



# Leadership in Africa:

## What we learn from Mandela

Prof. Adebayo Olukoshi

### Summary

If it is the unseen, rarely glorified moments that make up an outcome, the personal attributes of a leader determine a society's trajectory. Joel Netshitenzhe believes it was in these moments between trigger and action that made the Mandela, Sisulu, Tshwete, generation so exceptional and key to the struggle against apartheid. They learned from doing and listening; they understood context and balance of forces. Nelson Mandela stood out amongst an exceptional generation. Avoiding the tendency to reduce the Mandela legacy to oversentimentality and symbolism, Prof. Olukoshi draws practical lessons about vision, context and pragmatism that the world, and especially Africa, can learn from the local boy from Qunu.

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Leadership is key to good governance and development. Yet, it is the absence of good leadership that has characterized governance on the continent. For too long the African narrative has been a dysfunctional one: neocolonialism, underdevelopment, and poverty and aid dependency. A turn away from this can partially be achieved through foresighted leadership that is up to the task of mitigating known and yet unknown global challenges. This can be done through a sense of purpose, a roadmap with the aspirations of the people in mind. In this discussion paper, an adaptation of a speech delivered by Adebayo Olukoshi at the Tana High-Level Forum, the precedence set by Nelson Mandela's leadership is analyzed.

### Key Points

- 1 The leadership discourse in Africa is marred by the lack of capacity to envision and drive political and socio-economic transformation.
- 2 Africa's leaders need to embrace a leadership style that can bridge the gap between the elites and the contextual aspirations of the people they represent.
- 3 Leadership resources and capacities in Africa must be explored in order to achieve an all-round transformation.

We draw three key lessons from Mandela's leadership style. First, Africa needs visionary leaders who are committed to socio-economic and political transformation. Secondly, African leadership needs to be redefined in a way that can change the current narratives and lay the foundation for real renaissance. Finally, leadership that seeks to earn the trust and confidence of the society which strengthen the social contract. Olukoshi recommends Mandela's style of transformative leadership is capable of taking Africa to the next level of development. Olukoshi's paper concludes with a call for a reawakening of the Ubuntu (humanity) spirit particularly among African leaders and strategic capacity building that will make socio-economic and political transformation in Africa a reality.

## Defining and contextualizing the leadership challenge

The continent is at the throes of some of the most radical and rapid changes that have been seen in a long time. The changes - economic, social, political, cultural, technological, demographic, and spatial- demand effective leadership if the continent is to derive an all-round continental renewal from them. This is all the more so as the changes are also occurring as part - and in the midst - of some of the most far-reaching geopolitical and socio-economic realignments in the international system since the end of the Second World War. In drawing leadership lessons for today's Africa from the life and times of Nelson Mandela, we will do well to remind ourselves that realignments during the last five hundred years in world history left Africa at the receiving end of changes that signaled the emergence of today's leading global powers.

“The history of enslavement, exploitation, the scramble and partition, colonization, poverty, underdevelopment, neocolonial dependence, and generalized domination that became an essential stuff of the African story cannot be allowed to repeat itself or continue under new guises.”

Leadership at various levels of African state and society will have to be consciously nurtured, intelligently mobilized, and strategically deployed if the continent is not only to turn the table of underdevelopment and dependence but also to truly realize “Africa rising.” Mandela's life and legacy provide ample evidence that the capacity is within us in Africa to produce the leadership required to meet the challenges of the changing times.

## Mandela as a model of African leadership

Much has been written and said about the leadership qualities and attributes of Mandela. These range from his unyielding personal commitment to the pursuit of a just cause, the personal sacrifices he made for his convictions and his readiness to pay the price for his beliefs to his espousal of a gospel of tolerance, his loyalty to a collective cause, and his sense of duty to

his society. Attention has also been drawn to his insistence on the centrality of political organization, organizational discipline, the importance of personal responsibility and accountability, his faith in the basic fairness of people, and his abiding belief in the common humanity. Mandela's humaneness at all times and the uncommon generosity of spirit he displayed towards his traducers earned him considerable admiration and acclaim, making him a hero and model across a world that has grown accustomed to sledgehammer revenge and narrow retribution in the governance of global affairs.

Who could have expected that a person who had been so systematically ill-treated would emerge from over 27 years of prison to advocate reconciliation and extend a right hand of fellowship to his former oppressors? How could a person who had been the victim of much racial hatred that separated him from his family and actively sought to dehumanize him emerge from prolonged confinement to become a supporter of Ubuntu? Who among us was not amazed to note that on the day of his inauguration in 1994 as the first South African President to be democratically elected by his compatriots of all races, he reserved a seat in the front row at the Union Buildings for his former prison guard? And the positive surprises that flowed so effortlessly out of Mandela continued throughout his presidential years into his retirement and his death, leaving us in no doubt that his was not a case of a politician opportunistically playing to a stage-managed gallery but of a leader who was so completely at ease with himself and his fellow humans that his natural actions and gestures helped to re-write chapters in history - and in the theory and practice of leadership. Nelson Mandela showed himself to be a rare breed of forward-looking leaders who proved able to put their personal pains and travails aside for the greater good of country and humankind. He forgave even though he did not -

and could not have been expected to forget. And yet, he stoically refused to be locked in a trap of bitterness, lest he be booked into another round of imprisonment, this time an imprisonment that would be self-imposed.

The historic defense statement which Mandela made on 20 April, 1964 at the Rivonia trials summarized his vision of a world founded on justice and dignity, and his uncompromising abhorrence of the institutionalized racism of apartheid. He reiterated his dream of a non-racial democratic society in the speech he delivered on 11 February, 1990 following his release from 27 years of prison and at his inauguration on 10 May 1994 as the first elected president of post-apartheid South Africa. Following his death on 5 December, 2014, much of the world, unsurprisingly, was united in mourning over the passing of a truly great person. For Africans and the Diaspora, there was a sense of pride that Mandela was not just one of them but also emerged from among them.

## Lessons for Africa

There is plenty to celebrate about the life of Mandela and many reasons not just to salute his legacy but also to perpetuate it. This is all the more so when his example is set against the generally uninspiring performance of leaders in Africa and the world. On account of this, drawing lessons and inspiration from Mandela's contributions and example will, no doubt, continue for a long time to come.

## A capacity to dream and envision

The first aspect of the leadership example which Mandela represented resided in his emergence, once he joined in the struggle for the liberation of South Africa, as the charismatic voice and face of a dream.

The vision of a new (and better) society produced an audacity and a conviction of purpose and action. In this regard, Mandela came in the mold of great leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Amilcar Cabral. Many of these leaders drew their inspiration from an earlier generation of pan-Africanists like Henry Sylvester Williams and Marcus Garvey to articulate dreams of a free, independent, and united Africa at a time when the idea of independence looked out of reach. Dreams are the foundation for the visions that yield projects of societal transformation. Indeed, they represent the first step in the march of human progress and were it not for the courage of those who dared to dream even at the risk of being dismissed with contempt and ignominy, our world would not have known some of the major advances it has seen over the ages.

We know from experiences around the world that a people who lose their ability to dream and whose leaders are incapable of building visions lose the capacity to strive towards loftier and nobler heights with collective purpose and endurance in order to reinvent themselves and achieve a better future. John F. Kennedy's example as the 35th President of the United States demonstrates this amply. On 25 May, 1961, before a joint session of the United States Congress, he mobilized a weary American populace discouraged by the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Soviet head start in space around his dream of landing a human being on the moon. His dream was part of a broader effort aimed at rebuilding national confidence and a sense of all-round renewal among Americans. He succeeded when on 20 July 1969, almost six years after his assassination; Apollo 11 Commander Neil Armstrong became the first human to walk on the moon, to the immense pride of Americans and the admiration of the world. Dreams and the visions they yield are as integral to

nation- and state-building as they are to the nurturing of national identity, dignity, purpose, and pride. Dreams are critical to the enhancement of the can-do spirit in people that galvanizes them to individual and collective action. So convinced was Mandela of his dream of the imperatives of a non-racial society that through almost three decades of prison, he could neither be bent nor broken to compromise for anything less than his ideal of a new society.

Nelson Mandela's capacity and willingness to dream, and his tenacity in holding on to his vision and ideals bear important lessons for a contemporary generation of Africans, leaders and followers alike, who, in the guise of an excessive realism, have cast dreaming for stoic ideals and reduced governance to the perpetual management of under-achievement clothed in a poverty of foresight and mediocrity of policy.

“Leadership without a well-considered and articulated project of society is easily reduced to an exercise in power-mongering, self-aggrandizement and egotism of the types that have mired Africa in repeated cycles of corruption, conflict and instability.”

For much of the post-independence period, we have been witnesses to the huge costs in mal-governance which the lack of vision has exacted. These costs have manifested themselves in abuses of office, privilege, and distrust, religious bigotry, nepotism, egomania, violent conflicts, reckless use of

resources, and generalized systemic under-performance and outright collapse. Failing to embody the collective dreams of their people and to translate them into visions and strategies, too many leaders have sought instead to dominate, subordinate, manipulate, and repress them under different personalized diktats of "one nation, one destiny, one leader" that wear thin and lose credibility over time because they are underpinned only by the desire of rulers to self-perpetuate at whatever cost. Slogans may serve a purpose but they cannot be a substitute for carefully articulated dreams and visions of a greater tomorrow.

Having a capacity to dream and forging a vision of, for, and with society out of a broad-based dream of a much better future is not to guarantee that the leader who emerges at whatever level to embody the collective aspiration will necessarily live to see the dream fulfilled. It was Mandela's luck that he lived to be part of the dream of the post-apartheid South African society he so eloquently spelt out at his trial in 1964 and on other occasions during the long walk towards 1994. It is all the more remarkable that he outlined his vision fearlessly, courageously, and unambiguously even in the face of the certainty that he was going to be sentenced to long-term imprisonment and possibly death. Once in a position to drive the operationalization of the dream from the vantage point of the highest political office in his country, he went about his work with purpose and compassion. Yet, he never once claimed to be the only person whose ideas for the making of the post-apartheid ideal mattered. This was so in spite of the enormous sacrifices he made along with the many sung and unsung heroes and heroines of the South African struggle, sacrifices which conferred a paramount leadership status on him in the emerging post-apartheid South African political equation of the 1990s.

In stating his case and standing by his ideals, Mandela was sure that his dream was the dream of all South Africans and peoples around the world who believed in justice, equity, and freedom. It was for this reason that he was equally assured that even if he was locked away or put to death, the ideal for which he fought would never be killed for as long as apartheid endured. It was also because of this that he felt able to leave office after one term, certain that his successors would either have to hold the dream or be called to order by the citizenry. He was right. And in his rightness, we draw many lessons for contemporary leadership in Africa, including the important distinction that must be made between rulership and leadership. All too often, leaders in Africa arrogate to themselves an exclusivity of wisdom derived from the assumption that to be in office or to exercise authority is confirmation of their omniscience - and omnipotence. In consequence, dreams of a better society that are collective in origin are first personalized, then trivialized, and finally abused to create various monstrosities of power. Key figures who start off embodying a collective vision come to assume that they - and their families or clans - are the only ones capable of bearing the dream going forward. Among the many pathologies of power that result and which we have seen and continue to witness across our continent is the syndrome among many office bearers to cling on to office as part of de facto or de jure life presidencies. In doing so, the collective dream is lost, the vision becomes blurred, and ideals are forgotten. The consequence? Society flounders and citizens are alienated. Institutions of governance are thrashed. Politics becomes a game of self-preservation and survival at any cost. Mandela tells us it need not be so. In teaching us, he demonstrated repeatedly that he was neither infallible nor indispensable. More than this, he recognized his own mortality.

Mandela's life story also teaches us that it is not enough for leaders to have ideals but to also live those ideals. Having established his credentials as a visionary leader disciplined within the African National Congress (ANC), Umkonto WeSizwe and again the African National Congress he paid a huge personal price for his beliefs and principles. Mandela became worthy of the trust of his people in some of the difficult choices he and his comrades made. Too many of today's African rulers, by contrast, carry on as though to be a visionary leader and to embody a collective dream is to be trapped in grandiose adventurism or be disconnected from the harsh realities lived by their citizenry or to function outside of and above all institutions, structures and laws.

## Locally grounded

Every leader is groomed by their locality. No outstanding leader achieves greatness or inspires greatness by failing to be embedded in local contexts. It is in articulating a response to the local challenges confronted by defined political communities that the seeds of the greatness are first sown. And it is by local performance standards that a truly great leader is and must be evaluated in the first instance. In matters of leadership, charity must truly first begin at home. This point also broaches upon the organic connections that must always exist between leaders and the governed, connections that generate reciprocity and socially anchored balances that allow for mandate to be derived and which offer important reality checks for those who are entrusted with high office. Furthermore, it speaks to the ability of a leader to listen to local voices and tap into local wisdom in order to guide behaviour and action. Embedded leadership understands the chemistry, sociology and psychology of society. It does so not in order to cynically or opportunistically ride

populist tides but to be better positioned to help make tough choices about the overall direction of society.

From his native Qunu, that ancestral land to which he was fondly attached all of his life, to his community level engagements before prison and after, including participation in clan affairs and chiefly duties, as well his attention to immediate family matters, we gained glimpses of a person who was an engaged and active part of his local environment. Beyond his life in Qunu, we also saw the connectedness he established with people in different places in South Africa where professional work as a lawyer and activist took him. He was able as he became politicized to extend his local embeddedness to his work in the African National Congress (ANC) that was to become a lifelong home for him. It should not be surprising that at the different stages of his leadership trajectory, Mandela did not exhibit any innate fear of the people and he demonstrated this at various times, including whilst in office as President of South Africa. Embeddedness taught him that although he may have symbolized a struggle, his efforts were a part of a broader collective fight for change. This humbled him to the point where although we all sang songs of his heroism, he never cultivated nor succumbed to a cult of personality.

When Mandela emerged first as a leader of the ANC and then as President of South Africans of all races to engage the world, he did so fully anchored on local ground and on the basis of clear principles and values derived from the history of that local context.. Indeed, many are the rulers in post-colonial Africa who, having lost the trust of their people, proceed to expend scarce national resources to purchase meaningless accolades and trophies abroad from dubious indexers of performance who have perfected the professional art of feeding fat on desperate office bearers. For those who tested

Mandela by, to cite one example, seeking to advise him against the warmth he showed to Fidel Castro, he wasted no time in putting them in their place, reminding them that when the majority of South Africans needed solidarity from the world and they opted to cast their lot with the apartheid government and the minority interests it so crudely and violently served, Cuba under Castro did not hesitate to extend solidarity to the popular struggle against institutionalized racism even though the country was itself also under a prolonged boycott and siege.

There is an especially important message for the people in Africa, particularly those who claim or aspire to hold leadership positions, from Mandela's life of local embeddedness.

“In a world that has all too often sought to reserve the right to itself to define who is a “good” African leader, and on a continent where leaders have always given much greater value to foreign endorsement whilst actively riding roughshod over local opinion, Mandela teaches us that international honour begins at home and with doing right with integrity and vision by the citizenry.”

A leader properly embedded locally is able to embody the complexities of community without being reduced to the headship of exclusionary clan, ethnic, racial, or sectarian interests who thrive on stoking domestic hate and violence or perpetuating divide and rule policies in order to win or hold on to power. To be embedded in the home environment is not to be bigoted or parochial, or to court meaningless popularity through irresponsible actions or gestures. The legitimacy conferred by a credible and balanced local connectedness can also never be matched by the best skills and reach of public relations consultants and international lobbyists specialized in laundering the image of discredited rulers. Mandela, that man who had been a prisoner of conscience for a significant portion of his active life and whom some countries had classified as a terrorist to be excluded from their shores, had no need of image launderers to clean him up after his release. Rather, it was publicists who competed with one another, alongside celebrities and political figures of various hues, to be seen with him, in his presence, or in his light, complete with imitations of the trademark shirt he adopted as president. Mandela did not just claim leadership. He earned it. And we all respected him for it because his local embeddedness, we recognized ourselves.

### Leadership and controversy; leadership is controversial

The third aspect of the Mandela example, which is not often mentioned, but which is critical to draw attention to is the issue of controversy. Lord Acton it was who stated in one of his famous letters written in April 1887 that great men are almost always bad men. I would modify that statement to say that great leaders are almost invariably controversial people for various reasons. At one level, their projects for society are not, as can be expected, always the

objects of consensus and they generally tend to be forceful personalities who, in some ways, are ahead of their time and their generation. At another level, their methods and choices are always open to questioning and contestation. Furthermore, in making hard and tough decisions, leaders cease to aspire to be all things to all people at all times. Instead they set their sights on a clearly articulated cause and course that inevitably means losing some and winning some. The bigger challenge then for a leader is the ability to manage controversy with tolerance and openness that allows for learning.

All too often, in Africa perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, we have been schooled to look for infallible prophets and saints in leaders and would often discard or discount potential leaders only because they have been labeled controversial, especially by influential external forces. The founders of Pan-Africanism, which we celebrate to this day, were considered by many to be bearers of controversial ideas and worldviews. From Abraham Lincoln to Kemal Attaturk, Mahatma Ghandi to Martin Luther King Junior, Mao Tse Tung to Amilcar Cabral, Otto Von Bismarck to Amilcar Cabral, Vladimir Lenin to Kwame Nkrumah, Olof Palme to Julius Nyerere, Shaka Zulu to Amina of Zazzau - controversy has never be far from the doorsteps of leaders. Mandela himself lived his fair share of controversy, whether viewed from aspects of his private social affairs, including his marital experiences, or with regard to his political life and choices. It was, however, a big measure of just how great he was that controversy could not halt his long walk and during the course of that march, he always left a door open for reaching out to his opponents, including those like Mangsotho Gatsha Buthelezi. Mandela's type of controversy was not the poisonous sort that asphyxiates all conversation. It was a controversy that mainly flowed from a politics

of ideas, ideals, and visions, not a controversy emanating from or fed by a moral turpitude.

Regrettably, the types of controversy that surrounds those who have presided over our commonwealth or are presently at the helm of power is of the most ignoble and banal type, centering around mal-governance, absentee governance, and offshore governance manifested in abuses perpetrated by some first families, insensitivity to the plight of the poor, prolonged excursions abroad in foreign hotels, or equally prolonged stretches of seclusion in native villages that increasingly substitute for the official seat of power. Mandela was controversial but his controversy was not, by any stretch of the imagination, in the same league as the controversy that enveloped the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko, Jean Bedel Bokassa, or Sani Abacha and the many others in their league, both dead and alive, past and present who made plunder and blatant thievery the directive principle of their policies and actions.

“Bold, courageous, and visionary leadership will always attract controversy of the types that help society to advance forward.”

Such controversy is healthy and welcome. Controversy generated by rulers who abuse office, power, and privilege and trust only ends up setting society backwards and dividing it. It is the kind of controversy that has diminished the African world and its hopes of a renaissance.



## Conclusion

A scramble for the continent is taking place that calls for a leadership which is organically rooted and able to drive bold visions of transformation for the continent. The Mandela generation was the generation of liberation and out of that generation we saw the likes of Nkrumah, Nyerere, Cabral, and Machel who bequeathed to us political freedom and the restoration of our collective dignity. Ours is now the generation of a new phase of the pan-African renaissance which must drive the project of a progressive structural transformation for the continent and its peoples. Doing so with attention to the imperatives of building a solid production base for our countries with social justice and democratic governance as part of the prerequisites for unity and progress. It is a project which needs audacious visionaries who, drawing on the rich history of the continent and the example of the likes of Mandela, can embody and articulate our collective aspiration for an Africa that fully rediscovers itself and takes its rightful place in the world. This, ultimately, is the principal challenge of the Mandela legacy. For the sake of the sacrifice he and his generation of liberation leaders made, we cannot afford to fail.

## About the Author

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