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Nelson Mandela A man and his  
legacy in the African and  
international landscape

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## Nelson Mandela A man and his legacy in the African and international landscape

### *Abstract:*

*A century after Mandela's birth, we observe a country that has grown apart from the path he designed, and which made of the Rainbow Nation as an ivory tower. This article analyses, from an international relations perspective, the legacy of the South African hero. Moreover, this article assesses his legacy's deterioration these past years, pointing out its current state. Finally, it will briefly point out the hope, under great uncertainty, that the future may bring to Mandela's legacy.*

### *Keywords:*

*Nelson Mandela, legacy, Pan-Africanism, human rights, African renaissance, South African exceptionalism, South Africa, international relations.*

\* NOTE: The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

## Introduction

In July 18, 1918, Nelson Mandela was born in Mvezo, at that time part of the Province of the Cape, in present day South Africa. Today, 100 years later, the weight that the name Mandela has is similar to that of other heroes of our time, such as Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King. The mere mention of his name is often a balsam to heated debates and his words calm down discrepancies as if they were true arguments from authority. Mandela's shadow is truly large, and the fruits of his tireless work still prevails today, against all odds —however struggling it is today, as we shall see.

The purpose of this article is to analyze Mandela's legacy in the international and African context, with the objective of portraying a trustworthy image of both Nelson Mandela; the man, and Nelson Mandela; the figure, and what both accomplished. It is also worth noting that I do not intend to pursue the favorite game of any smart historian. Such, in order to assess the relevance of a given historic event or an important individual, tries to analyze how things would have developed had he not existed. One representative example is that of Niall Ferguson, the brilliant Scottish historian and professor, who asserts that the participation of Great Britain in the First World War was the biggest mistake in modern history<sup>1</sup>.

It would be a truly interesting exercise to envisage what South Africa would have been like in the 1990s without Nelson Mandela. It is not a wild thought to adventure that the abominable Apartheid regime would have inevitably collapsed because of its own exhaustion and the enormous pressure, both domestic and international. Nor it would be to see the African National Congress reach power incontestably in the 1994 general elections. The analysis of the historic possibilities, however fascinating, is not the issue at hand in this article. Nonetheless, it is most needed to keep an accurate eye in the context, as there are things that may —and should— be attributed to Nelson Mandela. But there are others that ought to be dealt with cautiously, without claim of causation where it does not exist, in both a positive and a negative sense. And this *modus operandi* shall be applied not only to the most shining aspects of its legacy, but also to the darkest. This remark is motivated by the praising language which is often used around Nelson Mandela and other individuals of its stature; a phenomenon that is especially the case in

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<sup>1</sup> According to him, as he writes in his book *The Pity of War* (1998), in 1914 there was no real threat against Great Britain, that could have lived peacefully with continental Europe under German domination.

the media, but of which the rigorous academia —*a priori*— does not escape either. This is but a sign of the natural human tendency to attribute to our heroes all the goodness and virtues and, in order to preserve their immaculate image, ascribe to the circumstances and different scapegoats, all angles of darkness. Well, I do not intend to follow the usual chant, nor to navigate in equidistance. Quite the contrary, equanimity will be the rule in this article. In my opinion, far from being an offense to the quasi-sacred, this way —and only this way— we shall show Mandela and his legacy the respect he is due, and we will better value him, appreciating what he achieved not because of lacking defects or not facing adversity, but precisely because of overcoming them. Both of others and his own.

One last note is pertinent at this point. It is about the approximation this article intends to pursue to the figure and legacy of Mandela; which will be circumscribed to the international relations realm —even though it is evident that we could not fully understand what he accomplished internationally without the victories held domestically. Without further introductory remarks, let us begin the analysis of Mandela's legacy in the African and international landscape, without losing sight of the man beneath the large shadow projected by the figure.

### **Idealism, realism and the political thought of Nelson Mandela**

Any analysis or conversation in the international relations realm finds a clairvoyant expository form —however imperfect— from the classic dichotomist distinction of idealism and realism. International relations realism<sup>2</sup> consists of a vision that conceives such relations as a place of extreme competitiveness and conflict. The supreme unity under the realist perspective is the state, which is driven, above all, by survival and pre-eminence instincts that lead it to a constant struggle for power in order to defend its national interests and its own security.

By contrast, international idealism tries to overcome the insurmountable differences between the states in an effort to ensure that their internal *modus vivendi* is

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<sup>2</sup> International realism has a long-standing tradition, rooted on the theory of classic authors in the field of political theory such as Thucydides or Machiavelli, as well as explicit modern implementations by political leaders like U.S. president, George W. Bush.

also dominant in the international realm and therefore becomes the engine of their foreign policy. One of the first proponents of international idealism was the U.S. president Woodrow Wilson and its highest expression was the League of Nations, created in 1919 after the First World War and a forerunner of the so-called international liberal order, whose paradigm is currently configured by the United Nations and the European Union. The phenomenon of identification of a united international community with the political philosophy of liberalism has led, in turn, to the conception of a very specific idealism; one based on a western philosophy that primarily seeks to promote the values of democratic self-determination and a market economy. In other words, international idealism translates into international liberalism. And it is in this framework that we find the political thought of Nelson Mandela —although there is a clear evolution in his thought, as we shall see.

There is not much written about the political philosophy of the South African leader, which is largely due to the perception of Mandela as someone non-ideological and eminently pragmatic. However, in my opinion, conducting oneself in a manner based on the search for shared interests, agreements and reconciliation does not denote an ideological absence but rather one characterized by such notes. In fact, there is not only a marked ideological component but a change in it throughout his life, as it is worth remembering that Mandela led the armed wing of the African National Congress, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* —The Spear of the Nation—, from the early 1960s until his imprisonment. For this reason, the contrast with the Nelson Mandela that left prison in 1990 is evident. In any case, it is necessary to clarify that this point does not seek to enter into normative assessments about the morality of the use of violence in situations of enormous injustice; it merely reveals the ideology raised by Mandela and the great change that is observed before and after his imprisonment.

An aseptic analysis of the figure and the legacy of Mandela would surely dedicate a few words to that stage of the 1960s previously mentioned. However, equanimity requires, together with the necessary brevity of this text, to focus on the 1990s, and especially in his presidency, because there was no legacy greater than the one he left during those years. For it is the election of Mandela as the first South African black president what definitely made him the visible face of a feat of epic proportions. However, it is necessary to analyze such culminating moment of transition as it was the one that

ultimately elevated Mandela to the category of hero.

As I have pointed out in other papers<sup>3</sup>, South Africa's democratic transition was characterized by a marked pacifism, whose contrast with a regime such as the Apartheid makes it even more praiseworthy. This element of nonviolence is absolutely crucial. However, it often goes unnoticed how complicated it is to appease and replace a feeling of revenge and resentment with forgiveness and reconciliation; sentiments that are paradoxical given that the rule throughout history has been the first of these attitudes. Therefore, the second group is truly exceptional, which is the reason why this 'South African Exceptionalism' elevated the Rainbow Nation to a position of moral authority, capable of influencing the African and global contexts. However, before delving into how great it was the impact of Mandela's influence, it is convenient to look at the reasons that he upheld and that served as solid rock onto which to build an entire nation. In other words, we have to look for the ideas that underlie South Africa's foreign policy during the Mandela era. Mandela himself left a record of them in an article he wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 under the title *South Africa's Future Foreign Policy*, in which the most reliable — and almost exclusive— image of his political thought is preserved, and especially his conception of international relations and the role that South Africa ought to play in them.

Of the aforementioned article, which is a declaration of principles —and of intentions—, three fundamental points that would mark South Africa's foreign policy during the Mandela era must be highlighted: (i) The emphasis on not forgetting the past but truly forgiving; (ii) the protection of human rights domestically and internationally; and (iii) its accentuated Pan-Africanist spirit. These were the solid principles upon which South Africa's foreign policy was built in its first democratic phase. Now, we must analyze each one of these three points with caution, since subscribing a series of principles does not necessarily imply a consequent action in that sense, and much less the creation of a legacy in this regard.

In this article, Mandela begins by referring to the horror of the Apartheid regime and expresses his firm commitment, together with the government party, the African National Congress, to build a new country of free and equal citizens, regardless of race, sex or creed. The commonly accepted narrative is that the struggle for freedom led by

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<sup>3</sup> See Soto Gómez, J.A. (2017). 'Sudáfrica: ¿un país a la deriva en el nuevo orden mundial?', *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos* 61/2017.

Mandela overthrew the Apartheid regime. There is no doubt that this struggle was essential to end the regime. However, reality also includes less heroic elements. For the end of the Apartheid was mainly due to a political agreement between proponents of change and the ruling political elite, led by Frederik de Klerk<sup>4</sup>, then South African president. Without such agreement, which greatly reduced the privileges enjoyed by the white South African population, the struggle for freedom and racial equality carried out by the anti-regime resistance would have never succeeded in putting an end to it. Therefore, Mandela must be considered at this point as a representative figure of the struggle for freedom and equality; as a symbol. But not as a cause. That cause was the political agreement mentioned above together with the international sanctions that contributed to an isolation that South Africa itself sought and suffered, in equal parts, since the 1960s. At this point, it is worth pointing out the great change that is observed in Mandela's international affinity and alignment. In the 1960s, the Apartheid regime, under constant public condemnation by the Western bloc, enjoyed an underground support in the struggle against the Soviet Union, given the prominent role of South Africa in the fight against Communism in Angola and Mozambique, to name a few examples. And, on the other hand, the Communist bloc supported the African National Congress with arms and funding in its struggle against the Apartheid regime. However, in South Africa's democratic rebirth, Mandela made a turn of one hundred and eighty degrees, embracing the liberal international order. This denotes either a mere pragmatism —reflected in support for the victorious bloc in the Cold War— or a change in the political thought of Nelson Mandela —or perhaps both.

On the other hand, Mandela did have a prominent role in the reconciliation process, renouncing to any type of violence. And this is where his enormous worth lies, as mentioned above. Without it, it is not bold to envision a period of democratization that could very well have turned into a civil confrontation, motivated by revenge and restitution desires after decades of oppression. It is enough to take a look at the decolonization process in countries where —in situations prior to their self-determination that were light years away from the suffering caused by Apartheid— there were rates of violence and

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<sup>4</sup> The crucial role played by De Klerk granted him, together with Nelson Mandela, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Both of them were also awarded with the Prince of Asturias Award in International Cooperation in 1992.

reparation far superior to those experienced in South Africa. Some examples of this phenomenon are Algeria, where after the bloody war of independence, the population of European descent —approximately one tenth— went to France; or Mozambique, where the Portuguese population quickly left the country after gaining its independence<sup>5</sup>.

The second fundamental point is the human rights language, in line with the aforementioned incorporation of South Africa to the liberal democratic bloc. In the 1993 article, Mandela points out that South Africans deserve recognition of the right to life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness; phrase identical to that of the U.S. Declaration of Independence of 1776. This reflects a clear democratic commitment, which the Freedom Charter of 1995 would point out later, stating that “South Africa belongs to all those who live within its borders, blacks and whites”<sup>6</sup>. However, what is truly important in the first part of the article is the consideration of the author that none of it will happen unless South Africa fully participates again in the international arena.

Mandela’s conception of the complementary nature of domestic and foreign policy is thus observed. On the one hand, without a peaceful, civilized South Africa based on principles of dignity and equality, any movement in the international sphere directed towards those countries that in turn could be of help in achieving such objectives would be in vain. On the other hand, foreign policy had to bring the right partners to South Africa’s doorsteps, in order to help rebuild the nation. This was not at all easy since, as mentioned above, South African foreign policy had been hijacked by the monolithic theme of Apartheid for decades, creating an isolated country, and transmitting to the international sphere a tremendously negative image —which sometimes was also accompanied by negative performances.

Mandela’s vision on human rights’ protection was not limited to the domestic sphere. On the contrary, it is a characteristic of his political thought the conception of a South Africa that was called to defend the human rights of other people. This goal was put into effect on numerous occasions and not only on the African continent, but on a global scale. One of the most representative examples is the mediation of Nelson

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<sup>5</sup> Campbel, J. (2013). ‘Think Again: Nelson Mandela’, *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>6</sup> Fragment of the 1995 Freedom Charter’s preamble. This document consists of a declaration of basic principles and was written and proclaimed by the South African Congress Alliance, formed by the African National Congress and its allies.

Mandela in 1997 to end the conflict in Northern Ireland, facilitating the dialogue between the Irish nationalist group Sinn Fein and the IRA, and the Democratic Unionist Party, and to a large extent make possible the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Similarly, in the African landscape, the mediation of Mandela in 1999 —already succeeded in the presidency by Thabo Mbeki— in Burundi's civil war<sup>7</sup>, resulted in the Arusha Agreements of the year 2000.

Nonetheless, not everything was so bright in Mandela's defense of human rights. Perhaps because of a historical debt thanks to the help given to the African National Congress during its struggle to end Apartheid, or because of a reminiscent ideological affinity, Mandela was loyal to dictators such as Gaddafi in Libya or Fidel Castro in Cuba, both having a rather poor record on the protection of human rights. In spite of this, as mentioned before, Mandela's South Africa walked firmly hand in hand with the liberal international order during the 1990s<sup>8</sup>, something that did not prevent Mandela from criticizing the actions that in his view threatened the inalienable human rights of other people. Some examples are the condemnation of the interventionist and militaristic policy of U.S. president George W. Bush, as well as the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. And for this as well, Mandela's legacy in this field is commendable.

The last point to be highlighted of the 1993 article is the defense of Pan-Africanism. Here, there is also a clear change in Mandela's thought, as well as his correlative performance. During the 1960s, his struggle against the Apartheid regime was rooted in a marked leftist liberation nationalism. By contrast, his presidential mandate was not characterized by a romantic look towards a utopian African past. Far from it, under a framework of reconciliation and coexistence, he sought to make South Africa into a nation that would elevate neighboring countries above their differences —and also those rooted within themselves— in order to strengthen the bonds of solidarity among Africans. This spirit was reflected not only in his mediating activity in conflicts such as the one mentioned

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<sup>7</sup> Miti, K. (2012). 'South Africa and Conflict Resolution in Africa: From Mandela to Zuma University of Pretoria, South Africa', *Southern African Peace and Security Studies* 1 (1), p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> As I note in Soto Gómez, J.A. (2017). 'Sudáfrica: ¿un país a la deriva en el nuevo orden mundial?', *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos* 61/2017, South Africa evolved in a few years from being one of the most hermetic countries in the world to become an authoritative voice in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, member of the G20 and the BRICS, as well as one of the ten global strategic partners of the European Union.



in Burundi, but also in other symbolic acts as making *Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika* —may God bless Africa— South Africa's national anthem, which bears witness to the country's commitment not only to itself, but also to the rest of the African continent.

These three points; reconciliation, the defense of human rights, and Pan-Africanism, elevated South Africa to the status of a regional power of enormous scope, configuring itself as a country that, on previous occasions<sup>9</sup>, I have called a 'swing state', given its capacity to influence as a catalyst in the surrounding countries. This was also due to a process of investment and foreign trade —especially intracontinental— in which South Africa embarked shortly after its democratic rebirth<sup>10</sup>.

However, the return of South Africa to international respectability and the sacred nature of its internal situation would soon face enormous challenges. Mandela's legacy would find itself at a crossroads: rupture on the one hand, and perseverance on the other. And during the last decade, it seemed to opt for the first way.

### **Mandela's legacy today. A rapid desacralization**

President Thabo Mbeki succeeded Mandela in 1999 and, during his first term, he was faithful<sup>11</sup> to the course set by Mandela, consolidating South Africa as a global player of the first order, under the banners of solidarity and reconstruction that Africa needed so much. The Pan-Africanism that characterized Mandela was translated into a continuation in the mediating mission of South Africa in conflicts such as the civil war that the Democratic Republic of the Congo was going through. Similarly, South-South collaboration between countries of the same environment was fostered, leading to the emergence of a new concept, the 'African Renaissance'<sup>12</sup>, which perfectly encapsulated

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<sup>9</sup> See Soto Gómez, J.A. (2017). 'Países bisagra en África como motores de desarrollo del continente', *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos* 119/2017, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> McNamee, T. (2016). 'Harnessing the Power of Africa's Swing States. The Catalytic Role of Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa', *The Brenthurst Foundation*, Discussion Paper 1/2016.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Krasno y Sean LaPides point out in their book *Personality, Political Leadership, and Decision Making: A Global Perspective* (2015) that president Mbeki was inflexible in keeping South Africa's strong democracy. However, there are others that argue that it was him who started to re-racialize the South African political discourse and that the violent wing of Zuma's supporters was nourished by Mbeki's exclusionary policies and authoritarian style.

<sup>12</sup> Despite being Thabo Mbeki who ultimately propelled the African Renaissance concept, it was coined for the first time Cheikh Anta Diop in a series of essays written in 1946 and which would later be collected in his book *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in Culture and Development, 1946-1960*.

the principles defended by Mandela of democratization, respect for international law and the defense of human rights. Thus, Mbeki preserved the legacy of his predecessor, focusing on the South African political and socio-economic renewal, while persevering in South Africa's integration into the international community and its demarcation as an African hegemon<sup>13</sup>.

However, this powerful resurgence began to decline during the second term of president Mbeki (2004-2008), starting a trend that betrayed the legacy of Mandela and reached its maximum expression under the presidency of Jacob Zuma. However, during the first years of his mandate, South Africa still endorsed some of the principles of its democratic childhood, such as its position as regional leader or its commitment to the defense of human rights. Similarly, South Africa remained under the structural framework of the Bretton Woods institutions, at least nominally.

Despite this, the symptoms of a drift that turned its back on Mandela's legacy were numerous. The most representative example in the realm of foreign policy was the obvious turn towards Russia and China. Especially since 2013, South Africa stopped supporting—at least, *de facto*—“an international landscape whose identity is the multi-polar equilibrium that characterized Nelson Mandela's vision”<sup>14</sup>. The report prepared by the African National Congress in 2015 entitled *A Better Africa in a Better and Just World*—in which the change of paradigm was recorded—, attests to this shift. This report set out the parameters to be followed by South Africa's foreign policy until 2020 and it identified two priority objectives: “in the economic sphere, an approach to China, and, in the political sphere, to leave North American influence and take the hand of Russia”<sup>15</sup>. The fault line between South Africa and the liberal international order was also observed during this period in the disregard of the African National Congress for the rule of law and its previously unquestionable defense of human rights. Similarly, it was reflected in the fact that in 2015, Omar Al-Bashir, president of Sudan, was allowed to leave South Africa despite the existence of an arrest warrant against him of the International Criminal Court.

This ideological involution, as it could not be otherwise, also had its impact in the

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<sup>13</sup> Landsberg, C. (2010). 'Thabo Mbeki's legacy of transformational diplomacy', in Glaser, D. (ed.), *Mbeki and after: reflections on the legacy of Thabo Mbeki*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press).

<sup>14</sup> Soto Gómez, J.A. (2017). 'Sudáfrica: ¿un país a la deriva en el nuevo orden mundial?', *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos* 61/2017, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

domestic sphere. The Pan-Africanism raised by Mandela was quickly put into question when xenophobic outbursts took place against immigrants from neighboring countries who entered South Africa in search of better living and working conditions. Moreover, the reconciliation process was soon hampered by an inequality that made it unsustainable. For South Africa went from being a nation of races to a nation of economic and social classes. However, the economically prosperous classes are configured in its vast majority by the segment of white population, while the lower classes have a very high percentage of black and mixed people —the so-called coloreds. For this reason, economic inequality brings out two blocks that resemble those in which society was structured during the Apartheid regime. At the same time, the ideological drift of the African National Congress made Mandela's reconciliation missive become more difficult. For the African National Congress is not something monolithic at all. On the contrary, the decision-making process and the holding of power depend on a complex tripartite alliance of the African National Congress, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party. This structure goes back to the ideologically nationalist and liberationist strand that seemed to have ended with the triumph of Mandela, while greatly hinders the agility of the government to respond to crises.

Finally, the Zuma era was also characterized by a rampant political corruption — especially during its last years— that affected both the president and the government party, which increased the discredit of the country in the international and African sphere.

Mandela's legacy seemed almost completely squandered at the end of last year, despite the inexorable advance of new political winds; winds of reform and regeneration, of peace and reconciliation, personified in the figure of the political party Democratic Alliance —which is today the main opposition party. However, it is with the election of Cyril Ramaphosa as president of South Africa on February 15<sup>th</sup> of this year —after the resignation of president Zuma— where the real hope lies for the survival of Mandela's legacy. This is something to which Ramaphosa referred during the State of the Nation Address on February 16<sup>th</sup>, when he pointed out that South Africa had to return urgently to the embrace of Mandela's legacy.

## Conclusion

It is too early to venture what will be of Mandela's legacy under the rule of Ramaphosa. However, everything seems to indicate that its deterioration has ended after more than a decade of looting. With the election of Ramaphosa, the African National Congress has adopted a more moderate ideological stance, perhaps to maintain its partisan hegemony in view of the advance of other political forces that may dispute it the political power. Or perhaps to achieve a South Africa that resembles more the one that Mandela envisioned; a South Africa, as we have seen, built on the pillars of reconciliation, African brotherhood and the defense of human rights.

However, such legacy is one of great fragility, and the forgetfulness by successors of Mandela that prosperity, reputation and respect require constant care has taken its toll on it. During the next few months we will possibly be witnesses to a change of direction that puts South Africa back on the path where Mandela placed it almost three decades ago. Only this way South Africa will be able to solve the ailments it suffers, recover its leading role in African relations as a regional hegemon and a swing state, and consolidate its preponderance in the international sphere. Time will tell.

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