On Campus

Bigger than South Africa

Mamadou Diouf, director of the Institute of African Studies at Columbia, remembers Nelson Mandela — and tells us why the world will, too.

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“It always seems impossible until it is done.” — Nelson Mandela

The legacy of Nelson Mandela will be with us for decades to come. The reasons are linked to his own history, to the way he understood power, and to the way he led his long-divided country. This is a man who lived under apartheid, a man who had been locked up for twenty-seven years. Of course, he did not solve all the problems South Africa faced, but Mandela is also bigger than South Africa. He’s bigger than the

continent. His legacy is a legacy for all humanity to honor.

This is a man who came out of jail and was ready to talk to the people who jailed him. He was ready — because he was mostly a man of the 1960s, an era defined by radicalism, and you see this driving the charter of the African National Congress. Out of jail, he was able to adjust to a completely new moment — adjust as an individual, but also as a politician. And while most people predicted bloodshed, Mandela single-handedly ensured that South Africa would not go through a racial civil war; that a space was open for negotiation; that a space was open for compromise; that a space was open to invent a new world.

Mandela was behind the idea that it was possible to invent a new world. That it was possible to turn enemies not into friends, but into partners. That it was possible to pull together different memories and multiple heritages to avoid the tensions and confrontations of a history of segregation, violence, and systematic spoliation. Insisting strongly on not forgetting, he advocated forgiveness. He believed that it was possible to reinvent South Africa. A new and ideal South Africa. He kept saying that South Africa was a complex country, and that reconciliation was the only appropriate response to the challenge the country was facing — the only way things should be done.

The second element, probably the most important of his legacy, is that this man decided to serve one term and leave office. This was a revolution in Africa. He could have stayed until his death. Because he was already a myth. The message he conveyed was a powerful message. By stepping down — the universally recognized hero, probably the only one Africans agreed on — he showed that he didn’t believe in the notion of the charismatic leader, a messiah destined to eternally lead his people. It was also a sign of respect for ordinary citizens. A lesson of humility and dedication to the cause of democracy and justice. Even when he left power, he remained the person to go to in a moment of crisis, the person to go to when you needed advice, the person to go to when you needed voice to mobilize. Mandela’s is a very powerful voice, but it’s the voice of a democratic politician, of an icon who behaves like an ordinary citizen. It’s the voice of a man who was able to say, at a point, “I have been too long in jail. I have done what I had to do to help the transition. Now I’m too old to remain president. I have to pass the baton to a new generation.”

He did a great job passing the baton, never commenting on what was going on in the new government, but still staying on the stage, working through the Nelson Mandela Foundation to address social issues in and beyond South Africa and Africa, becoming universally acclaimed as the most important world leader from the mid-twentieth century to the present.

The third element, which seems very trivial but is very important, is that he decided to drop his suits and ties — the formal uniform of the president — and to wear his colorful shirts. It signaled a return to the state of an ordinary citizen of the world, a return home to live his life as an ordinary man. After working for the future of a nation, after setting the foundation of the future of South Africa, he decided to revisit his past and rediscover a life he hadn’t lived. After the long march to freedom, he began a long march back to all he had missed because of the struggle to free South Africa — the twenty-seven years in jail and the challenges of the transition from apartheid to the rainbow nation.

Politically, of course, we can discuss some of the choices he made. But something that will remain with us, and remain with history, is not only the way he ensured a peaceful transition in a context of violence, but also the way he left power — and held himself as a powerful, wise man.

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