

How Mandela Changed South Africa

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December 5, 2013

Nelson Mandela was the father of the current democratic South Africa that replaced the odious apartheid state.

His primary legacy is a multiracial South Africa under the rule of law. Mandela's governance was characterized by racial reconciliation, especially with white Afrikaners, which he shrewdly promoted through the use of symbols. Like President Obama, Mandela sought "teachable moments." For example, he publicly supported the predominately white national rugby team. He took tea with Betsie Verwoerd, the widow of Hendrick Verwoerd, the chief architect of apartheid. He avoided African National Congress (ANC) and black African triumphalism; there was no wholesale change in Afrikaner place names during his presidency.



statue of Nelson Mandela stands outside the gates of Drakenstein Correctional Centre (formerly Victor Verster Prison), near Paarl in Western Cape province. (Photo: Finbarr O'Reilly/Courtesy Reuters)

He insisted on the rule of law. Apartheid may have been a crime against humanity, but there was no extra-legal "revolutionary justice." Instead there was a [Truth and Reconciliation](#)

[Commission](#) under the presidency of Archbishop Desmond Tutu that offered amnesty in return for confession to liberation fighters and members of the apartheid security services. Mandela assiduously observed the new constitution that enshrined the strongest protection of individual and minority rights anywhere in the world. Alone among African states, South Africa permits gay marriage, though much of the population remains homophobic.

Governance Dilemmas

However, most of the black majority [remains impoverished](#). Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, a fellow veteran of African liberation struggles, recently criticized Mandela for too often subordinating the black majority to the white minority. Many South Africans share that view, even if they are reluctant to express it openly. Julius Malema, once the head of the ANC Youth League that Mandela founded, calls for the expropriation of white property without compensation.

As for the rule of law, there is a new questioning of the independent judiciary and property rights guarantees amid concerns that they obstruct greater economic equality. The administration of Jacob Zuma is promoting a state secrets bill that that could reduce government transparency and stifle criticism of the government. Some leaders of civil society now question Mandela's unswerving support for the ANC since the ruling party is more and more associated with patronage politics and personal enrichment.

For most South Africans racial identities remain paramount. At the same time, there are signs that popular attitudes are evolving toward Mandela's non-racial, democratic values that may provide a bulwark for the future of the rule of law to which Mandela (himself a lawyer) was devoted.

The Racial Divide

But, race and class remain inextricably linked. Survey data indicates that South Africans of all age groups and races feel non-racialism and greater integration are unlikely for their generation. Many South Africans, like many Americans, live in separate racial spheres. [The Reconciliation Barometer](#) Survey in 2012 found that 43.5 percent of South Africans rarely or never speak to someone of another race. Only about half interact with persons of a different race frequently on weekdays, and less than 20 percent regularly socialize with people of other races.

For the present, race is also the overwhelming predictor of voting behavior. Despite the all-race character of the governing ANC, most of its electoral support comes from blacks. It is recruiting few new leaders from the other races. The opposition Democratic Alliance is the party of choice of most whites and "coloureds." (People of mixed racial origin; they consider themselves a distinct racial group.) It is seeking black supporters, especially from the new black middle class. It remains to be seen whether it will be successful.

Racism continues to be a reality. Among whites it continues, especially in rural areas. This racism usually takes the form of racist verbal slurs and treatment of domestic employees, who are predominantly black. Critics of Mandela's successors, Thabo Mbeki and Zuma, accuse them of exploiting for their own narrow political interests a crude form of black racism against whites. Zuma performs in public the song, "Bring me my Machine Gun" as part of an Afro-populism far from the spirit of Mandela.

Yet there has been progress. A black middle class mostly based in the public sector has emerged, as have a few high-profile black millionaires. Perhaps more significant is a black presence at formerly segregated institutions and public accommodations. Such public integration enhances black self-esteem and helps shape how South Africans see each other. It represents an important part of the Mandela and ANC legacy.

The Standard of Living Gap

But, the difference in wealth among the racial groups remains stark. Indeed the racial wealth gap has increased since the end of apartheid, not decreased. Credible estimates conclude that the annual earnings for black household are about a sixth of that for whites.

Life expectancy is also a useful measure of the well-being of South Africa's population. While there are significant racial disparities, the overall average for South Africans in 2007 was 50, a decline from 62 in 1990, mostly the result of AIDS. Even for whites, life expectancy is comparatively low. In 2007, it was about that of Egypt (71). Overall South African life expectancy is almost thirty years shorter than in the most advanced Western countries. As for the country's BRICS diplomatic partners (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), for Brazil, it was 72; for Russia it was 68; for China, 73; and for India, 65.

How to account for the overall low life expectancy? HIV/AIDS remains a scourge. However, short life expectancy among blacks also reflects a host of social realities, ranging from poor medical facilities, limited education, and profound poverty that affects diet, housing, and even the quality of child care. Baragwanth Hospital in Soweto, for example, has developed a world-renowned expertise in treating burns because they were so common among children playing around open cooking fires.

Beyond Apartheid's Shadow

Nevertheless, the core of Mandela's legacy -- non-racial democracy based on the rule of law -- endures. At the time of Mandela's inauguration, whites by and large did not see apartheid as evil. Hence, it is significant that by 2012, polling data from the [Reconciliation Barometer](#) shows that 83.8 percent of South Africans (including all races) now see apartheid as a crime against humanity. A substantial majority of white South Africans share this view.

But this same polling data shows significant racial differences on issues of public policy. Poverty is seen by 82 percent of black Africans to be a result of apartheid. However, only 50.6 percent of whites agree. Nevertheless, whites are moving away from the apartheid mindset.

In a democracy numbers count. South Africa's "public square" has become genuinely multiracial and "African" in style. The agencies of government with whom most people regularly come into contact—the post office, the police, customs and immigration figures, agricultural extension experts—have come to mirror the demographics of the country.

Human rights are protected by the law. Freedom of speech is absolute—for now. These are major democratic achievements, and they owe much to Nelson Mandela's vision for his beloved country.