

MANDELA THE GREAT?

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Former presidents Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk

Following on from Harvard Business School's Professor Gautam Mukunda's analysis of "Indispensable" leaders (see preceding pages), *Acumen* wondered if our own legendary Madiba would have made the grade? We spoke to several contemporary politicians who worked with Mandela at the time of South Africa's transition, as well as one of the country's leading political scientists, one of its most respected journalists and a political commentator.

TIME, PLACE, CIRCUMSTANCE

Roelf Meyer, GIBS honorary professor and former minister of constitutional affairs, is credited with Cyril Ramaphosa of negotiating the transition. He says Mandela is both a unique leader and a product of time, place and circumstances. "He is a unique individual with some rare leadership qualities, rare in the sense that you find very few people who have all the virtues compounded in one person. The circumstances he went through as a freedom fighter, an imprisoned leader for a very long time and then released into the public mind at the age of 71, really brought the situation together. Where there was an opportunity for him to either prove his leadership or to fail."

Mac Maharaj, current presidential spokesperson, former cabinet minister, Robben Island prisoner and ANC exile, adds, "Madiba himself would say that he is not unique, but I think it is true that in the context that leaders in all fields of human activity are a product of time, place and circumstance." Maharaj

also notes "the person must be able to recognise the time and circumstances that call for particular action to be taken and act accordingly". Madiba, says Maharaj, recognised "that it was time for negotiation ... and pressed this need home with a firm hand".

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... HIS RECONCILIATION GESTURES GAVE SOUTH AFRICA BREATHING SPACE ...”



Few would disagree with Zibi's belief that it was Mandela's long prison sentence that turned him into a "powerful symbol of South Africa's fight for liberation" but Zibi also observes, "His imprisonment and freedom from raging ANC factional battles in exile was probably the greatest unintended gift we could have hoped for. He emerged untainted and with a clarity of mind and a powerful presence that helped him hold sway at very critical moments during the 1988-94 period".

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Habib concurs: "Madiba in 1990 was a very different man from the Madiba in 1965 when he was leader of Umkhonto we Sizwe ... I doubt he would have been able to achieve the greatness he did when he was 40 rather than at 71."

MANDELA THE MAN

Mandela "never sees unintended consequences as an obstacle, never sees himself as victim and never seeks to blame others for the circumstances that have come about," says Maharaj. "So he takes the consequences in his stride and works together with his colleagues to find the way ahead. Like in the Rivonia Trial. He stood up and took full responsibility for the consequences as the leader of Umkhonto we Sizwe even though a substantial part of the charges related to actions taken by his co-accused while he was already in prison. He shows no appetite to allocate blame ... The quality of refusing to put himself into the mode of a victim is very special in Madiba."

Sparks says the distinguishing feature of Mandela's leadership was that "he focused on the big issues. He identified the big issue as racial reconciliation and the prevention of civil war. A great leader has got to be able to delegate and identify where he is personally strongest. And that is what he did. He allowed the detail of negotiation to be dealt with by those who were better at it, like Cyril Ramaphosa".

At the time of the transition, Tony Leon was Leader of the Opposition; he's just returned from Argentina as South Africa's ambassador. Leon says Mandela's leadership was an unusual combination, "part Edwardian gentleman, part Xhosa chief, part lawyer, part guerrilla, part statesman. This added up to something much greater than the sum of his parts". Leon touches another critical point: "He also, perhaps because of his personal characteristics and experiences, had extraordinarily high levels of emotional intelligence."

A similar view comes from Zibi: "Mandela is rare as a politician in that he appears to understand very acutely the human condition and the stimuli that are needed to alter people's behaviours. He had a knack for saying and doing the right things at the right time."

What, like wearing the green No.6 Springbok jersey when the Boks won the Rugby World Cup in 1995?

"He was a master of symbolism," says Zibi. "In this area he is unparalleled. In fact, he probably would be the most successful

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GREAT LEADERS ARE
BORN IN A CONTEXT ...”

"I don't quite like the word unique, but I do think he was an exceptional leader," comments Allister Sparks, journalist and author. "I guess we would have made the transition at some point, but maybe not at that time, if it were not for him. Part of the reason for the transition at that time was because of pressure for his release. He was the right person at the right time and place."

Wits University Vice-Chancellor Designate, Professor Adam Habib, echoes Sparks' sentiments: "Great leaders are born in a particular moment and context, but the context does not produce all people as great. So I don't think you could have had a Mandela outside South Africa and particularly a Mandela of the 1970s and 80s. Great leaders are born in a context, but contexts don't automatically produce great leaders."

A different nuance comes from Midrand Group member Songezo Zibi: "Mandela is not unique for a leader who emerges in times of great difficulty in the life of any nation or peoples. There are many similar examples across the world and through time ... The time and circumstances gave him no choice but to pursue his ideals to the fullest extent possible."

advertising creative director you could find anywhere. He knew which buttons to press, when and for what effect."

Meyer, who was also in the Government of National Unity cabinet, says Mandela did a number of things against the general expectation. "I can recall that something he did at a very early stage of freedom was to visit Betsie Verwoerd, the widow of the man who put him in jail. And it was a shock to many, but at the same time he demonstrated to people that it is possible to overcome the anger and hostilities of the past ... similarly, the wearing of the Springbok jersey."

"He loved the grand gesture, the quality of surprise and understood the power of symbolism. All these came together in the Invictus moment," says Leon.

MANDELA & THE ANC

There is near-unanimity that Madiba is a product of the ANC. "The ANC did have a vision and it was very well led for many years and had a series of great leaders," says Sparks, who reminds us that "Immediately prior to Mandela, Tambo led the ANC with great skill and precision. Mandela is very much a product of the ANC."

Maharaj quotes Madiba as saying "I am what I am because of the ANC".

"He says that it is the ANC that made him. He has never been a person who says, even at the height of his power, 'I am the ANC.'" Maharaj adds that the relationship is not a one-way street: "... just as the ANC made him, he helped shape the ANC."

Another interesting observation comes from Habib, who believes that context is important here, too. "Context is not simply the structure of society, but also the ANC itself. Madiba would never have achieved the global status that he did in the 1990s had the ANC, in the late 1970s and 80s, not decided to make him the face of the ANC and of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement."

Dissent though, from Zibi, who suggests that Mandela "was formed long before he encountered the ANC. The party merely heightened his consciousness and provided a platform for him to grow".

THE LEADERSHIP LEGACY

Meyer says it's hard to think that South Africa's "miracle" transition could have been as successful without Mandela, although he notes that it was not Mandela alone (see sidebar). "His direction, leadership and role was quite obvious. And the fact that he has been recognised as the father of the nation by all today exemplifies the role he played."

Sparks dislikes the word miracle: "It was not a miracle transition. Miracles require magic. This was skilfully done. It happened at the right time, a convergence of events in the world, the collapse of the Soviet Union, international pressure, domestic pressure."

"He gave direction overall in many ways," according to Meyer. "The day he walked out of prison on 11 February 1990, if he had not given direction and leadership that day, things in South Africa could have gone very out of hand in terms of ongoing demonstrations, protests and even civil unrest. But instead he walked out, gave direction and leadership and said, let's find a negotiated settlement."

Madiba played a fundamental role in the transition, according to Habib. "... his really great contribution was to give South Africa a breathing space in the 1990s. It was a precarious

moment in South Africa's history ... his criticalness was that his reconciliation gestures gave South Africa breathing space to become an ordinary society ..." Habib comments that this breathing space came "with costs. Like the levels of inequality we live with".

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... HE WAS AN
EXCEPTIONAL LEADER.”

Maharaj believes that South Africa is harming itself by simplifying Madiba's achievements in the first democratic government. "The programme that Madiba followed ... was developed through widespread consultation, inside and outside the ANC. It was based on three aspects: nation building, reconciliation and reconstruction. Today, when we look back, we find that we have reduced the platform of his government to the issue of reconciliation. True, Madiba has been passionate about reconciliation, but we're harming ourselves by simplifying his achievements in this way.

"This single track focus on reconciliation has allowed the beneficiaries of apartheid, mainly the white community, to walk away from the challenges of building the democratic South Africa and see their life as 'business as usual'. At the same time, this leads many, if not most, in the black majority to feel short changed by this thing called reconciliation."

Zibi shares Maharaj's view. "Mandela's reconciliation project had evolved to imply that black people no longer needed to have their suffering validated, a critical aspect if you want continued support."

Maharaj concludes by pointing to what he calls "the real power of Madiba as an icon in this modern world". He asks "what makes a 20-year old in Toronto, a worker in Brazil, a villager in India and an executive in London or New York look up to Madiba? Beneath their different experiences and perspectives is the simple reality that they see in him a human being; a person with frailties and foibles, like all of us. Thus, he is more than an inspiration. He is an aspirational model ... each of us can become better people and all of us have a bit of Madiba in us" ●

THE OTHERS

Two commentators with whom *Acumen* spoke were at pains to point out that Mandela did not achieve South Africa's transition single-handed. Mac Maharaj: "... two stand out: F.W. de Klerk for recognising the writ of history and grasping the nettle; and very importantly, Oliver Tambo, then president of the ANC, who saw that negotiation was becoming a possibility and went on to lay the groundwork ..."

Tony Leon: "... it is important to note that there could not have been a Mandela (in the sense of providing a bridge between apartheid and democracy) without a de Klerk. It was the combination of them at the critical moment which gave the necessary leadership to our transition." As noted elsewhere in this article, two others are also regularly cited for their crucial role in the negotiations – ANC deputy secretary general Cyril Ramaphosa and one of our commentators, GIBS honorary professor Roelf Meyer.