

How Mandela and S. Africa Were Freed

History often recounts events through the tales of “great men,” but that is rarely the complete story. South Africa’s overturning of white supremacy is a case in point, not just the personal triumph of Nelson Mandela but the victory of a global movement, as Danny Schechter recalls.

By Danny Schechter

This is probably the worst time to write and release a book about one’s involvement in a struggle to free South Africa. It’s a bad time because even as South Africa celebrates its twentieth anniversary as a democracy, there has rarely been more rancor and anger in a land we all wanted to see as a Rainbow nation, a model for the world because of how it achieved a relatively peaceful transition from white rule and promoted racial reconciliation.

My new book, *When South Africa Called, We Answered: How Solidarity Helped Topple Apartheid* about the global solidarity movement has been published by a Canadian website and online publication run by Tony Sutton, a former editor of Johannesburg’s classic Drum Magazine, often spoken of as the Life Magazine for the black communities during the glory days of resistance.

As I hunt for an American and South Africa publisher, this 300-pager is available in the PDF format as an e-book and can be downloaded for free at <http://coldtype.net>. I wrote it and released it quickly, after a serious health scare because I wanted to be sure that the history of the projects I have been associated with over the decades, from the all-star album “Sun City” by 58 Artists United Against Apartheid, the TV series “South Africa Now,” and my work with Nelson Mandela whose story I tell in the book, *Madiba A to Z: The Many Faces of Nelson Mandela*(Madibabook.com)

As I was writing about Mandela heroic life, I thought there might be value in writing my own story, too, by compiling the many essays I wrote alongside the media work I have done about South Africa for decades as a form of solidarity. And I know, as is all too often the case with a lot of my work, the timing may be very problematic if not totally off.

The global anti-apartheid movement is long gone, and now, so is Madiba, the leader who largely inspired it. With all the memorializing, many confess to be “Mandela-ed out.” His life has been feted in print, and on the big screen, most recently by the epic movie, “Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom.”

The press has mostly moved on. In South Africa, the news media is now more focused on the drama of the trial of Oscar Pistorius, South Africa’s high-

profile disabled runner accused of intentionally shooting his girlfriend in a tragic and bloody late-night confrontation.

Britain's *The Financial Times*, reflecting the interest and interests of its readers, did send their editor, Lionel Barber, on a 12-day safari to Southern Africa to key in on today's challenges.

He notes that "twenty years after the end of apartheid [sic, it's been 24 years] South Africa and its neighboring states, Namibia and Angola, face a second great struggle for progress, prosperity and a better future for all."

Barber spent a day on the campaign trail with President Jacob Zuma, observing, "he can jive like a man half his age to the old liberation favorite, *Umshini Wami*," ("Bring me my Machine Gun.") FT doesn't mention that this is an oft-repeated recycled act for JZ, as he's known, because he beat that song to death in his first campaign five years ago.

In the end, Barber is upbeat about South Africa's economy, perhaps because it is still dominated by a multinational privately controlled Mineral Energy Complex, many based in London. "If you believe in Africa," he writes. "You have to be positive about South Africa." This is hardly the message of Zuma's many detractors.

Soon, as the South African election in early May comes into focus, the rest of the world media will descend and give local events their attention for a day or two. They love conflict and this story is perfect, complete with bitter charges of corruption, defections by long-time supporters of Mandela's party, the ANC, and frustration in every community as the economy seems unable to eradicate poverty and distribute wealth fairly.

The FT hints at this downside, but features the positive hopes of investors and financiers. The truth is that 20 years after the country's first multiracial election in which the ANC promised "A Better Life For All," many there are living worse lives with poverty today as deep as it was then.

It's not all the fault of South Africans, but reflects a globalized world economy that benefits the 1 percent, far more than the 99 percent, especially in traditionally poor and colonized countries.

At the same time, activists in West have also moved on or moved off this political stage as economic failures erupt in Europe and America, and as young people are stuck in student-debt bubbles, with social for global economic justice movements losing visibility.

Global problems today may be even more serious, with inequality and climate

change topping the list, but the sense of widespread moral outrage that fired the anti-apartheid movement seems on the decline.

At Mandela's funeral, that international movement in a way, a successor to a similar crusade against slavery a century and a half earlier was barely referenced.

The focus was on the utterings of heads of state with a great-men-make-history subtext on display.

Even the ANC as a people's movement was pushed aside by all the government dictated protocol and media led deification of Mandela by politicians. Only the aging "Arch," Desmond Tutu criticized the organizers for not inviting leading whites and activists from abroad.

Even as the event celebrated the history of South Africa's greatest son and his "long walk to freedom," it also rewrote history, leaving out the mass global force responsible for generating pressure for sanctions and demands for Mandela and Co.'s freedom.

Perhaps that's why I felt compelled to write this book, to add my small voice and the memory of worthy, if relatively, notwell-remembered contributions to this important history. As been said many times: the past is never past.

South Africans also need to be reminded of the debt they owe to a world that responded to their call for support and stood with them in the dark years. In an interdependent world, that movement played a crucial role. When South African politicians ride the "gravy train," they are betraying their friends abroad.

Unfortunately, the media that lionizes change-makers from above and ignores movements from below will always downplay that lesson, lest they encourage similar struggles on today's global issues.

As a friend once told me when I went to South Africa at age 25 to enlist in that then against-all-odds freedom struggle, "it's not the ship that makes the waves, but the motion on the ocean."

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