully resisted the megalomania that comes with deification, and who died Thursday at age 95, but the young lawyer who used to sit in my parents' living room until the early hours of the morning, debating African nationalism with my father, Ashby Peter Mda.

In 1944, they were among the leaders who had founded the African National Congress Youth League. These young men considered the African National Congress, which had by then existed for more than three decades, moribund and outmoded. They felt there was a need to take the liberation struggle from protest to armed struggle, and were known to shout down those they felt were "selling out" by participating in apartheid-created structures through which black people were supposed to express their political aspirations.

What struck me, even then, was that Mandela was a man of contradictions. He could be avuncular, especially to us kids, but he was also strict and disciplined. While he was a fire-breathing revolutionary who would quote Marx and Lenin at the drop of a hat, he was also a Xhosa traditionalist with aristocratic tendencies. For instance, Kaiser and George Matanzima, chiefs of the Tembu ethnic group who spearheaded the apartheid "Bantustan" system of separate territories for black South Africans, were not only his relatives but his friends as well. While many thought the Matanzima brothers had betrayed the cause of black liberation, Mandela would not thoroughly denounce them. Perhaps here we could already see the flicker of tolerance to those with opposing views for which he later distinguished himself.

It is ironic that in today's South Africa, there is an increasingly vocal segment of black South Africans who feel that Mandela sold out the liberation struggle to white interests. This will come as a surprise to the international community, which informally canonized him and thinks he enjoyed universal adoration in his country. After he initiated negotiations for the end of apartheid and led South Africa into a new era of freedom with a progressive Constitution that recognizes the rights of everyone (including homosexuals, another admirable contradiction for an African aristocrat), there was, of course, euphoria in the country. But that was a long time ago. With the rampant corruption of the current

ruling elite, and the fact that very little has changed for a majority of black people, the euphoria has been replaced with disillusionment.

The new order that Mandela brought about, this argument goes, did not fundamentally change the economic arrangements in the country. It ushered in prosperity, but the distribution of that prosperity was skewed in favor of the white establishment and its dependent new black elite. Today the political apparatchiks are the new billionaires, led by a president — Jacob Zuma — who blatantly used millions of taxpayer dollars to upgrade his private residence to accommodate his expanding harem and a phalanx of children.

The blame-Mandela movement is not by any means a groundswell, but it is loud enough in its vehemence to warrant attention. It is led by individual activists whose main platforms are Facebook, Twitter and other social media, and in its formal sense by such organizations as the September National Imbizo, which believes that “South Africa is an anti-black white supremacist country managed by the A.N.C. in the interests of white people. Only blacks can liberate themselves.” The claim is that the settlement reached between the A.N.C. and the white apartheid government was a fraud perpetrated on the black people, who have yet to get back the land stolen by whites during colonialism. Mandela’s government, critics say, focused on the cosmetics of reconciliation, while nothing materially changed in the lives of a majority of South Africans.

This movement, though not representative of the majority of black South Africans who still adore Mandela and his A.N.C., is gaining momentum, especially on university campuses.

I understand the frustrations of those young South Africans and I share their disillusionment. I, however, do not share their perspective on Mandela. I saw in him a skillful politician whose policy of reconciliation saved the country from a blood bath and ushered it into a period of democracy, human rights and tolerance. I admired him for his compassion and generosity, values that are not usually associated with politicians. I also admired him for his integrity and loyalty.

But I fear that, for Mandela, loyalty went too far. The corruption that we see today did not just suddenly erupt after his term in office; it took root during his time. He was loyal to his comrades to a fault, and was therefore blind to some of their misdeeds.

When he was president, I often wrote about the emerging patronage system and crony capitalism. To his credit, when I wrote him a long letter outlining my concerns, he phoned me within a week and arranged a meeting between me and three of his senior cabinet ministers. Although nothing of substance came of the meeting, the very fact that

Mandela listened attentively to the complaints of an ordinary citizen, and took them seriously enough to convene such a meeting, was extraordinary for any president.

In later years, however, Mandela became the victim of the very corruption I was complaining about. He was surrounded by all sorts of characters, friends and relatives, some of whom were keen to profit from his name. They include his grandson Mandla Mandela, a petty tribal chief who was widely reported to have pre-emptively sold to a television network the broadcast rights to his grandfather's funeral.

Mandela leaves a proud legacy of freedom and human rights, of tolerance and reconciliation. Alas, some of his compatriots are trampling on it. I cannot speak for him and say he was pained by what he saw happening to his country in his last days. I had not spoken with him for years before he died. But I can say that the Mandela I knew would have been pained.

Zakes Mda, a professor of creative writing at Ohio University, is the author of "Sometimes There Is a Void: Memoirs of an Outsider."