



Mandela as public face of the African National Congress¹

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During the early 1960s the African National Congress took a strategic decision to use multi-lateral organisations such as the Pan African Freedom Movement of East, Central and Southern Africa (PAFMECSA) and the United Nations as sites to pursue the struggle for national liberation. The General Assembly's Special Committee on Apartheid became the specific focus of many of the ANC activities and offered badly needed access to the international community. In July 1963, for example, Duma Nokwe, Robert Resha and Tennyson Makiwane made this proposal to the Special Committee:

All countries should...implement immediately the resolutions adopted at the seventeenth session of the General Assembly which included a request that all members break diplomatic relations with South Africa...boycott all South African goods and refrain from selling anything to South Africa...the UN should demand the immediate release of all political prisoners...banned persons.²

Nelson Mandela's demeanour – including his impeccable attitude of mutual respect for his colleagues – was praiseworthy; he harboured no personal ambitions to oust the exiled Tambo from the ANC leadership. This is evident in Mandela's diary entry of Wednesday, 1 February 1962, which later formed part of the apartheid state's evidence against him during the Rivonia Trial. It records a pre-conference planning meeting between Mandela and his colleagues in Dar es Salaam. They were about to depart for Addis Ababa to attend a conference convened by the PAFMECSA to be held from 2–10 February 1962. Mandela, who was then the commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the ANC, was appointed by his colleagues to address this important meeting on behalf of the ANC, instead of Tambo, who, as the then deputy president of the organisation formed part of the official delegation, as Chief Albert Luthuli, the president of the ANC was in South Africa. Mandela was uneasy about this arrangement and wrote in his diary:

... in the evening, OR [Tambo] ... Mzwayi [Piliso] and I have a discussion and they suggest I should lead the delegation. I feel, however, that this may undermine OR's position and affect his weight in his general work [for the ANC]. We eventually reach a compromise [and consensus on the matter]³.

Mandela successfully addressed the conference which was opened by Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and his paper was subsequently adopted by the PAFMECSA conference as an official record on the current situation in apartheid South Africa.

Giving Mandela the platform at the conference indicates that as early as the 1960s Tambo and other members of the ANC's executive committee regarded Mandela as the public face of the organisation - a status that would be officially confirmed during the early 1980s. But Mandela always insisted that the leader of the ANC was OR Tambo and therefore he was accountable to him. It is worth elaborating the fact that Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Wilton Mkwayi and other leaders respected him profoundly and felt honoured to be led by him. In return, Tambo later supported efforts to use Mandela, through the Release Mandela Campaign, as a unifying symbol of the anti-colonial struggle for liberation. It was a clear case of mutual affection, displaying the human side of the liberation struggle⁴. In fact the official title of the campaign established in 1980 was "Release Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners".

However, a collective is a collection of individuals and there are times in the life of a political movement where individual leaders embody some of the outstanding qualities one would expect from an astute leader. According to Mandela, the ANC had been extremely fortunate in this regard when past leaders are placed under scrutiny. Mandela had these affectionate words to say about O.R. Tambo:

It is a phenomenal leader who can succeed in exile to keep united a vast multiracial organisation with divergent schools of thought, with a membership deployed in distant continents, and a youth seething with anger at the repression of their

people; a youth who believe that anger alone without resources and proper planning can help overthrow a racist regime. Oliver Tambo achieved all this. To political and common law prisoners inside the country, to foreign freedom fighters, diplomats, Heads of State, O.R. was acknowledged as a shining example of a smart and balanced leader who was sure to help restore the dignity of the oppressed people and put their destiny in their [own] hands⁵.

Release Mandela Campaign

In 1980, the ANC leadership officially called on its structures and supporters inside the country to embark on a Release Mandela Campaign. Percy Qoboza, the redoubtable editor of the *Sunday Post* in Johannesburg, launched the initiative in an editorial on 9 March 1980. He called on his readers to sign a petition and more than 86 000 responded, drawing in the support of many organisations and prominent leaders. A Release Nelson Mandela Committee was formed that same month⁶. Why was the official establishment of the campaign projecting Mandela as the movement's public face necessary?

The answer is provided by the ANC's strategic decision to focus on the importance of international solidarity as one of the four most important pillars of the struggle for national liberation in South Africa. For the ANC, the question arose during the early 1960s: How could international solidarity be nurtured and then sustained for the duration of the liberation struggle in apartheid ruled South Africa? The challenge was for the ANC to develop a multi-faceted strategy to strengthen its international appeal and to consolidate this burgeoning solidarity with the support of various social movements, non-governmental organisations, multi-lateral organisations such as the United Nations (UN), Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Non Aligned Movement. This also included the support of various governments throughout the world.⁷

With Kwame Nkrumah spearheading international solidarity during the late 1950s and the anti-apartheid movement in England following suit, the exponential growth

of the global anti-apartheid movement meant that the ANC had to fine-tune its strategy to be disseminated to the wider world. Later, in addition to economic sanctions, sport and cultural boycotts entailed using public history and other new sites of the struggle for national liberation. These new sites included the mass media, ANC journals such as *Sechaba* and *Mayibuye*, banners, posters, placards, stickers, t-shirts, theatre, drama, protest songs and dance including musicians and performance artists such as Amandla, Miriam Makeba, Harry Belafonte and Hugh Masekela.

But the challenge still remained that an engaging public face was needed by the liberation movement to further propel it to new heights. The answer may have been found in the rising influence of television as a tool of mass communication and its massive impact on US politics during the 1960s. In fact one has to take into cognisance the fact that television became a central part of American life in the 1950s. Moreover, technological advances made television sets less expensive and accessible to consumers throughout the US and therefore by the 1960s the majority of the households in America had a television set. Thus the television became a part of everyday life of the American people. As sales boomed there were new opportunities for broadcasters and political parties. This was because politics in most parts of the world, particularly in the West, were becoming more personalised. If one analyses the US elections of 1960 - the presidential race to the White House involving Richard Nixon and John Kennedy - and the election of subsequent US presidents - it is evident that it was far easier for television and related forms of broadcasting media in the US to focus on a particular individual rather than on entire national executive committees of the Democratic Party or Republican Party.

It is worth emphasising the point that the 1960 election was the closest in history despite Kennedy's stirring rhetoric and apparent triumph in televised political debates. In their book entitled *Politics and Television*, Gladys and Kurt Lang write that in 1960:

Richard M. Nixon and John F.

Kennedy were the first presidential candidates to appear together before the television cameras. Four times - altogether four hours - within a span of four weeks they answered questions put to them by a panel of four newsmen. In their first encounter, on September 26 in Chicago, and on October 27 in Washington D.C., and October 21 in New York, the two men spoke from the same studio. On October 13, when Nixon was in Los Angeles and Kennedy was in New York, they met each other at a distance - through split-screen technique. Judged by the audience they reached, the broadcast was a huge success. Between 65 and 70 million watched any one telecast; somewhere between 85 and 120 million were estimated to have witnessed at least one of the four (television broadcasts)⁸.

Indeed, from the 1960s onwards it gradually became clear that in terms of a sound political strategy and in order to appeal to voters, a public face representing a leader of a given political party had to be the focal point of a political campaign that called for widespread grassroots support of the party's policies and political programmes. This was also the case in Europe which had to adopt the US example regarding the impact of television on the political fortunes of rival political parties. As an example, both the Labour and Conservative parties in Britain mimicked their US counterparts and used the television during political campaigns in the 1960s. It was courting disaster to organise a political campaign for the president of the USA or the prime minister of the United Kingdom by using the collective draw card of a given political party national executive council. But some in the Congress Alliance argued that in terms of promoting inclusivity and transparency this was still possible concerning the struggle for national liberation in South Africa. The exiled ANC disagreed with this viewpoint because it was becoming increasingly difficult for the liberation movement to promote its international solidarity campaign by focusing on only the Congress Alliance as a collective or its national executive committee as a

group.

It became obvious to the leadership of the ANC that the advent of multimedia, particularly television as a mass communication tool was not merely a passing fad. But there were questions which needed answers.

Firstly, was it correct to identify one individual to promote the struggle for liberation in South Africa? If the answer was yes, would not the ANC and allies create a situation where the cult of the personality would be the order of the day, as had happened in the Soviet Union with Joseph Stalin; in Cuba with Fidel Castro; and in China with Chairman Mao Tse Tung? It was obvious that if one wanted an influential international solidarity campaign to succeed, one could not just have a general campaign such as: 'free all political prisoners incarcerated in South African prisons by the apartheid regime' – end of story – however noble this human rights ideal was! That would suffice to intellectualise such ideals in abstract terms. But how would one get the international community and democrats across the racial divide to focus on that noble issue without identifying one individual to become the symbol and the 'public face' of that concerted political campaign? As argued earlier, a formal decision was adopted by the exiled National Executive Committee of the ANC during the early 1980s to assign this role to Mandela. Immediately, the international community and members of the anti-apartheid movement in various countries were focused on Mandela who became the symbol of all political prisoners, not only in South Africa but in other parts of the world too. In Marxist terms the identification of Mandela as the public face of the liberation struggle could be defended from a Marxist view about the relationship between the particular and the general.

What were the circumstances behind the choice of Mandela by the ANC to play such a crucial role?

- Mandela was the ideal choice because he was the first leader of MK, the military wing of the ANC. He had also spearheaded the All-in-Africa Conference held in South Africa in 1961 - defying the

apartheid regime's security forces after the Sharpeville Massacre. Furthermore, by the 1960s he had already shown signs of remarkable leadership potential within the organisation. Those who knew him and had worked with him in South Africa argued that he possessed charismatic qualities; qualities that were essential in a leadership role. He had what we call gravitas, a magnetic personality, so much so that when he entered a hall or a meeting, he immediately became the focus of attention.

- Mandela already had a larger than life image among the majority of the oppressed; they referred to him as the 'Black Pimpernel' and had unbounded admiration for his exploits in outwitting the regime's security forces while he was operating in the ANC's underground during the early 1960s and underwent military training outside the borders of South Africa. Henceforth, the majority of the people were already talking about 'Mandela the revolutionary'. Furthermore, his secret sojourns elsewhere on the African continent and the links he had established with other nationalist struggles and leaders, stood him in good stead.
- However much the apartheid racist regime tried to destroy his name, his courageous and fearless conduct as a principled member of the ANC during the Rivonia Trial served to elevate and augment his international stature. Mandela's dignified conduct at this trial was underscored by his now famous (and often quoted) statement that he was ready to die for the cause. Therefore the ANC was certainly not taking an unknown figure into the international arena.
- Very interestingly, if one looks at the Mass Democratic Movement after the release of Mandela and other political prisoners, no one in the ANC disputed the leadership of O.R. Tambo by pursuing factional politics and agendas. That says something about their level of political consciousness, maturity and understanding of the challenges that faced the banished organisation.

There was no overt animosity in the leadership structure and this was an important reason why the Release Mandela Campaign achieved its goals.

- The drive to garner international solidarity would not have enjoyed the same impact if relationships had been fractious on the decision to use Mandela as the public face of the campaign. To be sure there were instances when the leadership at Robben Island had their squabbles – Harry Gwala, Oom Govan Mbeki had sharp differences with Mandela. But these were internal dynamics that were duly resolved in routine organisational structures.
- Mandela was highly principled and grounded as far as the political traditions of the ANC were concerned. For example, when the devious apartheid regime tried to set a divide-and-rule trap to besmirch his reputation, he saw right through it. Pretoria sent his cousin Chief Matanzima (the leader of the Transkei Bantustan) and others to try and convince him to forsake the struggle as an individual and in this way 'buy' his freedom. He would have none of it and bluntly refused the offer. His forthright political principles further convinced the ANC to structure the campaign for the release of political prisoners around Mandela.
- Even if the oppressed in South Africa did not express it loudly, the fact of the matter was that Mandela's name resonated with them and they appreciated and understood the great sacrifices he and other political prisoners had made to realise the liberation cause.
- The Release Mandela Campaign was inclusive although it bore Mandela's name. All the posters, t-shirts, placards, memorabilia, banners, flags, stickers, protest songs etc. proclaimed the release not only of Nelson Mandela but also of other well-known political prisoners such as Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni Dennis Goldberg, Wilton Mkwayi, and so forth.
- In hindsight, there was also the element of mystique that surrounded

Mandela at the time and continues to do so into his twilight years. The ANC had no real photographs or other forms of images of him since his incarceration on Robben Island except the one with Sisulu. This perhaps contributed to the aura and interest that fuelled the international campaign.

- All these factors culminated in the famous Release Mandela music concert in Hyde Park, London, in the late 1980s when the message spread across the world was the release of political prisoners in South Africa. Had the ANC not been able to introduce the political element as the cornerstone of this hugely successful extravaganza, it would have become just another popular music concert. International artists and music stars such as Simple Minds, Tracy Chapman, Joan Armatrading, UB 40, Eurhythmics, Whitney Houston, George Michael and Stevie Wonder, to name a few, participated.

But it is important for us to guard against concluding that the ANC was unique and exceptional in using the tactical strategy of harmonising the individual and collective imperatives in a given struggle for political emancipation.

The international context: Latin America and South East Asia as case studies

For example, in the case of the politically oppressed in Latin America, particularly Chile, the World Communist Movement adopted a similar political strategy and made an international call for the release of Luis Corvalán, the long-time leader of the Chilean Communist Party whose support was critical to the rise in 1970 of Salvador Allende, the first elected Marxist head of state in the Western Hemisphere. Corvalán will be remembered in the west as a high-profile political prisoner in General Augusto Pinochet's regime of terror. He was subsequently exchanged for the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky in 1976.

Although there were many other Chilean political prisoners incarcerated in jail, the Soviet Union and others

launched a concerted campaign for Corvalán's release. The call for Corvalán's freedom became the symbol of Chilean resistance. When he was finally set free Corvalán travelled to the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic and other socialist countries to thank those who had supported him so valiantly. Corvalán also attended international conferences and was one of the first political prisoners to publicly support the call for the release of Mandela and other South African political prisoners.

Another interesting case study is that of Ananias Maidana, the former general secretary of the Communist Party of Paraguay. He served more than twenty years as a political prisoner under the violent dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. The Paraguayan regime was exceptionally repressive at the time but the international solidarity movement was unable to build an effective campaign for his release. The World Communist Movement and others demanded that he be set free but could not sustain a specific campaign to this end. Yet Maidana's case was just as deserving as those of Corvalán and Mandela. He served a long term of imprisonment just as Mandela did and was just as courageous. The crucial difference was that the ANC, as a liberation movement, was able to mobilise its struggle around Mandela in a manner that no political organisation in the world had ever done before or since.

In terms of the geopolitics of the Cold War in South East Asia – in particular the freedom struggle in Vietnam – the relationship between the individual and the collective was also identified as vitally important. It was quite clear that Ho Chi Minh was a central figure in Vietnam's international solidarity campaign. His name featured in slogans, protest songs, etc. But of course General Giap was also prominent because of his tremendous capacity as a symbol of guerrilla warfare and a famed military leader who held the invading forces at bay. It was not surprising that the ANC established a fraternal relationship with their Vietnamese counterparts. During the late 1970s the ANC's Politico-Military Strategy Commission, led by the ANC's president, Oliver Tambo,

and made up of Thabo Mbeki, Joe Modise, Moses Mabhida, Joe Gqabi and Joe Slovo, was invited by their political colleagues to undertake a study tour in Vietnam. After the visit, the Commission submitted its report (also known as The Green Book/Theses on our Strategic Line) to the ANC's national executive committee in March 1979⁹.

To conclude this article which mainly focuses on the relationship between an individual and a collective in contemporary politics, when Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, there were internal dynamics in the liberation movement that might have scuppered his ascendancy to the presidency of both the ANC and the country. But this did not happen, because Mandela's colleagues in the ANC made it possible for him to reach the pinnacle of politics and assume the presidency. To say this is not to downplay Mandela's personal role in his achievement. It also says a great deal about the ANC's leadership maturity and level of political consciousness. The collective and consultative traditions of the ANC proved invaluable during Mandela's term as the first president of the democratic Republic of South Africa. These traditions, as much as Mandela's charismatic personality, shaped the style and the achievements of his brief time in office. ■

References:

- ¹ This paper benefitted immensely from extensive oral history interviews with Essop Pahad conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu, SADET Oral History Project.
- ² UN General Assembly, *Official Records*, Resolution 1761, XVII Session, 6 November 1962.
- ³ South African National Archives (hereafter SANA), Transvaal Province Depot (hereafter TPD), Criminal Case (CC) 253/64 (Rivonia Trial), Exhibit 17.
- ⁴ For such a viewpoint, see 'Oliver Tambo', speech delivered by Mandela at the funeral of O.R. Tambo, 2 May 1993, in K. Asmal et al., *Nelson Mandela, from Freedom to the Future: Tributes and Speeches*, (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2003), 489–492.
- ⁵ Mandela, *Conversations with Myself*, 345.
- ⁶ See for example, 'For the sake of SA, free Nelson Mandela', *Post*, 21 March 1980; 'Release Mandela call is growing rapidly', *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 June 1980; 'Churches must save the soul of the nation by supporting the campaign to free Mandela – or commit an act of treason against God', *Post*, 23 March 1980; 'Worldwide calls to free Mandela', *Post*, 12 October 1980; 'Swapo joins Mandela call', *Post*, 6 April 1980; 'Free Mandela say Tanzania and Kenya', *Post*, 13 April 1980.
- ⁷ See SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 3, International Solidarity* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010).
- ⁸ G.E. Lang and K. Lang, *Politics and Television* (Beverly Hills: SAGE, 1984); G. and K. Lang, *Voting and Nonvoting* (Boston,: Blaisdell, 1968); T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).
- ⁹ <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mk/green-book.html>