

Mandela and Mugabe: Service vs Power

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Abstract

It is quite a commonplace truth to assert that one of the prominent characters who have impacted the social and political sphere of the African continent in the late century is the now departed South African leader, Nelson Mandela, referred to as the African of the century¹ by the news writer François Soudan (*Jeune Afrique hors série*, 2013). As a young militant of the African National Congress (ANC) and a committed partisan of the struggle for equality between blacks and whites in apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela's convictions made him spend an important part of his life in prison. But his hope and self-determination triumphed over the apartheid regime, and true democracy eventually found its way towards the advent of a multiracial South Africa in the early 1990s. Hailed and praised throughout the continent as the champion of democracy and a good example of proper management and detachment vis-à-vis state power, Mandela however appears to be hard to imitate. Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwean veteran who had known a similar trajectory in the struggle for the liberation of South Rhodesia fell short in completing his heroic destiny as he trapped himself in the waves of political power, up until 21 November 2017 when he was forced to quit his privileged position. Mandela and Mugabe were two committed leaders indeed. However, the ethical standards set by the one seemed to be too high for the other. This article attempts to shed light on the administrative style of the two former Heads of States, while making a comparison of their personalities with particular regard to their approach to power, in the guise of service.

Key words: Mandela, Mugabe, democracy, political power, leadership style.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The crisis of leadership which continues to threaten the South African liberation party, the African National Congress after the departure of their iconic and committed leader Mandela goes beyond the borders of the South African territory; it should rather be viewed as the whole African continent's issue. Indeed, Mandela's legacy has crossed the borders of South Africa and the ideals he had cherished and incarnated are acclaimed worldwide. Particularly in Africa, south of the Sahara desert, those Heads of states that have been his peers, his admirers and those who claim to also be involved with their "peoples" in a democratic process in their countries have however behaved contrarily. Indeed, power management by African Heads of State is questionable when considering the principles of democratic rules. The paradox here is that while they celebrate Mandela and revere him for his struggle and his sense of integrity, they are not inclined to follow his footsteps, by putting into practice in their respective countries, his lessons of invaluable detachment and humility towards political power. In conquering the supreme power after his unceasing militant struggle and lifetime sacrifice, Mandela could have stayed in power for more than the five-year term he officiated. Nothing prevented him from claiming more than one term of presidency. But the years in prison had certainly brought him to a personal realization: that even self-dedication to serving one's people has a limit. He renounced being re-elected and quit with honor, dignity and a remarkable sense of responsibility.

Meanwhile, Zimbabwe, just one border from South Africa, which faced similar colonial white occupation and settlement with South Africa, has known a rather different destiny. The hero of the liberation struggle of the country conquered the supreme power and maintained himself in power for decades. The merit brought to Robert Mugabe upon winning the liberation struggle over the British colonial occupation progressively turned into dictatorship and servitude of his own people. After several years in power, the hero nearly became an outcast in his own country. This paper beams the spotlight on Zimbabwe under the political ruling of Mugabe and Mandela's era in South Africa. Apparently, the two leaders had the same mission and they could be said to have fought the same struggles; however they ended their missions differently. In South Africa,

¹ My own translation

Mandela voluntarily renounced power and retired with honor and admiration, while in next door Zimbabwe, Mugabe destroyed his own legacy by perpetuating his stay in power until the ultimate humiliation of November 2017, when the army forced him to step down.

II. METHODOLOGY

Different but complementary approaches have been used to carry out this comparative analysis. Dealing with historical facts, we have also used the documentary analysis approach. The data and information collected from books, magazines and other sources, some online, and from the mass media in general, have been processed to accommodate this approach. Furthermore, as a qualitative research, the diversity of sources and the cross checking of information have also helped in the construction of the arguments to verify or contradict the main hypotheses underlying this research.

Written from a qualitative perspective, and having previously carried out a research work on the African National Congress (ANC) and the emergence of a democratic South Africa², this work may tend to be biased. However, rather than focusing on the man, we are concerned with spotlighting the charisma and achievements of Nelson Mandela as a leader, during and after his administration, as opposed to Robert Mugabe's demonstrated attachment to power during his own tenure.

III. RESULTS

A- Veteran Mugabe: A Half Hero

On the occasion of Nelson Mandela's funeral, President Mugabe allegedly announced that he would like the people of Africa to treat and remember him as they did Mandela on the day of his own death. The departed Morgan Tsvangirai, his renowned political opponent however ironically answered him that he should first accept to start with twenty-seven years in prison for such a wish to be accepted and fulfilled.

There are several points of resemblance between Mandela and Mugabe. At the very least, it can be said that: (1) the countries of the two political figures experienced the same white minority rule over the blacks; (2) their militant activism propelled them to the front of their struggle for liberation; (3) they spent several years in prison for their commitment to the liberation of their peoples, and eventually came out as heroes of the guerilla warfare which resulted in the independence of their respective countries. 1979 marked the end of the war of independence championed by Mugabe as the hero and one year later, he won the general elections in South Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) and became inaugurated as Prime Minister of the newly independent Zimbabwe. Mugabe has remained in power ever since, strengthening his position as the head of the nation, and crushing any attempted opposition to his power. In 1987, Mugabe became the president of Zimbabwe and enjoyed a somewhat legitimate popularity in his country and abroad, while Mandela was still in prison. But as soon as the situation changed in the neighboring South Africa with Mandela's liberation from prison, the world turned its eyes on the man who had spent all of twenty-seven years behind bars, a time period more than twice the length of Mugabe's stay in prison.

It is understandable that Mugabe would feel a bit jealous of Mandela and his seemingly unfading popularity ever since, even after his departure from office. But it should be evident that if the Zimbabwean veteran and hero of the war of independence has failed to keep the esteem of his people, he has nobody to blame but himself and his insatiable thirst for power. On Mugabe's apparently unpredicted rapid downfall, Norimitsu Onishi in one article entitled Behind Mugabe's Rapid Fall: A Firing, a Feud and a First Lady, explains: "The rapid fall of Zimbabwe's president, whose legendary guile and ruthlessness helped him outmaneuver countless adversaries over nearly four decades, probably has surprised no one more than Robert Mugabe himself" (New York's Times, 2017)³.

Since the independence of the country in 1980, he has been in control of power. Shifting from the position of Prime Minister in 1980 to Presidency seven years later, Mugabe was re-elected time and again (1990, 1996, 2002 and 2008), even with less panache. After nearly forty years in power, veteran Mugabe still wanted more, while "the Man" whom he demanded to be equally compared to had been content with only one term of administration.

It is a constant wonder why South Africa's (good) democratic experiences have not spilled over to neighboring Zimbabwe. The answer might be in Mugabe's own posture; an attitude which progressively eroded his own margin of certainty that he kept right up to the fateful month of November 2017 when the incredible occurred. His wife Grace's presidential ambitions to take over from her husband eventually showed up to be an ungraceful act for both of them.

² My PH.D research topic, defended at the Abomey-Calavi University (Benin) in 2015.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/19/world/africa/robert-mugabe-zimbabwe.html>

B- Remembering Mandela

It took South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) a long time to reach the historical date of 27 April 1994. Ever since however, the date has continued to be celebrated each year as Freedom Day, in remembrance of the first multiracial vote ever cast in South Africa.

The African National Congress (ANC) would be void and even inconsistent, if one does not take into account Nelson Mandela's contributions as a militant, a prisoner and later on as the elected president of the nation. Indeed, in the course of the history of the struggle for liberation in South Africa, the ANC as a political organization in its achievements had come to be somehow confounded with Mandela himself. Not that the party's life as a whole could be restricted to a single person's life, but starting from some time in the fight for freedom, and even up to his late departure in 2013, Mandela had incarnated the life, the ideology and destiny of the party which in turn somehow contributed to making him what he had been: a committed militant, a mass leader, a rebel, an activist, a prisoner, a martyr and eventually a reference figure in the history of his country.

Mandela joined the African National Congress at the age of twenty-six, thus starting, probably without his knowing, a long and tumultuous political activism career that would lead him to spend more than one fourth of his life behind bars. The year 1961 marked a turning point in Mandela's vision for better living conditions and demands of equality for his people. Indeed, after he realized that the nonviolent struggle had its limits, Mandela and some other fellows founded the military wing of the ANC and called it "Umkhonto we Sizwe"⁴. He coordinated a sabotage campaign against government military targets, and together they made plans for a possible guerrilla war if sabotage failed to end apartheid. From 1962, Mandela got arrested several times, up till June 1964 when he started serving out his life imprisonment jail term.

Acceding to power with nearly 63% of the votes cast three decades later, Mandela and the ANC were then holding their legitimate revenge over the Whites (British and Boers) who had had their round of controlling state power until then. Indeed, though the British and the Boers had united to form the Union of South Africa since 1910 and had welded into a Republic later on (1961), this was done solely to the detriment of their common enemies (the Blacks).

On the eve of Mandela's inauguration as the president of the country, South Africa could be compared to a broken pot - an edifice in ruins which the newly established administration had to rebuild for the whole entity to stand as one unit. The years of negotiation generated a common agreement from the parties. A transitional constitution that would govern the country for a five-year transitional period was drafted. But this was not enough.

It is obvious that in 1994, Mandela and the ANC had inherited a country sharply divided by racial tensions and several years of exploitation and injustice committed by one people over another. The country was visibly in need of a healing balm, in whatever form, to overcome its trauma and recover from decades of permanent insecurity, brutality and police repressions. The proposed therapy came from the ANC under the leadership of Mandela; they designed a mechanism that could enable people, Blacks and Whites alike, to come before an audience to relieve their minds and attempt to free their hearts from years of guilt. The mechanism became known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Facing the unalienable task of reconstruction of a country in ruins socially, Mandela and the ANC opted for the appeasement of the ensuing social tension. The revenge syndrome arising from winners' justice was contained and carefully avoided. Instead of remaining in power for long years to pay back to their oppressors what they as a people had endured, Mandela and the ANC opted for institutional mechanisms to ease the social tension.

IV. DISCUSSION

Service or power: who deserves the wreath?

While one of the two protagonists spent only five years to impact his population, of course with a preceding long career of political activism and struggle for equality, the other one hung on to power for nearly four decades, with some mitigated achievements eventually. Comparing Mandela to Mugabe may seem unrealistic at first sight. However, the lauded achievements of one could be less brilliant if they did not have their counterpart on the other side - one could liken it to comparing quality to quantity.

Upon coming to power, a Head of State's inauguration is comparable to a contract that is being signed between himself and his compatriots, with the country's constitution serving as the basis of agreement. But in the majority of cases, especially in Africa, Heads of States are more prone to seek ways and means to continually modify the constitution, in order to maintain themselves in power.

While agreeing with the fact that each people has its unique story and historical trajectory, it is also true that there are values which are universally recognized, and this is particularly true with regards to Mandela's legacy to Africa and to the world in general.

⁴ The phrase means "The spear of the nation" in the Zulu and Xhosa languages in South Africa.

Why did Mugabe fail to rise to the stature of his “unconscious” hero? He failed to leave power and retire while it was still possible to do so. Actually, the Zimbabwe African National Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF, Mugabe’s political party) and the whole Zimbabwe to a larger extent did not lack people capable of replacing the more than ninety-year-old President and make him take advantage of a deserved retirement after nearly forty years in power. Meanwhile, a mere glance at what is happening next door in South Africa in the political field shows that since the country shifted to multiracial elections in 1994, the ANC has conquered political power. Moreover, the party continues to control political power despite the internal divisions in the midst of Mandela’s followers. Mugabe failed to foresee and prepare even his own survival by enabling an internal alternation of power within his political party. It is regrettable that President Mugabe did not allow himself and his country Zimbabwe to benefit from South Africa’s good example.

Considering Nelson Mandela’s single tenure (five years), one is tempted to assert he achieved more than Robert Mugabe’s long stay in power (37 years). While South Africa missed Mandela who spent only one term in office, Mugabe in next-door Zimbabwe visibly exasperated his compatriots by his long stay in power, obviously planning to die in office. Granted that Mugabe was praised for revitalizing land reforms in favor of blacks in the late 1990s, though by brutalizing white land owners, long gone were the times when he could claim a real control or esteem of his compatriots. As a matter of fact, he jeopardized the Zimbabwean local economy, and what was to have been a solution to a real inequality problem became the source of other social tensions. On the South African side, Blacks were also confronted by land reform problems. However, Mandela wisely dealt with the issue by postponing its settlement to the next administration. His main concern being the unification of the different peoples under the rainbow banner at the time, Mandela visibly foresaw the danger that could arise from any attempt of brutal land dispossession from the whites. There is no denying that Mandela did not achieve all his goals before he quit the presidency of his country. Nevertheless, his five-year tenure seems to have had a far more positive impact on his country than Mugabe’s annoying thirty-seven year stay in power. Mandela quit power willingly and with honor, Mugabe was chased from power by a “smart” coup d’état.

V. CONCLUSION

Nelson Mandela was actually made of flesh and blood like any other human being. He had his flaws, imperfections and merits too. In his own words: “I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.” (Rice University, Houston, 1999). But through personal commitment, he succeeded in making his values transcend all the unavoidable weaknesses which are the common features of all human beings. Moreover, he succeeded in converting all his values into an ideal which he now placed at the service of his people. He was even ready to sacrifice his life for the liberation of his people, while Robert Mugabe, his contemporary ruler, was scheming to perpetuate himself in power and became an albatross around his compatriot’s necks. One was for service, the other was for power. We make bold to say that the Mandela model is what the African continent requires for good management of state power at the upper level. Unfortunately, so far, there has only been one of his kind!

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