

Winnie's failing fortunes

— ANTHONY HEARD

WINNIE MANDELA's fall reflects a wider issue than the toppling of a famous man's wife. It strikes at the heart of what is happening in this democratizing end of Africa. Former saints are now seen as sinners; and former ogres, not that bad after all.

In the hard old days of dirty war between white and black, the country's world was simple. There were the haves, who were white, and the have-nots, who were black. It was a matter of white rulers and black ruled. Depending on one's attitude (or hue), blacks or whites were right. Polarization was complete.

That was a world of awful simplicity.

The Afrikaner Nationalists held absolute sway over the majority blacks and the white liberal minority. In the process the Nationalists ennobled almost every black and liberal who fought them. And the Nationalists demonized themselves.

The Nationalists were seen by the world, and by most South Africans, as a brutal racial oligarchy intent on keeping blacks down forever. The cap fitted.

That started changing slowly with the reforms of former President P.W. Botha, who legalized black trade unions, allowed much social integration and abolished the pass laws which determined where blacks could be and work.

Life became marginally better for most blacks.

But Botha, a stern and irascible militarist, could summon neither the courage nor vision to push his reforms to the logical conclusion: the real emancipation of blacks. He tried to mix repression with reform.

Enter Winnie Mandela.

With her husband locked away seemingly for life on charges of sabotage, and most other African National Congress leaders exiled, jailed or dead, she maintained a faithful holding operation at the gates of the South African hell. Vivacious and quick-witted, she assumed the role of the Mother of the Nation, defied the authorities at every turn and was a prime victim of repression.

To chronicle what she suffered would take columns. Suffice it to say that any ordinary person subjected to that degree of harassment would require permanent psychiatric assistance.

Enter F.W. de Klerk.

He deftly squeezed Botha out of office, succeeded to the presidency and set about emancipating blacks while trying to reassure whites. He legalized all political parties including the communists, struck down repressive laws — and allowed Winnie Mandela's husband to walk out from life imprisonment. Nelson, as it were, came back from the dead.

That in retrospect was the end of Winnie Mandela as she had been known. She failed to adjust to the new times. Her style and her rhetoric were fashioned in a time-frame suited to the dirty days of Botha when, despite modern reform, whites were determined to stay on top. It was as those Botha

days came to an end when she allegedly connived in the murky deeds committed by her soccer-team bodyguard in Soweto in 1988. Youths were kidnapped and thrashed; a 14-year old boy died. The community, including some African National Congress sympathizers, was affronted, and disowned Winnie.

She was convicted by the Supreme Court last year of serious offences: kidnapping and not reporting an assault. She is appealing. Her husband stood by her throughout the trial, but tensions between them grew.

Now, in sadness, Nelson has let go of Winnie.

It seems the differences that have built up between them since his release in February 1990, have become too great and, in his early seventies, he would rather plod on without her.

In doing this, he has cut her adrift. The paradoxical charge that can be levelled against Winnie is this: When Nelson was not free, her support was total and invaluable; but, with him free, she is a liability.

Her extreme statements have cut across what he was trying to do, for instance raising the temperature of the debate when it should have been cooled. She has embroiled herself in highly controversial activities — and, in this sense, let him down.

Winnie is showing no signs of sober reflection about her political and personal style. She is buzzing around the violence-torn townships, visiting the afflicted and enchanting the dancing cohorts of black youngsters who revere her. Re-opened police inquiries into the murky Soweto events could bring her back to court.

It remains to be seen where the truth lies, indeed, whether fact can be distinguished from fiction — and dirty tricks. There has been a hyper-critical rush to judgment over the Winnie affair which has been absent from much of the media's handling of other controversial issues and personalities. This has complicated the public's assessment of the situation.

Whether she will carve for herself a meaningful place in history beyond her hardship years, seems doubtful — though the "new South Africa" promises roller-coaster surprises for almost everyone.

She is a fighter. She resigned as ANC social welfare head, but successfully held her chairmanship of the ANC Women's League in the PWV region in elections early in May.

This writer believes that a key to her future lies in how negotiations turn out. Only if there is a lurch to a really radical order (say, like Libya), could she gain substantial ground, in common with others who were irreparably radicalized by repression and also cannot adjust to new times.

But that prospect seems unlikely as her estranged husband and De Klerk grope toward a stable new order which offers no extremes and therefore a durable future for both black and white. ●