

THE STAR

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Dr F van Zyl Slabbert

The loneliest time for a political leader is to lead when there is no obvious path forward. When there are competing, contradictory options that generate powerful feelings and his leadership is appropriated by partisan factions to strengthen their respective causes. At such times, history begins to shape its judgement of political leaders. That judgement has little to do with whether the leader was kind, charismatic, revered, admired, how much he suffered for his cause, or battled to keep all his followers together. The brutally simple question that history seeks to answer is :

Did he lead when it mattered?

When few knew what to do or where to go, and no one was sure what would turn out to be the right course of action?

Nelson Mandela finds himself in the loneliest political spot in the world at the moment. He is not only the leader of the ANC/SACP/COSATU Alliance : events have made him the leader of liberation from racism and domination on the African continent. Without detracting from any other political leader, Mantel is the political leader in South Africa; his life and suffering encapsulates the trauma, tension and conflict that is called South Africa in the 20th Century world.

And yet, it is as leader of the ANC/SACP/COSATU Alliance, at this critical juncture in South Africa's transition, that history will begin to shape its judgement of him as a leader. Can he lead his Alliance and the country out of a debilitating political deadlock?

At the moment of his release he inherited a liberation movement whose leadership was deeply committed to a revolutionary overthrow of the South African Government and the seizure of power on behalf of the ANC. There is comprehensive documentary, and other evidence, that as the quality and scale of racial oppression deepened, the ANC Alliance shifted its tactics and strategies of opposition until, in the mid-80's it reluctantly accepted the inevitability of a People's War underpinned by a four pronged strategy of armed struggle, mass mobilization, international isolation and underground operations. There is equally convincing evidence that the most articular/prominent spokesmen of the revolutionary strategy of the ANC Alliance were, and are, members of the SACP who currently occupy leadership positions both within the ANC and the SACP. The deployment of this strategy and the "Total Strategy" of the Botha Government polarised South Africa into a deadlock between repression and liberation. It was this deadlock that De Klerk inherited and sought to break. The only person who could help him break it

was, and is, Nelson Mandela.

On his release, after 27 years in prison, Mandela put his movement's revolutionary strategy on hold. He staked his whole political reputation on negotiations as the mode of transition out of South Africa's deadlock and he personalised it by saying: "De Klerk is a man of integrity. I trust him." This declaration caused deep consternation within his ranks and that was reflected at the first national congress where it was decided to combine the strategy of negotiations with the strategy of mass mobilization and protest as the Alliance's approach to transition. Those who felt strongly about mobilization and protest were deeply suspicious of the Government's ability to deliver through negotiations, as well as what such negotiations could do to the solidarity of the Alliance. These suspicions have proved to be not totally unfounded.

Whether through incompetence, collusion, arrogance, ignorance or deliberation, the Government has underestimated the dynamics of transition. It thought it could control the agenda for negotiations, but the agenda refused to stay pinned down or be subject to the will of any particular party. Very soon, tension, suspicion and anger emerged. Posturing, bad faith, and double agendas became the order of the day. But the worst was the violence. Like malevolent slime it oozed into every fabric and texture of our society. Instead of addressing it politicians cursed each other for it. In despair, Justice Goldstone said that politicians were not serious about peace. Under such circumstances, negotiations could not even deliver a funny joke, never mind durable compromises.

Within the ANC Alliance, difference about the priority and relationship between the strategies of mass mobilization and negotiations began to emerge. The 'mobilizers' were not the same group as the 'negotiators', although all had to pledge loyalty to both strategies. In principle, mobilization and negotiations need not be incompatible; in practice it more often than not is very difficult to synchronize effectively and in South Africa at the present moment, virtually impossible.

After Boiphotong the strategic initiative within the ANC Alliance shifted to the 'mobilizers' and the most articulate spokesmen once again turned out to be members of the SACP who are also in leadership positions within the ANC, SACP and COSATU. Revolutionary rhetoric, so familiar during the People's War period began to emerge more clearly and stridently. The 'negotiators' were taking a beating. It is not so much a question of the SACP 'hijacking' the ANC, as that it represented the only coherent strategy as an alternative to the current failure of negotiations. Against the dogmatic ideological certainty of a People's REvolutionary Strategy, the open ended, fragile and personalised nature of negotiations stood very little chance, particularly if negotiations have not delivered. Mandela's own credibility within the Alliance as well as his trust in his negotiating partners began to wane.

But, it seems he went to Bisho and saw a future based on revolutionary mobilization and it did not work. Once again he

called "Halt"; once again he urged all South Africa's to walk away "from the precipice"; once again he chose for the priority of negotiations as the "only way forward". But this time not fresh out of prison with a smile on his face and trust in his eyes as he shook hands with De Klerk and we all felt two steps away from Camelot; not with more political capital and good will, here and abroad, than a politician or his party can use up in a lifetime. Now he says "let us negotiate" at a time when there is growing scepticism about South Africa's ability to make it, when he personally and politically has taken more beatings than even the toughest of us can handle; when he has to seek trust rather than assume it when engaging his opponents.

But most important of all can his writ hold within his own movement? Can he hold off the demands of the 'mobilizers' in order to negotiate for as long as it takes. Can he in effect say : "I have been chosen to lead and I choose negotiations. I seek your confidence to explore it fully to the exclusion of all other strategies for the time being." Can his leadership generate the discipline necessary within his own ranks so that he can bring clarity and direction amidst the general confusion and ambiguity in the country.

Nelson Mandela finds himself in a lonely spot. Over the next few weeks history will begin to shape its judgement of him as a leader. Failure of negotiations for De Klerk will be easier to carry. He leads a small party of a privileged minority used to the trappings of power and the manipulation of patronage. The structure of his political organisation gives him maximum flexibility and maneuverability. Damage control can be spread through careful use of the resources of the State and the co-operation of the private sector and other powerful interest groups, here and abroad. For the time being De Klerk can go on governing preserving the illusion of being in control of the destiny of our country.

But failure for Mandela means that negotiation is dead for him and all of us. Negotiation is what he staked his whole political career and reputation on and why he walked out of prison. If he succeeds, no hyperbole would adequately express history's judgement of his leadership. He would have "saved his country". If De Klerk shares an ounce of genuine concern for the success of negotiations and the future of the country, he will meet Mandela in his loneliness and walk the road with him. Because at that first meeting, the success of our transition depends on the personal chemistry that emerges between these two politicians. For Mandela's sake, and for the sake of us all, may his writ hold this time.

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