

**Notes from a conversation with Ahmed Kathrada, Barbara Hogan, Joel Netshitenzhe and Tony Trew, Johannesburg, 2 December 2014,**

TT How did you see Madiba's quality as a leader from your perspective as ANC member, Parliamentary Councillor, leading activist and friend?

AK What stands out immediately was his patience. He was a most patient listener at meetings, he preferred to speak last.

**Ministry declined**

JN In the buildup to the setting up of government, my recollection is that there were all kinds of preparations in the background. There are stories about him consulting people and constituencies about the Cabinet. In your own experience how did that weigh on him, selecting people and excluding others? If I am not mistaken, from the NWC, I think you were supposed to be minister of correctional services

AK That's what the papers had published . . .

JN . . . but then the IFP has to get some seats in Cabinet so he could remove a friend!

AK What had happened is that the papers had published beforehand their cabinet and my name was there. I then wrote to him and also gave the letter to someone to make sure in case mine doesn't reach him, saying that although my name has been mentioned I am not interested in being in the Cabinet. It didn't reach him so that when his first announcement came in the papers I was a minister. Fortunately there was this bartering with the IFP which wanted one of the security portfolios, so the easiest thing was to give mine.

JN Did you have discussions with him on the leadership?

AK No, no not at all. I told him that 'Look, I am not interested.' I wrote to him that I am not interested. Whether the letter reached him or not, I don't know

JN But in your assessment as he was doing all that, was it weighing heavily on him, or was he taking it in his stride?

AK Yes, he didn't like manoeuvre. Some of it was quite straightforward, because I didn't give him any trouble on this question. Maybe he was relieved.

**Parliamentary Counsellor & the President's correspondence**

TT You and Essop were both Parliamentary councillors but it seems Madiba and Thabo had very different ideas about what a councillor should do. How did he see your job as parliamentary councillor?

AK From my point of view it was just a title. Contrary to perceptions people have that this is a very senior position, in practice it was just a title. Madiba's contact with me would be not a systematic thing. Every now and then when something arises he would come and talk to me. But it wasn't as if we had regular meetings and consultations. It was not like that. My position as parliamentary councillor was a payback thing, because you remember they had appointed me as

minister, then came this thing of the Inkatha people and they had to make room. So then they thought they had to give me a position because I had already indicated I wasn't interested and that's when they created this parliamentary councillor thing. There was no such thing before.

JN What I remember, Kathy, is that whilst Madiba did also try to use you for things to do with Parliament, you were supposed to be the main person who did his letters, his correspondence. If there were letters from different heads of state and other people, he would want you to go through them and then draft the responses.

AK What happened is that the civil servants who were initially all from the apartheid days, came to me to suggest a draft reply to letters and so forth. I used to refer letters to ministers because they were in a better position to deal with them than we could. He also relied quite a bit on the whites from the previous order

BH It was a huge body of correspondence, because everybody wanted a piece of Madiba. You used to go to work at eight in the morning and come back easily at six and you would be working over weekends. Kathy was very methodically going through all correspondence that was directed to him. It wasn't just heads of state. It was as if everything was landed on his desk. And you would then refer it on to ministers when you thought it was appropriate that they take action, and in fact I think it was more or less as if you were sheltering the office from the deluge that was coming through and Madiba was trusting your judgment.

TT Did you attend caucus, were there were some decisive occasions when Madiba came to caucus?

AK I wasn't there when some women told him he was just an old man. It was a debate on something or the other. 'You must just go and improve your thinking, you are just an old man,' some women told him

One thing has just struck me. Some Cabinet minister came to see him, and he suggested to Madiba. 'Let's go out.' Then he tried to cover the phone, this Cabinet minister, and Madiba said, 'No, whatever you speak to me, I don't want to hide, not anything. I don't want to walk with you. Tell me whatever you want.' He wouldn't tolerate that type of thing.

### **Interactions in government**

JN When did you go to the Union Buildings for the first time? Your position was announced before the inauguration, so you would have gone with him almost full-time from the start.

AK Early on, we were together with Jakes, and Madiba said, 'I want you people to meet once a week', remember? It never happened. Jakes was there. 'I want you people to read the papers carefully and you must meet at least once a week.'

BH He wanted you to move to the Rondebosch estate, to be closer to him.

AK Yes, that was a whole thing where he said I should get a house there and a car and driver and all that and I said, 'I don't want all that.' I refused to have all that. I said 'I have a flat and have my own car. I don't want these things.'

JN Did you have any opportunity to sit with him informally just to talk about his entry into government?

AK Plenty, but it was never systematically arranged, we would meet each other somewhere, sometimes and just start talking.

JN The impression that I had, and I want you to correct me here, that he avoided as much as possible discussing governmental things with friends. He always wanted to separate the official functions from the other things that he was doing.

AK No, with me he was quite open, but again there was nothing systematic about it. Something that has happened yesterday, or the day before the week before, that strikes him, would come up, but it would be informally.

JN Just to complete this trend of thought, to what extent did he have informal interactions with Walter?

AK Very much, very, very much. He would even consult though Walter was never in government. But again, to my knowledge it was not a systematic thing.

JN Because I remember at one stage when his diary was getting too full, people were starting to propose that perhaps some hours should be put aside on Monday so he could have discussions with Walter. People were worried that it was too informal, there were no appointments.

### **GNU departure**

JN Did he ever discuss the departure of De Klerk and them from the Government of National Unity?

AK No, not specifically; it could have come up. It would be on the few occasions when he was quite frank, there were very few, when nobody was around, such as when we travelled to America and there were no other people, then he would talk quite openly.

### **Madiba brings news of a release offer**

AK Going back, to when we were at Pollsmoor. Every time Madiba had a visit or Walter had a visit, we knew that they would come back with some information, whether it's a visit from the family or from some official. So he's called to the office one day and he's going to see PW Botha. He goes and now we are all eager to know what it was. He comes back, 'Hello chaps! Hello, chaps!', and then he goes to his newspaper. Then he says, 'By the way, chaps, they have offered to release us. They've offered to release us on condition.' We didn't have to debate that. We said, 'Now, you write the letter and we'll all sign it, we're not interested in conditional release.' And that's what happened. He was so casual about it. He waited, he went to his newspaper and then it was, 'by the way'.

## **Nation building and non-racialism**

TT Thinking about nation-building, he went to Tongaat in late 1994 to receive the freedom of the town and on the copy of the speech we prepared for him he writes an addition at the end: 'The majority of the Indian community voted for the National Party -they voted to align themselves with the past – it is time for them now to join the future.' Did he talk of worries that ANC was not making progress in the Indian and Coloured communities?

AK Yes, often. We criticised him strongly for his relation with Rajbansi, but he wouldn't listen.

TT Jakes remarks in one interview that Madiba talked of these communities in a way that was different to how the ANC had come to talk, dealing with non-racialism almost by not mentioning race whereas he foregrounded it.

JN For us it was, 'black and white'.

TT ... whereas for him it was, 'black, that is, African, Indian and Coloured'.

JN Do you remember when there was that debate about whether the Indian Congress should disband? There was such a debate at some time.

AK There was, when the ANC opened up. I can't remember specifically.

JN Maybe the last one on this, you were raising the issue about how he wanted to be accommodative of people like Rajbansi and others and you guys differed with him – did you ever discuss the issue?

AK He was criticising me like anything, because I even refused to shake hands with Rajbansi.

JN But would he motivate, explain why he adopted this approach?

AK No, he laid down the rule, 'You chaps are wrong'.

This is a thing that arose about working in those organisations when we were still in jail and Hennie Ferrus, this Coloured chap, was being released - he was only serving five or six years. Madiba's view was that he should work in the Labour Party. Now this was against the view of people like Govan. Govan was quite a hardliner there. But Madiba had discussions with him: 'Join the Labour Party, get other comrades with you, work within the Labour Party and try to influence them from within rather than regarding them as enemies and having nothing to do with them.'

## **Traditional leaders**

TT Did you gather anything about how he felt about traditional leaders? Some people say he was at heart a traditional leader, others not at all.

AK I think he went a bit overboard with this thing about traditional leaders, too accommodating. The first thing that happened is that Matanzima's brother, George, came to see him in jail and he asked us to also see him. We didn't mind as he asked us so we saw him. But the debate arose when Matanzima wanted

to visit him, Kaiser himself. Then he was very careful. First of all there was the High Organ. The High Organ was a sort of executive consisting of the four senior leaders, the members of the NEC: Madiba, Walter, Govan, Raymond. I was there as a rotating member. The issue of Matanzima came up. So first he calls for the discussion at the High Organ and then he puts it to all the membership, first in our section and then to the main section. He sent a message that Matanzima wants to visit him, should he see or not? I think the majority said, 'No', and he didn't see him. I was on the High Organ at the time, I was against it, Govan was against it; Raymond was against it; Walter was, well, Walter was Walter...

JN Dialectical!

AK Then he put it to the membership in our section. He had special permission from the authorities to meet Gwala and them from the communal cells. Then he took all the things into consideration and he agreed: he didn't see Matanzima.

When Buthelezi wanted to visit him on Robben Island, again he raised it with the High Organ and then to the membership. The majority were against it and he didn't see him.

TT Coming to the later period, we see in his manuscript the position that we must respect traditional leadership as a cultural institution which should have no political, executive authority. In a NWC debate during CODESA about how traditional leadership should be represented at CODESA, he argues that they should come as members of the provincial or regional delegations and not have special representation as traditional leaders.

BH Generally, in the CODESA period, there were homeland parties that he was careful to accommodate, but I always got the sense that he was very careful to make a very strong distinction between them and traditional leaders and didn't really accord them the kind of respect he would have accorded to traditional leaders. My sense was that it was an instrumental thing to keep them from going to the other side, to keep them in the tent.

On the other hand my sense is that he was very respectful of tribal authority. Remember, Kathy, when that debate came up about his having to take his position as traditional leader. He laughed at that, and said, 'I have been a president now they want me to become chief of the village!' But he didn't mean that in a derogatory way and he persuaded Mandela to take on that role. My understanding of his approach was that he had an understanding of the role that chiefs play, but he also understood that many had been co-opted into the homeland system and that is what he was opposed to.

AK He laughed, 'I was the President of the country, now they asked me to be head of a little tribe.'

### **Consulting about decisions**

JN Maybe the way he handled the issue of visits by traditional leaders to Robben Island raises an interesting question about his character. On the one hand,

many of us would admire him for his decisive leadership, sometimes taking action ahead of everyone else, even if he didn't consult, even if people didn't agree. But in instances like this he would consult. Why do you think he acted differently? When he started negotiations he did it without you agreeing.

AK No, what happened then is that he was completely isolated from us, completely – in the same jail but isolated. We had no contact with him, at all, nothing. So he made the first move, to talk to the others, and then reported to us. They gave him permission to see us one by one. I was the only one who opposed it, he saw me last.

JN He knew!

AK He said he expected it! The others said, 'Why were we waiting so long?' All the others said that, Mlangeni was the chap who said most clearly, why were we waiting so long? He took me last and I said, 'No, we're going to now talk to them from a position of weakness.'

### **International visits**

JN From memory would there be any international visit or experience that comes to mind. I remember in India, New York and Washington.

AK No, there were little habits. There was food. When he went to India he took a bag of mealie meal, Mary knew how to make porridge.

He was also very, very conscious of his staff. When he and some of his staff members visited Saudi Arabia they were given such expensive gifts, watches, and there was a woman among them and she was boasting like anything. There was another woman who was not there, but she came into the picture, she was already working in the president's office or whatever, but she wasn't in Saudi Arabia. She didn't get anything near to that. So we were in India together and this other woman is there. He tells me, 'Please go with one of the Indian chaps and buy something expensive and let her think that they come from the Indian government.' So we did just that.