Asian Journal of Peacebuilding Vol. 11 No. 2 (2023): 377-383
doi: 10.18588/202311.00a432 Lecture Note

The Legacy of Nelson Mandela's Political Thought

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Excellencies, Counsel Generals, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Fellow South Africans,

Good afternoon.

On behalf of the President of our Republic, H. E. Cyril Ramophosa, and the entire people of South Africa, I wish to thank you for joining us on this special occasion as we celebrate the twenty-ninth anniversary of South Africa's democracy. Let me take this opportunity to congratulate President Yoon Suk Yeol, President of Republic of Korea, and all citizens of Korea on your achievement of seventy-eight years of liberation. South Africans take much inspiration from your country's achievements as we forge ahead in building a united non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic South Africa.

I am honored to be with you here today to talk about the political legacy of my father, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. This occasion is even more poignant for me because next month will be the twenty-eighth anniversary of his address to Seoul National University when he accepted an honorary doctorate. This year, on December 5, will be the tenth anniversary of his passing, and on April 2 was the fifth anniversary of the passing of my mother, Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. I feel their loss every day. I am moved by the continuity brought by the opportunity to speak to you today. I feel profoundly privileged to be able to stand here, more than a quarter of a century after my father addressed the university community when this very institution honored his life and work. And now, today, I am here to honor my father by reminding you of his political legacy and illustrating how it has influenced me and my work. This is my task today.

I believe that when we start out to look into anyone's legacy, we must first set out to answer three fundamental questions: Why? What? And how? While

The lecture was delivered as part of the 2023 South Africa Freedom Day commemoration in collaboration with the South African Embassy in Korea that took place at Seoul National University (SNU) on June 9, 2023, at an event organized by the SNU Asia Center's Asia-Africa Center.

ISSN 2288-2693 Print, ISSN 2288-2707 Online

my father was involved with a variety of campaigns since he moved from his childhood home in the countryside to Johannesburg in 1941, his political legacy started in earnest when he made the difficult decision to give up his career as a lawyer and throw himself into politics with all the personal dangers and sacrifices that this represented. Any examination of the meaning of his political legacy must, in the first instance, ask why he did this. I want to try to draw you closer to an understanding of the detail of his why so we can better understand him and what he left behind. So, why did my father do this?

The best way I can answer this question is to quote a line many of you will have already heard, and some of you will know well. Coined in the feminist movement in 1968, it was quickly adopted by the civil rights movement and even some national liberation campaigns. It says: "The personal is political."

The South Africa my father lived in, and wanted to change, was run strictly along the lines of institutionalized racism. The policy of the government who controlled his country was that every individual person was classified according to a certain race group. Based on a person's classification, the state had a pre-determined list of what they would be entitled to throughout their lives and even into their death, where they could be born, where they would be entitled to live, which in turn would determine the type of house they could live in. The area would depend on whether or not they would be able to own their own house or, in a tiny minority of cases, the land on which it was built.

Before my father was born, the colonial authorities enacted the Land Act which essentially took away the right of African people to own land. Despite being the vast majority of the population, they were, according to this act, allowed to own a mere 7 percent of the land. Opposing the 1913 Land Act was why the African National Congress, the organization my father joined in 1944 and later led, was formed. Twenty-three years after the first Land Act, it was amended in 1936 to set aside only 13.5 percent of the land for African ownership. The struggle for land remains, to this day, a burning issue in my country.

A person's racial classification would, in addition, decide where they could go to school, the type of education they would receive, where they could study at the university level, if at all. It dictated what type of job they could have; how much they would be paid; when they fell ill, which hospital would treat them; and when they passed away, where they were entitled to be buried. Whites were placed at the very top of the list of privileges and would automatically receive the very most of the very best of everything South Africa had to offer. Black people were on the lowest possible rung of the ladder and received the least of everything, from housing, to services, to schools, the type and standard of education, and opportunities in life.

We were also subjected to continual inhumane repression, which could see Black people being thrown into prison just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were arbitrary arrests and charges before racist courts that

would sooner believe a white person than a Black person. In the South Africa of my parents, and the country in which I was born and raised, you could not get away from politics. It was personal.

Of course, politics was the big backdrop to our lives, the legal framework which ran society. But politics was also about every little detail of your life, your lived experiences, and those of your family, friends, and comrades. Not to get involved in trying to change things would have meant that you would have had to accept all the injustice and oppression that came with the system. You would have had to accept that you were indeed inferior and that nothing could change that. Accepting it would have meant that you were allowing the system to do with you what it wished.

While colonialism had already introduced and practiced racial discrimination in my country, it was refined under the policy of apartheid, which was imposed on my country after the 1948 general election was won by the Nazi-inspired National Party. What apartheid really meant was that, as a Black person, you were not allowed to live as a full human being with rights in the country of your birth. It meant inferior living conditions, an education system that was designed for you to be employable only as a servant or a manual worker. It meant that you had no freedom of movement. You were not even regarded as a citizen of South Africa. You were supposed to be in so-called white areas to work while your families were confined to impoverished pockets of the country, which the regime had designed as living areas for different ethnic groups. At base, apartheid meant that Black people would be confined to a life of poverty, deprivation, and violence against their bodies and their souls.

Given all of this, I would like to ask, who here can honestly say that they would be willing to accept such a life? I hope I am succeeding in getting you to understand my father's mindset and why, as a principled and courageous visionary, he could do nothing else with his life than to oppose apartheid. Way back in 1953, my father wrote of his devotion to the principals expressed in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Paramount to him among these rights was the right to education. He wrote at the time, "Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among the nation's racial or religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace." He believed that his whole life.

In fact, when he addressed this university forty-two years later on July 6, 1995, my father explained that he and his comrades in South Africa had been compelled "to challenge the system that made education a privilege for the majority and a right for the minority." "To our generation," he said, "education became a key to unlock the gates of oppression, a tool against the warped logic of the slave-master." To challenge this system, he said, meant "detention, death,

exile and long terms of imprisonment." Despite knowing what the personal consequences for him could be, he was still prepared to take up the challenge. My father hated racism so intensely that he could never have remained quiet while it was being imposed daily in minute and vicious detail to destroy the lives and prospects of millions of people. So, we now know his "why."

My next threshold question is "what?" What exactly did my father focus on in his political life. His "what" can be summed under the concept of human rights. He wanted all South Africans, all human beings, actually, wherever they lived, to enjoy human rights as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The right to equality, dignity, and liberty; the right to a nationality, to be regarded as a citizen in the land of one's birth; the right to a decent standard of living, freedom of thought, freedom of movement, freedom of speech. And he was driven to help create a society in which everyone had the right to vote for a government of their own choice. Essentially, my father sacrificed so many years of his life, his freedom, and a family life, so that all South Africans could have the same human rights. Equal rights.

My father is known for his deep love and concern for the welfare of children. He was driven by the belief that as the most vulnerable members of our world, children deserve extra protection. After being moved by the sight of children living on the street and huddling around a makeshift fire one winter in Cape Town soon after he was elected president, my father established the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund which he initially financed himself by donating a third of this salary. At its launch in 1995 he famously said, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

My own philosophy holds the same love and care for children at its center. Without proper care for children, we cannot hope for safety and security for all of us. Children are the future, and they will become damaged adults, unless we do everything in our power to give them enough love, enough care, and enough resources as they grow. Without this, we cannot hope to even make a dent in the rate of gender-based violence that ravages societies right around the world. We cannot hope to bring an end to human trafficking, the dark currency exchanged by evil human beings who prey on the powerless. These two horrific scourges on our planet all have their genesis in the vulnerability of children.

For me personally, this is one of the central aspects of his legacy, which I have taken into my own work. If we, as people of conscience and people blessed with the ability to have our voices heard, could only speak up more against the ongoing assault on our society, on its weakest members, from violence against women and children and human trafficking, it might help to contribute greater efforts to bring this to an end. We must never give up. Very closely linked to gender-based violence and human trafficking is HIV and AIDS, which my father spent many years highlighting, especially after he left office when he started the international awareness campaign named for his prison number, 46664. His

openness in speaking about the pandemic also helped to decrease the stigma prevalent in many parts of society. For instance, when a South African activist living with HIV was fighting for free ARVs for all, my father visited him and later campaigned with him while wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "HIV-positive." And after the tragic passing of my brother, Makgatho, in 2005, my father announced to the world that he had succumbed to AIDS complications.

The stigma of HIV/AIDS was not the only one he broke, he spoke about suffering from tuberculosis while he was in prison, another disease people are often ashamed to talk about. He added that in 2001, "I was found to be a cancer patient. Now, I didn't hide this, I immediately called the press, and I told them I have this illness." I can proudly say that I believe one of the gifts I have inherited from my father is his courage in speaking about matters that need to be heard.

It goes without saying that when we are focused on children, we have to talk about education. And, as I have already mentioned, my father saw education as one of the main ways in which to empower people. Underlying all of this, and an enormous obstacle to bringing about the change in the world we so passionately believe in, is poverty. The eradication of poverty must be high up on all our lists, just as it was high on my father's agenda. Faced with governing a people left impoverished by apartheid, my father was convinced that there can be no real freedom when there is poverty. Just as the people of South Africa had come together to fight apartheid, with the help of the international community, my father found that poverty and the suffering it brings should be the new terrain of struggle.

Toward the end of his tenure as president, he told South Africa's Parliament, "We are proud of the achievements we have made. But the poverty that continues to stalk millions, the problems of education, housing, health, landlessness, and lack of jobs that continue to afflict the majority of our citizens—all these are reminders that the mission of meaningful freedom, democracy and human rights is yet to be fulfilled." Contrary to what some people like to suggest, my father was not the human manifestation of a magic wand that could have wiped away all the ills in society. His entire role was to help bring an end to apartheid and then to create a democratic system in which all adults had the right to vote. He did this. He and his comrades, including my mother, Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, did this.

We have examined the why and the what of my father's political legacy. Now we get to the question, "How?" How did my father exercise his political aims? For most of his time before being imprisoned, my father and his comrades threw themselves into devising, planning, and executing campaigns against apartheid. There was, for instance, the 1952 Defiance Campaign against unjust apartheid laws controlling the majority of the people. For this, he was convicted and given a suspended sentence of nine months in prison.

Then there was the daring plan to collect the desires from ordinary people

in every corner of the country about what kind of future constitution they would like to see for South Africa. This became the Freedom Charter, for which my father and 156 other people were charged with treason. While this case was in progress and my father was in the final group of accused on trial for four-and-a-half years, it became crystal clear that the apartheid regime would no longer tolerate peaceful protest. They simply shut down this possibility.

The turning point came on March 21, 1960, when the police shot and killed sixty-nine people protesting against measures to control their movements, against having to carry a book which detailed whether they were in an area legally or not. On that tragic Monday morning, most of the people whose lives were cut short had been shot in the back. Then, less than three weeks later on April 8, the regime banned the African National Congress (ANC), the political organization to which my father was a leading member. It also outlawed another liberation movement, the Pan Africanist Congress. With that, all legal means of opposing apartheid had been shut down. They would remain illegal organizations for thirty years.

With no other option, my father supported the idea of an armed struggle to be able to continue the protest against apartheid. It was clear to him and his comrades that violence was the strategy the apartheid regime understood. He was asked to travel to the newly independent states in Africa to raise support and money for the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto weSizwe (Spear of the Nation), of which he was commander-in-chief. In the initial years of the armed struggle, the organization was very careful to only attack strategic installations and to avoid loss of life. My father's secret travels through Africa without a passport and his protest work landed him a five-year prison sentence in 1962, and the next year he was brought from prison to face sabotage charges with his comrades. Seven of them were sentenced to life in prison.

My father fought against injustice. He fought to change a system and he succeeded. The next steps are up to us. All of us. To properly undo hundreds of years of colonial subjugation, followed by decades of apartheid rule, will take the efforts of all the people who have come after him and who will come after me. Perhaps then we will be able to achieve a country in which we can say that everyone has everything that they need in life to become happy and healthy contributing members of society. Just as my father did, I see myself as one of the millions of people who have a role to play in this regard. I see us all, people of conscience throughout the world, as having a part in making the world a better place for our children and grandchildren. That better world will come when no person who is seen as different in any way is discriminated against; that we are all seen as worthy human beings.

I will leave you with these thoughts from my father as he addressed South Africa's parliament before he stepped down after serving one term as the country's first democratically elected president. My father said, "I will continue to entertain the hope that there has emerged a cadre of leaders in my own country and region,

on my Continent and in the world, which will not allow that any should be denied their freedom as we were, that any should be turned into refugees as we were, that any should be condemned to grow hungry as we were, that any should be stripped of their human dignity as we were."

I thank you.

Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere appreciation to Mr. Chung Kwang-yong (Deputy Director-General, African and Middle Eastern Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Dr. Park Soo-jin (Director for Seoul National University Asia Center), Dr. Kim Tae-kyoon (Director for SNU Asia-Africa Center), Amb. Park Jong-Dae (Advisory Committee member for the Asia Africa Center, former Korean Ambassador to South Africa), and Dr. Joonhwa Cho (Research Fellow for the SNU Asia-Africa Center) for both the speaking invitation and the organization of this event in celebration of South Africa's Freedom Day. I am honored to have been given the opportunity, and I applaud their commitment to fostering meaningful dialogue and understanding between our respective nations.

Zenani N. Dlamini has held the position of South African Ambassador to South Korea since 2019. Prior to her current role, she served as the South African Ambassador to Argentina for a five-year period starting in 2012. Subsequently, she was appointed as the High Commissioner in Mauritius. Zenani N. Dlamini is the daughter of the late anti-apartheid activist and Nobel laureate, Nelson Mandela.