Nelson Mandela's Long Walk

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NELSON MANDELA'S BEST-SELLING autobiography, published in 1994, is titled *Long Walk to Freedom*. It tells the powerful story of the journey of a rural Transkei boy who was a cow-herd and son of a deposed tribal chief, to guerilla fighter to decades-long prisoner on an island fortress and then to the first Black and democratic president of his nation, South Africa.

This story came at a time when the world was witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union, the toppling of statues of many socialist icons and the quagmire of many post-colonial states in Africa. Mandela's story was rightfully seen as one example of vindication for resistance, righteousness, principle and steadfastness. With the African National Congress's victory seen as a rare move forward during the 1990s, it reminded us all that to sacrifice for justice will finally find redemption.

Often written out of this story are the sustained rebellions by millions of South Africans that were to lead to Mandela's release from prison. The 1973 Durban workers' strikes, the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement, the 1976 Soweto student uprising and the rebellions of the 1980s, all put the regime on the back-foot.

The international sanctions movement caused a run on the banks in 1985 that contributed to white business breaking with Pretoria and exploring terms with the liberation movement. Reeling from resistance and economic crisis, the apartheid regime opened talks with Mandela.

It was one of the ironies of the mid-1980s that those who marched in the streets of South Africa saw non-collaboration as a central plank of resistance. For them, negotiation with the regime was outside of any genuine liberation movement's organizational mandate.

By agreeing to meet with representatives of the regime, Mandela was already playing a lone card. Many in his own exiled movement were shocked by this move.

Running through the speeches and banners of the internal rebellion was a sense that apartheid and capitalism were feeding off each other, and that the destruction of the former would "grow over" and destroy the latter. Our theories posited the existence of a strange and unique creature, racial capitalism. Our strategy was that an obsidian knife in the heart of apartheid oppression would cause the dragon of capitalism to slowly disintegrate. It was a time of monsters, tyrants, insurrection and the seizure of state power.

Nationwide, there were marches, protests and consumer boycotts. In the economic heartland of the country, the Vaal triangle, unions and community organizations united in a three-day stay-away in 1984, catalyzing wave after wave of mass strikes and protests.

Through the states of emergency, tens of thousands took to the streets to destroy state attempts at co-optation through the tri-cameral system, which sought to bring Indians and Coloureds as junior partners into the system, as well as the Black Local Authorities run by puppets in the African townships.

This was my generation, which knew mass organization, the constant fear of imprisonment, the sense of a regime unable to quell rebellion, of all things possible.

In 2013, it is difficult to capture the impact of the 1980s on a whole generation of activists. Apartheid could not imprison us. Cross-racial alliances, reading groups, all night meetings, building one street at a time. These were part of everyday life.

Dealing with Business

During this period, Mandela's clandestine talks with the regime continued. He was moved from Pollsmoor prison to Victor Verster with his own cook and swimming pool. He was taken for walks on the beach, as the regime prepared him for release. These talks with the regime took place behind the backs of his closest comrades, who were cut off from him.

The regime believed that, unlike those who marched in the streets and faced the barrage of bullets and lengthy periods of detention, Mandela was a man they could talk to. While he stuck to "one person, one vote in a unitary state" as a bottom-line demand for democracy, he appeared open to keeping the fundamentals of the accumulation system intact. The dragon would get a make-over.

There were imponderables. What was the ANC in exile thinking? Big business seemed to be sure of the ANC's commitment to a deal. They led the way, meeting the ANC in exile in 1985, soon realizing that it was an organization they could do business with.

Gavin Reilly, Chairman of Anglo-American Corporation, led a delegation of top representatives of South African monopoly capital to Lusaka to talk with the ANC leadership. He reflected on that meeting, that "he had the impression the ANC was not 'too keen' to be seen as 'marxist' and that the ANC leaders had a good understanding 'of the need for free enterprise."' Reilly's summation was to prove incredibly insightful, if you replace the words "free enterprise" with "prerogatives of monopoly capital."

There was another imponderable. The internal insurgency had the potential to derail the Afrikaner regime and white capital's best laid plans. The benefits of free enterprise did not feature in their vocabulary. But in that crucial period between Mandela's release in 1990 and the elections of 1994, the ANC skilfully absorbed the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM).

COSATU, the main labor federation, acknowledged the ANC as the leading force in the alliance that included the South African Communist Party. Both these organizations were allowed to nominate a slate of members to be put on the ANC's election list. Many of these representatives were to become notorious for their embrace of macro-economic conservatism and overseeing the privatization of state assets.

The internal regiments who tipped the balance in the liberation movement's favor were outflanked. The pace of liberation set in the townships streets of the 1980s was been slowly moved into the boardroom. The balance of forces was shifting. The ANC was eating away at the Nats' (National Party's — ed.) apartheid machine. At the same time, Capital, outside of the calculations of the MDM in the '80s, was eating into the ANC.

The long march to freedom was gathering speed, but what was its direction?

The ANC was to produce stability for capital — and a consequent 10% decline in the ratio of wages to profits — during the Mandela and Mbeki presidencies. This, the apartheid regime could not offer. There were moments when the carefully crafted script called for ad-libbing. But the ANC was able to turn on the tap of mass mobilization to release tensions and then turn it off.

The April 1993 assassination of Chris Hani (an ANC leader murdered by a white supremacist — ed.) was one particular moment. But the ANC shrewdly managed this potentially explosive event. Mandela was key. He writes in Long Walk to Freedom:

"We adopted a strategy to deal with our own constituency in the ANC. In order to forestall outbreaks of retaliatory violence, we arranged a week-long series of mass rallies and demonstrations throughout the country. This would give people a means of expressing their frustration without resorting to violence. Mr de Klerk and I spoke privately and agreed that we would not let Hani's murder derail the negotiations."

Mandela at the Helm

Why Mandela? We wanted a messiah to give us direction and hope, after the years in which life was tenuous, fragile, suspended on the edge of disintegration. We wanted to believe in good men, in just policies, in a caring, inclusive society. At the tip of Africa, where for so long we had been imprisoned by race, where ceilings were placed on what we could achieve because of the color of our skin, and our imaginations had been ground down by both subtle and crude repressions, it seemed we could now sweep these barriers away.

With Mandela at the helm, we were on the move. It was a time of embracing, of grand gestures, of style and the possibility of everyday freedom, whatever the structural and historical constraints. For those of us who had lived under the stop-watch of race, whose fathers and mothers knew only stigmatization, our lives compressed into tight racial corners, we too it seemed were released from long-term imprisonment.

The first years after the Mandela release were electrifying. All over people who felt trapped by apartheid, by the immediacy of making do or destroying the system, now felt they were living in history. Madiba magic touched us all releasing the spell cast over us for so long.

Much was initially promised. Nelson Mandela's short walk through the gates of Victor Verster prison meant more than the beginning of the defeat of apartheid. Mandela symbolized the hope that society could be organized differently, humanely and nobly. This, at a time also when there was talk of one world order, and one in which amoral markets alone held sway. The Soviet Union had collapsed, the welfare state was in retreat, the market economy had gone global and the shining light of capitalism, it was written, had arrived and was banging at the doors of state regimentation and control.

Mandela, in his first speech in 1990 in Cape Town, promised that the ideals of the Freedom Charter would illuminate the way to a new South Africa. The 1994 Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) would serve as the ANC's campaign plan to redress past inequities, as those who suffered under the yoke of apartheid would take their place as fully fledged citizens, under a new flag and national anthem, guided by a new constitution in a new South Africa.

Mandela marked the closure of one long terrible world-wide history, defined by colonial dispossession and racial oppression. He signaled an opening; of a time when all South Africans

would be free from racial and economic exclusions and marked the foundation of the Rainbow Nation of God.

Openings would be the operative word. Our economy, which for so long had operated behind protectionist barriers, was thrown open to a feeding frenzy by global sharks, as we lost one labor-intensive industry after another to East Asian competitors.

As South Africa sought to negotiate its way onto the global stage and a unipolar world, concessions were quickly made and the adoption of a people-centered economic path jettisoned.

We, who marched in the 1980s behind banners that read “Forward ever, backwards never,” were flummoxed. Rather than Mandela illuminating the path to freedom from poverty and inequality, the first years of the ANC government were marked by a series of policy U-turns.

It was a time in which erstwhile revolutionaries and left intellectuals confused realism with conformism and surrender with fighting back.

Exchange controls were relaxed in 1995 and then crucially in 1999, Minister of Finance Trevor Manuel allowed big business to delist from Johannesburg and relist on the London Stock Exchange.

Some of the country’s biggest companies decamped with apartheid’s plunder: Anglo American, De Beers diamonds, Investec bank, Old Mutual insurance, Didata ICT, SAB Miller breweries (all to London), and Mondi paper (to New York).

The $25 billion apartheid debt, odious in law, was to be honored. Foreign policy embraced Indonesian dictator Suharto (Mandela gave the butcher the highest honor for a foreigner, The Cape of Good Hope Medal), and after an $850 million International Monetary Fund loan in late 1993, that institution’s diktats were slavishly followed.

The final U-turn was signaled without warning. The RDP was replaced by a series of neoliberal White Papers in sector after sector, culminating in the 1996 homegrown Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) structural adjustment policy. This became the ruling mantra and codified liberalization as the official ideology of Mandela’s government.

Our manufacturing industry was decimated. Teaching at the Durban Workers College at the time, I saw a swift change in the role of shop-stewards. Where a few months before they were pushing back the frontiers of control on the shop floor, organizing mass marches, and confronting the bosses, now they were spending time negotiating the retrenchments of hundreds of workers, while at the same time preaching discipline and order in the workplace. Overnight, unions were working with the bosses to encourage international competitiveness.

COSATU promoted a “Buy South Africa Campaign.” Yet because of the influence of COSATU stalwart turned Minister Alec Erwin, the union movement had signed on to the lowering of tariff barriers. Now it insisted that South Africans buy more expensive local products as their patriotic duty. At one union rally, when workers realized they were wearing T-shirts made in China, they took them off and ripped them up. At least the seams came apart easily.

The Faustian Pact

We, who had been isolated from the world during apartheid, were now rushed at breakneck speed into the embrace of global competitiveness. People who bore the crushing weight of apartheid were

now asked to bear the burden of shock capitalism. Once more, the call went out from on high; patience and discipline.

The former Intelligence Minister in the ANC government, Ronnie Kasrils, argues that in this crucial early period, "the battle for the ANC's soul got under way, and was eventually lost to corporate power: we were entrapped by the neoliberal economy — or, as some today cry out, we 'sold our people down the river'" (*The Guardian*, 24 June 2013). This Faustian pact, he suggests, meant the ANC could no longer hang on to its revolutionary ideals.

Today, the ANC is a very different organization to the one that existed in 1990. The composition of the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC), once the preserve of working-class exiles and former political prisoners, is now populated by CEOs, millionaires and billionaires.

Take for example the newly elected Deputy President of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa. One time general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), he is now one of South Africa's richest men. The speed at which he entered the billionaire class is astounding, making Afrikaners like the Ruperts, who became billionaires post-1948, seem pedestrian.

In one of those typical South African ironies, Ramaphosa became a key figure in the massacre of 34 workers at the Marikana platinum mine owned by Lonmin, in which he was the largest local shareholder.

Ramaphosa was in constant communication with the mining bosses and the state during the August 2012 strike. In one of his emails on August 15, he wrote to Lonmin's Albert Jamieson: "You are absolutely correct in insisting that the Minister, and indeed all government officials, need to understand that we are essentially dealing with a criminal act. I have said as much to the Minister of Safety and Security. I will stress that Minister [Susan] Shabangu should have a discussion with Roger [Phillimore, Lonmin chairman]."

Collusion between capital and the State has happened in systematic patterns in the sordid history of the mining industry in this country. Part of that history included the collaboration of so-called tribal chiefs who were corrupt and were used by those oppressive governments to turn the self-sufficient black African farmers into slave labor workers. Today we have a situation where those chiefs have been replaced by so-called BEE (Black Economic Empowerment — ed.) partners of these mines carrying on that torch of collusion.

Mandela, too, was showered with a small financial fortune by friendly tycoons after his release from 27 years of prison in 1990, sufficient to amass a $10 million asset base in six short years. In the year that Thabo Mbeki fired Jacob Zuma as Deputy President, Mandela rewarded Zuma with a R1 million check. Zuma, now president, also has his tycoons. Particularly significant is the notorious Gupta family. They have extensive business dealings with Zuma's family and the close connection has given rise to a new word: the Zuptas.

Union general secretaries now earn more than cabinet ministers, and unions have investments in the very enterprises they try to organize. The racial geography of our cities remains intact. The commanding heights of the economy and control of the land remain largely in white hands, while government attempts at redistribution are paltry.

Almost two decades into the transition, one has a sense that all the solidity of the anti-apartheid struggle has melted into air. The long walk to freedom has been interrupted by ubiquitous toll roads. The lights that illuminated the march to freedom have slowly dimmed as electricity prices have escalated. The thirst for freedom has been parched by water that demands cash before delivery.

An economy that was supposed to deliver more and more jobs sheds them every day. A state that promised to progressively redress apartheid's legacy allows inequality and poverty to deepen. The trade unionists of yesteryear occupy the boardrooms of corporate capital.

What about the other parts of the Alliance? To read the South African Communist Party is like reading a Monty Python script. It claims that it is deepening the national democratic revolution as an advance towards socialism. But it never fights an election on its own, instead feeding off the ANC slate, which is a party committed to deepening capitalist social relations.

COSATU claims to advance the cause of the working class and sees the best way of doing this by attaching itself to the apron strings of the ANC, whose economic policies throw more and more people into the unemployment queue. It is no wonder then that for many South Africans, the early optimism has now been tempered by Kafka's refrain, "there is hope, but not for us."

The Embattled Legacy

Who owns the Mandela legacy? Is he the Father of the Nation, above and beyond party politics? Clearly the children and grandchildren want to own this legacy, cashing in on the largesse and already splitting into factions. And the ANC needs Mandela as it prepares for an election battle. If there were tensions while Mandela lay in his hospital bed, one can only imagine how many times his legacy will be dug up only to be recast, reformed, rebranded and renamed in the years ahead.

Mandela's bravery, mistake, wisdom and retreat are what they are. He did what he thought he needed to do. The conditions under which he made his compromises are past. The things to gain will never come. His time, and all it symbolized, is over.

Anthony Sampson, in his biography of Mandela published in 1999, titles one of the chapters "Man and Myth." If it is difficult to read Mandela, it is as difficult to write Mandela, as man and myth have converged.

While Mandela appeared to be accessible, reading the man was another matter entirely. Richard Stengel, ghost-writer of Mandela's autobiography, wrote of "the man and the mask as one," while Ahmed Kathrada, who had been with him in prison for 25 years, revealed: "He's impenetrable."

We will probably never know what Mandela really thought, what the inner workings of his mind were, or what regrets he really had. There are no intimate diaries like Gandhi's for instance, and there have been no critical contemporary biographies of Mandela's years in power. To date, they have mainly been sycophantic. In time this might change, if Kasrils' coming out is an indicator.

As early as 1992, just after the Bisho Massacre of 30 people by apartheid's homeland army, Mandela warned: "we are sitting on a time bomb…The enemy is now you and me, people who have a car and have a house. It's order, anything that relates to order [that's the target] and it's a very grave situation."

The land of apartheid is witness to ongoing class warfare. It is inchoate, disparate and often desperate. But it's there. Every day. Banging on the gates. For a moment, and with verve and style, Mandela gave us the sense that we were living beyond and above race and tribalism. But now, it seems those old chestnuts too are back.

Nelson Mandela was, if anything, a man sworn to struggle. It only seems like yesterday that he wound the clock and gave us the possibility of new times. He may be stilled — but that clock is

ticking.

Ashwin Desai

A Note from the ATC Editors

AMONG THE MANY assessments of the legacy of Nelson Mandela and today's post-apartheid South Africa, we recommend the following selection.

An interview with Patrick Bond, providing more depth on the issues raised in the above quote from Ronnie Kasrils, can be found on ESSF (article 30772), Mandela Led Fight Against Apartheid, But Not Against Extreme Inequality

A discussion with Glen Ford, executive editor of Black Agenda Report, is online on ESSF (article 30773), Mandela Embodied the Victories and Failures of the South African Liberation Struggle

Two pieces are posted on the *Solidarity* website (and reproduced on ESSF one):

A tribute written by Brian Ashley, editor of the South African magazine Amandla! on ESSF (article 30535), Nelson Mandela, and from Kate Doyle Griffiths-Dingani on ESSF (article 30571), Lovely Bones: Reflections on the Legacy of Nelson Mandela.

P.S.

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