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Mandela's utilitarianism and the struggle for liberation

“Mandela was a great leader because he recognized that the movement had become a civil insurrection, a largely nonviolent struggle. A great leader is one who recognizes where the movement is and leads them accordingly, not one who says, ‘Do it my way!’”

In the time since his death at age 95, Nelson Mandela's thinking on the strategic direction of the liberation struggle in South Africa has been oversimplified by proponents of nonviolent and armed resistance alike. His leadership in the relatively peaceful end to the brutal apartheid system was indeed critical, as was his leadership three decades earlier in the shift from nonviolent to armed resistance by the African National Congress (ANC). Yet many analysts have largely ignored the critical events in South Africa which took place in between, during his nearly three decades in prison.

While, on principle, Mandela refused to renounce violence from his prison cell as long as the far more violent apartheid regime refused to do the same, he also recognized the limits of guerrilla warfare in a country where the regime had all the advantages when it came to armed conflict. However morally justifiable armed struggle may have been in the face of such brutality, it simply was not working. Indeed, in the final years of his imprisonment, he - like other ANC leaders - recognized that it was the growing waves of strikes and boycotts, the establishment of parallel institutions, and other forms of unarmed resistance by the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the ANC's political wing, that would eventually free South Africa from white minority rule.

While many western governments argued that the supposedly benevolent influence of western capital would lead to liberalization and an eventual end to South Africa's apartheid system, and many on the left argued that liberation would come only through armed revolution, in fact it was largely unarmed resistance by the black majority and its supporters, both within South Africa and abroad, which proved decisive.

The resistance of the 1980s was centered on massive noncooperation. Less than six months prior to Mandela's release from prison in February 1990, an editorial in the *Weekly Argus* observed, “The intimidatory powers of the state have waned; the veneration of the law has diminished with the erosion of the rule of law. Inevitably that meek acquiescence of yesteryear has evaporated and SA is now witnessing an open, deliberate and organised campaign of defiance.”

Though it is easy to think of apartheid South African in terms of radical polarization, a model that would tend to support armed struggle as a means of change, the high degree of interdependence – albeit on unfair terms imposed by the ruling white minority – allowed greater latitude for nonviolent movements than is normally possible in most polarized societies. About half of the country's Africans lived in areas allocated to South Africa's whites, including all the ports, major cities, industry, mines, and optimal agricultural land, as did virtually all of the Coloureds and Asians. The white minority existed from day to day with a high level of dependence on the black majority, not just for their high standard of living, but for their very survival. Massive noncooperation, therefore, constituted a more direct challenge to the system of apartheid than did violence.

The black South Africans' overwhelming numerical majority made the use of massive noncooperation particularly effective when they started to mobilize in large numbers in the mid-1980s. Nonviolent action, despite its requirements of discipline and bravery in the face of repression, allowed participation by a far greater percentage of the population than the ANC's exiled guerilla army, whose armed cadres could rarely even penetrate the country's heavily-guarded borders.

By contrast, essentially conservative and religious Africans tended to respond negatively or not at all to revolutionary violence. For example, sociologist [Heribert Adam](#) once noted how the early ANC bombing campaigns "which aimed at frightening whites into making concessions, instead resulted in a strengthening of the repressive machinery and general discouragement of African militancy closer to general resignative despair than determination to actively resist white domination."

Likewise, the use of guerrilla warfare by the ANC's armed wing and other acts of violence solidified even liberal white opinion in support of repressive actions by the white minority government. An escalation of the armed struggle, in the eyes of the white minority, would have confirmed their worst stereotypes of the Africans as "violent savages" and encouraged whites to resist bitterly and engage in even more brutal repression.

By contrast, nonviolent action allowed far greater potential for creating cleavages among the white elites, such as how to best respond to the resistance, how long to resist the inevitable changes demanded by the revolutionaries, and at what costs. The shift back to a mostly nonviolent struggle in the 1980s lured white opinion away from those seeking continued white domination. Though the prospect of giving up their privileges was not particularly welcomed by most whites, the use of largely nonviolent methods by the black majority was seen as indicative of a movement less likely to engage in reprisals against the white minority upon obtaining power, thereby making possible a greater willingness to accept majority rule.

The advantages of nonviolent action in winning allies went far beyond the potentially enlightened sectors of South Africa's white minority, in that it also extended to the world community. International opinion was of crucial importance. Despite verbal condemnation of its racial policies, the western industrialized world gave South Africa consistent support over the years in the form of trade, industrial development, technological assistance, infusion of capital, and arms. South Africa would not have become the economic and military power it was without the massive aid it received from the west during the more than forty years of apartheid rule.

Prior to the imposition of sanctions in the mid-1980s, there was over \$13 billion worth of annual trade between South Africa and the west, which - combined with \$30 billion in foreign investment - supplied the country with the vast majority of such basic commodities as transportation equipment, electrical equipment and machinery, nuclear technology, telecommunications facilities and services, computer technology, chemicals and related products, paper and manufactures, and other goods essential to the maintenance of South Africa as a modern industrialized state. In addition, the west supported the South African regime through outstanding bank loans and credits totaling \$6.5 billion, much of which went to government entities with no restrictions.

When the United Nations Security Council threatened sanctions and other punitive measures against South Africa, three members - the United States, Great Britain, and France (due to their important economic and political interests) - cast vetoes. Armed resistance by the ANC gave some western nations an excuse to label the ANC a "terrorist organization" and block the imposition of targeted sanctions against the apartheid regime. By the mid to late 1980s, however, thanks to massive nonviolent protests in these countries by anti-apartheid activists, most industrialized nations imposed sanctions on the apartheid regime. Labor unions, church groups, students, and leftist organizations in solidarity with the resistance movement in South Africa's townships made business as usual with the apartheid government impossible. Scenes broadcast in the international media of

nonviolent black protesters being shot and brutally beaten by government forces galvanized popular opinion in the west in support of divestment and sanctions, which played a major role in forcing the white minority government to the negotiating table. By contrast, had the primary mode of resistance been armed struggle, it is unlikely that the same level of sympathy and the resulting mass mobilization would have been enough to make the sanctions movement so successful.

In his final years in prison, Mandela recognized that younger community activists like Mkhuseleli Jack - a UDF leader who led the strikes, boycotts, and public protests in the Port Elizabeth area - were far more significant in the success of the struggle than his former comrades from the ANC's armed wing. It was no accident that Mandela asked Jack, and not anyone from the old guard who had been involved in the armed resistance, to organize his first public rally upon his release from prison.

Mandela's approach to violence and nonviolence was not ideological, but pragmatic. Rev. Allan Boesak, a former anti-apartheid leader, noted that while Mandela did not lead the movement away from armed resistance, "Mandela was a great leader because he recognized that the movement had become a civil insurrection, a largely nonviolent struggle. A great leader is one who recognizes where the movement is and leads them accordingly, not one who says, 'Do it my way!'"

While the South African struggle was more protracted, more complex, and not exclusively nonviolent as some other pro-democracy struggles were during this era, it was one of the most significant. It demonstrated that even in a situation where so many had given up on nonviolent action, key figures in the resistance movement - including Nelson Mandela - would recognize its power in the successful liberation of their people.