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**Cover Story
Mandela on My Poster
The African World
By Bill Fletcher, Jr.**

BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor

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It is humbling and unsettling attempting to appraise the significance of an icon, especially at the time of that icon's 90th birthday. Nevertheless, we must honor Nelson Mandela while at the same time situating him in a broader and complicated context.

In important respects there are several different "Nelson Mandelas." For many of us who were active in and around the anti-apartheid support movement, [Nelson Mandela](#) became the face of the South African liberation struggle. This was true not only for activists, but also for much of the rest of the sympathetic world. In this respect the campaign to free him was much more than a demand for the freedom of one individual, but represented a mass means of protesting the illegitimacy and injustice of the apartheid regime.

The "second" Nelson Mandela was the post-prison/pre-president Mandela. Here we witnessed Nelson Mandela serving as the hero, negotiator, and unifier. Taking charge of the African National Congress's efforts to bring about democratic rule, he, ultimately, decided upon significant compromises that

ended apartheid. Mandela should not be credited or criticized for the decisions of this era as if they were done by one individual alone. The ANC had concluded that a military victory over the apartheid regime was unlikely and, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, a new international political situation had emerged. The 1994 democratic elections are a tribute to the work of Mandela and the ANC leadership, but the compromises that were made during the period of negotiations were controversial. Political rule was turned over to the Black majority, but the economy remained largely in the hands of the whites who had dominated the country.

The "third" Nelson Mandela could be seen during his term as President of South Africa. While steps were taken immediately to eliminate all vestiges of the apartheid regime, the ANC - under his leadership - chose to reject a previous progressive economic development approach and, instead, institute a very pro-privatization/pro-"free market" program known as "Growth, Employment and Redistribution" (GEAR). GEAR turned the entire pre-liberation approach of the ANC on its head and instead emphasized integrating South Africa into the capitalist global market, removing trade barriers, and promoting privatization. It did little to address the mammoth wealth divide in the country or the burning land question (which would later explode in neighboring Zimbabwe). Although GEAR is often blamed on (or credited to, depending on one's point of view) then Deputy (and now current) President Thabo Mbeki, the reality is that it was under the watch of President Nelson Mandela that South Africa opted in a direction that many international observers and friends found surprising and unsettling. It should be added that during this time period, President Mandela, despite the pressure of the USA and others to repudiate friends of South African freedom such as Cuba and Libya, stood firm and attempted to strengthen the forces in the global South advocating peace and self-determination. Nevertheless, South Africa was increasingly drawn into the web created by global capitalism, inhibiting its ability to complete what the ANC had described as the "national democratic revolution."

The "fourth" Nelson Mandela is the post-Presidency Mandela. Generally speaking he has been an outspoken human rights advocate taking very strong and public stands against the US invasion of Iraq, as well as stands against his successor - Mbeki - on the failure of the South African government to fully confront the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He has been among a group of world leaders, such as former US President James (Jimmy) Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who have spoken out on behalf of human rights, whether in the Darfur region of the Sudan or in occupied Palestine. Mandela, though weakening with age, has reemerged as a beacon of hope and struggle for true justice.

All this said, it is important for us to recognize that the triumphs and challenges faced by Nelson Mandela are illustrative of the contradictions we are living through with the collapse of what Egyptian theorist Samir Amin terms the "national populist projects." This is an expression referring to the post-World War II efforts at national independence and liberation in the so-called Third World that chose not to travel down the path toward socialism, but also attempted to be non-aligned in the Cold War. The crisis, to which Amin refers, hit South Africa in the mid-1990s over the question of the path toward reconstruction and development. The leadership of the African National Congress apparently concluded that it had to cut the best deal that it could with global capitalism and that charting a truly independent and transformative

path was unrealistic. Many people, inside and outside South Africa, hoped - and continue to hope - for a different conclusion and different route.

Nevertheless, Nelson Mandela remains my hero. Precisely because Mandela is human, rather than a god, he is not perfect and not above contradictions. He has been, however, a voice for rationality in a world that seems to increasingly succumb to the irrational; a voice for justice, in a world that often seems to tolerate some of the worst forms of injustice. He has also been a person of tremendous courage who resisted pressures to give up or to despair that many others would not have been able to withstand. For whatever else he will always be the Nelson Mandela imprinted on my old - but preserved - anti-apartheid poster: Defiant and dignified always.


Happy birthday, comrade Mandela!

For additional news and analysis concerning social justice in Africa visit [Pambazuka News](http://www.pambazuka.org) (www.pambazuka.org).

BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfrica Forum](#) and co-author of the book, [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.

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