

For Mandela, Reverence, But Criticism, Too

By RICK LYMAN

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JOHANNESBURG — Nelson Mandela was deeply respected in his homeland, and almost worshiped by many for his definitive role in ending white rule and installing multiracial democracy.

But he was never above reproach, political observers say.

When Andile Mngxitama, a black-consciousness advocate and frequent critic of Mr. Mandela, fired yet another broadside at the former leader before he died — comparing him unfavorably to neighboring Zimbabwe’s authoritarian president, Robert Mugabe — it certainly caught the attention of South Africa’s political class.

“It’s not an exaggeration to say Mandela’s leadership style, characterized by accommodation with the oppressors, will be forgotten, if not rejected within a generation,” he wrote in June.

That is not, to say the least, the mainstream view here.

“The point is that it was not a popular position, but no one beat him up for it,” said Steven Friedman, a University of Johannesburg political science professor and director of the Center for the Study of Democracy.

“There isn’t this kind of mania about him here that there is in some quarters overseas,” Mr. Friedman said of Mr. Mandela. “This sanctified image of him has always been more extreme elsewhere in the world than the local attitude.”

Indeed, the picture that the world had of Mr. Mandela was as an almost saintly figure, the faultless “father of the nation.” Images of the heartfelt prayer gatherings and candlelight vigils in recent months as South Africans came to terms with his death have reinforced that view.

But Mr. Mandela was a politician, among the most transformative of his era, but still a politician. As such, he went through the usual ups and downs that characterize any political career.

“Nelson Mandela was not a saint. We would dishonor his memory if we treated him as if he was one,” Pierre de Vos, a law professor, wrote on Friday in *The Daily Maverick*, an online magazine in South Africa, arguing that Mr. Mandela’s genius lay in his

willingness to bend and compromise. “Like all truly exceptional human beings, he was a person of flesh and blood, with his own idiosyncrasies, his own blind spots and weaknesses.”

Sometimes, though, the criticisms came in oblique, roundabout ways.

“Often, criticism of Mandela was disguised as criticism of others,” said Adam Habib, vice chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. “Some of the things that his successor, Thabo Mbeki, was criticized for were actually things that Mandela had initiated or supported.”

Those who were critical of things like the government’s slow reaction to the AIDS crisis or the halting steps toward economic equality often heaped their abuse on Mr. Mbeki without acknowledging that Mr. Mandela also shared responsibility for the slowness.

Even officials in the governing party, the African National Congress, would often talk about mistakes that “we” had made, when they were actually Mr. Mandela’s own initiatives, Mr. Habib said. They simply felt that it would be more palatable among their supporters to disguise the true target of their criticism.

Still, as Mr. Mandela’s life drew to a close, there were clearly efforts from all political corners to define his legacy and claim a portion of it. And some saw political calculation at work.

“Who really gains from the elevation of a political figure into an untouchable icon?” Anthony Butler, a University of Cape Town political science professor, wrote in his column in the June 28 issue of South Africa’s Business Day newspaper. “Not Mandela himself, who does not need our plaudits. The mythmakers who claim that a leader is beyond fault are ultimately seeking to shield a whole political class, and not just one individual, from the public scrutiny upon which democracy depends.”

Mr. Mandela was certainly seen here, as he was abroad, as a figure of major historical importance. Even the dwindling bands of white right-wingers who have little good to say about him share that view.

But that does not mean he did not draw his share of fire, much of it coming from other corners of the anti-apartheid movement. Some criticized him for what they saw as an overeagerness to placate the country’s white power elite in the transition to nonracial democracy in the early 1990s and, thereafter, with being more interested in keeping economic power brokers happy, albeit with a few new black faces in the group, than in delivering economic equality to the vast majority of those still living in poverty.

“He has been criticized on chat shows, in newspaper columns and by other political leaders for his emphasis on reconciliation in the early days of the new democracy, saying

this often came at the expense of economic equality,” Mr. Habib said.

Mr. Mandela also drew fire for his failures, acknowledged by some of his own closest colleagues, as an administrator. The skills that helped him transform the nation were not the same ones required to run a government, some argued.

Others questioned his decision to prioritize tranquility over justice, arguing that his embrace of a reconciliation process left human rights crimes unpunished.

“The criticism has been that he made too many concessions, while the real victims of apartheid still have to live with the consequences,” Mr. Habib said. “He is a global icon, a great leader, but he was not perfect.”

There were limits, though, to how much criticism the society, and the ruling part, could tolerate — and from whom.

In a widely noted 2010 interview with Nadira Naipaul in *The London Evening Standard*, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela leveled blistering criticisms at her ex-husband.

“Mandela let us down,” she is quoted as saying. “He agreed to a bad deal for the blacks. Economically, we are still on the outside.”

Outraged, African National Congress leaders ordered an immediate investigation and, shortly thereafter, issued a statement calling the entire interview a “fabrication.”

Mr. Mandela was also known for his vanity. Ahmed Kathrada, an anti-apartheid activist who spent decades in prison with Mr. Mandela, said that late in his imprisonment, when the conditions had vastly improved from the early days when he had to work in a quarry, the future president became so focused on obtaining a favored brand of hair oil that he pestered every visitor to find some for him, even luminaries like the anti-apartheid activist Helen Sussman.

“He was fixated on Pantene hair oil,” Mr. Kathrada said in an interview on Friday. “When he ordered it from the warden and was told that it was no longer manufactured, he became convinced they were lying to him.” Eventually two bottles were scrounged for him.

Once the political squabbles of Mandela’s era fade, though, the museum-approved, sanctified image of him is likely to take firmer hold, observers say, though it may not grow as strong as the one of him abroad.

“To idealize a great political leader — to try to take that person out of politics and the humanity out of that person — is in the end a futile or even contradictory endeavor,” Mr. Butler wrote.

Lydia Polgreen contributed reporting.