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## MANDELA'S UNFINISHED JOB IS OUR JOB

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**M**andela is gone. We had been expecting it for years, and yet the realization of his passing comes with a vortex of emotions and reflections. The rain is flowing through the hills of the 'new' South Africa. One of the driest countries in the world is flooded with water today. It feels as if the sky is crying, paying respect to the best-known icon of the Rainbow Nation. Over one hundred heads of state and government have travelled to Johannesburg to bid farewell to the man that we affectionately call Tata, 'father' in isiXhosa, Mandela's home language.

Mandela has become the global symbol of all struggles for freedom. As he famously remarked in his speech from the dock at the Rivonia Trial in 1964, he was willing to die for "the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities." For that, he spent almost three decades behind bars. Apartheid took his family away and harassed and imprisoned his wife, the activist Winnie Madikizela. Few other human beings have been able to overcome the pain of oppression to stand above their perpetrators and envisage a possible future of unity. This was a remarkable and unparalleled achievement, which Mandela embodied through his life and political project.

He was a revolutionary fighter who became a pragmatic political leader. He reinvented the African National Congress, from an elite movement espousing non-violent resistance, to a mass movement of freedom 'fighters'. He became the first commander in chief of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (The Spear of the Nation), the ANC's armed wing. He was labeled terrorist by the apartheid government and its Western allies, including Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. But he was viewed as a hero by the rest of the world. In the lead-up to his release in the 1980s, he underwent a major personal transition from freedom fighter to champion of peace. He used his charisma and credibility to guide his people on the path of forgiveness. It was a difficult task after decades of state-led oppression. Yet Mandela never felt the temptation to capitalize on the thirst for revenge dominating the African population. While his people wanted to fight back, he preached reconciliation. When his friend and political ally Chris Hani was murdered by a group of white supremacists in 1993, during the tough negotiations preceding the first democratic elections, Mandela spoke words of wisdom to the nation. He called for calm and unity, thus averting a brutal civil war. Even before the historic first democratic elections of April 1994, he was already the president of all South Africans.

Respected by the black community and revered by white people. Five years later, he surprised the world with the decision to step down after only one mandate as president: an unprecedented decision not only in Africa, where leaders hold onto to power for life, but also in the rest of the world.

His life, values and example stand in stark contrast to those of most politicians nowadays. As the satiric magazine *The Onion* affirmed on the day of his death: "Mandela becomes the first-ever politician to be missed." Unfortunately, the current leadership in South Africa is increasingly uncomfortable with the rule of law and the democratic constitution Mandela contributed to designing. Corruption and personal enrichment have become commonplace. But make no mistake: Mandela was not the champion of social justice. By prioritizing reconciliation, he avoided the tough issues of reparation and redistribution. He believed that continuity, especially in terms of economic policies, was fundamental for political stability. He then passed the baton of socio-economic reform to his successors. Yet, no real change has happened till now. South Africa is still an unbearably unequal society. To some extent, some of the policies endorsed by Mandela have contributed to exacerbating such inequalities. Wealth is still largely concentrated in a few hands. Working conditions in critical sectors, from manufacturing to mining and agriculture, are abysmal. Most South Africans are deprived of good education and healthcare. Discontent for the lack of service delivery is fueling unrest in many local communities. Xenophobia against foreign (African) workers, who are blamed for 'stealing' jobs, is becoming a serious national security concern. The South African development model, with its concentration of wealth, under-resourced welfare system and systematic exploitation of natural resources (especially minerals and metals), is deeply unsustainable.

Tata was the last great liberator of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With him gone, our future looks more uncertain than ever. For some reason, his presence (albeit reduced to a theoretical reality by age and sickness) was still a compass to many. He was the father of multiracial South Africa. He was a guarantee that the new South Africa would endure. Now, his unfinished job is our job. When leaders vanish, we all become protagonists. Our life after Mandela will depend on our capacity to imagine and build a just society for the 21st century. We will have to become leaders in our own communities to drive the type of social and economic change that Mandela was unable to achieve. We need to start right where he left off.