

Transcript of interview with Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Durban, 28 November 2014

TT: You had quite a multifaceted relationship with Nelson Mandela, a long-term one: as ANC, as leader of the IFP during the negotiations as a member of the government of national unity and as acting president. In your experience, how was his leadership brought to bear?

MB: As you say it was a multifaceted relationship. Apart from being my president he was my friend too and our friendship spanned decades as recorded in some of the books today. He was a friend of my father-in-law, Mr Zachariah Mzila in Johannesburg. Zachariah Mzila was a senior clerk and induna at Eloff Street extension compound, the WNLA compound. I think at one time Madiba stayed at WNLA. I remember he was always joking with my wife Irene about the fact that Irene as a teenager used to serve him tea when he visited their home, and he used to say she would do this [*putting his hand before his mouth*] and laugh and then Madiba would say, 'I must be very funny!' It was a joke between them. That's how long ago the connection is between my in-laws and him. Of course I was introduced to Madiba by Mr Sisulu, I knew Mr Sisulu as secretary general of the ANC long before and he is the one who introduced me to Madiba when I was in Johannesburg.

I remember the time when he was practising as a lawyer with Mr Tambo. I remember at one time there was an incident where the police had sort of harassed my first cousin, the king, the present king's father, King Cyprian Bhekizulu. We reported that matter to them. They were dealing with it as lawyers although I can't remember what the final state of things was.

I could never after that come to Johannesburg without Madiba inviting me for dinner as long ago as when he was married to Evelyn. I would go to their house in Orlando and have a meal with him. And then later he married Winnie Mandela and the same took place too. When Winnie was his wife Madiba would always invite me, and I remember that I met King Sabata Dalindyebo of the Tembus at his house. And sometimes when I came up with my cousin, the king, to Johannesburg, he would invite both of us and I remember in particular a meeting where our king met King Sabata Dalindyebo at Mr Mandela's house.

Then Rivonia came and he was arrested and imprisoned. Even at that time I think I am one of the few people that he corresponded with either directly, he would write to me, or else sometimes he would address a letter to my wife but in fact it was an indirect way of writing to me. Those letters are now recorded in some of the books like the *Prisoner in the Garden* and also *Conversations with Myself* and also in the latest book by Winnie Mandela. The last letter he wrote to me was in 1989 when there was violence, when he was agonising about the violence, suggesting that when he is released the two of us must meet to do something about the violence.

People always think that one is just trying to boast when I say that I don't think there is anyone who campaigned as much as I campaigned for his release, campaigning or holding rallies. We did so for years.

TT: When you were talking with the government did you make his release a condition of negotiations?

MB: Yes, but of course that was long afterwards. It was long after because in 1963 I went to Canada as a lay delegate of the Anglican Church to attend an Anglican Congress in Toronto, Canada, and when I was in London (en route to Canada) I got in touch with Mrs Tambo and she phoned Mr Tambo who was in Lusaka. Mr Tambo flew over to see me in London. He was a bit uneasy because he argued that at that time that there were lots of agents of BOSS, the Bureau for State Security. Being younger than him I thought he was exaggerating but probably as a more experienced leader than myself he must have known better. He thought that they would take some action against me if they heard that I had been with him, and in fact they did so. On my return they took away my passport – for nine years I was passport-less. Helen Suzman tried to get it returned and even a politician from this province, Douglas Mitchell, tried but they wouldn't return it.

Then Mr Tambo and Nkosi Albert Luthuli sent a message to me through Cleopas Nsibande. We Zulus resisted the homeland system longer than most areas. The government, kept on saying that the act was permissive and that we had to 'accept' it, but later they threw away all pretences and said, well, we had no choice. The message from Mr Tambo and Nkosi Albert Luthuli which they sent through Mr Nsibande, who in the 1990s became the interim leader of the ANC in Gauteng, was to say that if the regime imposed the homeland system on the Zulu people, I must not refuse to lead it if the people elected me, which in fact happened. Then I was elected in June 1970 and became the head of the KwaZulu government.

I remember that I had been invited to the United States and could not be part of the leadership exchange program because I had no passport, but as soon as I became the head of a government so-called they renewed the invitation, and I went to the United States and they gave me a passport for 12 months.

Since you are not talking about Tambo I won't say much about him, but Mr Tambo and I met a few times abroad especially when the debate hotted up on sanctions and disinvestment. I remember we were invited in about 1975 to Ethiopia: there was a brains trust involving the United States, what they called the African-American dialogue series which held seminars in some of the independent states and this time they invited me to Addis Ababa. I didn't realise that Mr Tambo had been invited. We met in Nairobi and Mr Tambo said to me that he didn't think it was wise for us, for him and myself, to attend this seminar on disinvestment and disagree as South African leaders, it wouldn't look good for us to disagree on a foreign platform. So we talked until the early hours of the morning and Mr Tambo said, no, I should go and he would not go and he stayed in Nairobi and I went to Ethiopia. On my return I joined him in Nairobi – they were just about celebrating their independence and we travelled in the same plane to Lusaka. I took advantage of being outside the country to go to Lusaka to thank Dr Kenneth Kaunda and also to go to Tanzania to thank President Nyerere for giving sanctuary to our exiles.

When this debate hotted up, Mr Tambo said, no, he thought I should come to London with a delegation. That happened in 1979, November or so. Mr Tambo said I should bring a delegation with me, he would have a delegation. In his delegation he had our former president, Mr Mbeki, and also Mr Nzo. We discussed the two issues: the armed struggle and sanctions. Although we could not agree on embracing the two strategies, there was no acrimony at all, we never quarrelled or got in any heated exchanges. Then after that Mr Tambo said that he would come back to me in December on some issues I raised, but unfortunately that didn't happen because in June 1980 Mr Nzo launched a bitter attack on me in London. And I remember the message I got from Mr Mandela who in spite of that sent a message to me to say that I should go to Lusaka. But the acrimony from Lusaka was such that I couldn't possibly go there. Since you are asking about Mr Mandela I thought I should give that background.

Some alienation began between ANC and Inkatha. Inkatha was actually a front for the ANC. When I stopped in Lusaka to thank President Kaunda, he arranged for me to visit the headquarters of his party, UNIP. After that visit he invited me again to State House and said that while he appreciated that virtually all our leaders were banned or imprisoned, he felt that I should start a membership-based organisation. And since I did the things I did as a cadre of the ANC, I had to consult Mr Tambo about founding a membership-based organisation. Mr Tambo's message was that I should go ahead, and that was how Inkatha was founded in March, 1975. I actually stated that its policies were based on the policies of founding fathers of the ANC in 1912. It was no more than a front of the ANC. But then unfortunately the relationship got much worse between me and the external mission of the ANC.

But the significant thing, since we are talking about Mr Mandela, is that it never soured relations between me and him. No. The last letter he wrote to me was in 1989 when he was lamenting the fact that there was this 'People's War' and that black people were killing each other and he suggested that as soon as he was released we should get together, he and I, to do something about it.

As you may remember, when Mr De Klerk invited me I made clear at that meeting, that negotiating with him without Mr Mandela was out of the question, that it was non-negotiable and that Mr Mandela and others in exile had to be part of it. So in February, if you recall, when Mr De Klerk announced the release of Mr Mandela, I am the only person he mentioned by name in Parliament, it is recorded in Hansard, as having helped him to make the decision.

So shortly after Mr Mandela was released, he phoned me to say we should meet as we had agreed in the correspondence. It was a question of arranging a meeting between us as soon as possible. For some reason the hardliners in the UDF and ANC prevented Mr Mandela from seeing me, to the extent that when he visited Transkei as it was then, some of the traditional leaders asked him how come he hasn't seen me, since it was an open secret that we were friends - and Mandela said, the leaders of the ANC and the UDF almost throttled him, preventing him seeing me.

So we didn't meet until 29 January the following year. That was almost a year afterwards. It was in the Royal Hotel here in Durban with a big delegation of the ANC and an Inkatha delegation. One of the things in the joint communiqué was that from that time onwards he, Madiba, and myself, would address joint rallies of ANC and IFP members. But sadly, that was not to be. Shortly afterwards I received an invitation to hold a rally in a place near Pietermaritzburg called Taylor's Halt. I contacted Madiba, let's go together, Madiba. He agreed with alacrity that we should go together. But a few days before we were due to go there, I heard that he was no longer going. I phoned and asked him and he said to me, 'Man, the leader of the ANC in your province of Natal brought in a whole busload of leaders of the ANC who came all of them to say that under no circumstances should I go with you there.' They prevented it.

So we didn't meet, and any subsequent meetings that we met were meetings organised by people like religious leaders such as Archbishop Tutu and Bishop Mogoba and others. But no meetings took place and that soured relations very badly.

You remember we went to the Security Council after that and I was very sad to hear my friend Madiba describing Inkatha as a surrogate of the apartheid regime. But of course with that background which I have given to you, I didn't hold it against Mr Mandela because I knew that those people who had drafted that had put it in his speech and that it didn't come as I knew him.

And then there were various efforts, three a side of ANC and IFP, 15 a side, all these efforts took place and ultimately there was the Government of National Unity after the election. I was very happy to know that Madiba had appointed me and a few of my colleagues from Inkatha to be part of the Government of National Unity. So I worked with Madiba.

TT: Did he consult you about which of your colleagues he should appoint?

MB: He said I must just give him the names, he accepted the names I gave him and didn't try to veto any of the names.

TT: Did he consult you on what posts they would occupy, or was that something he had decided himself?

MB: No, I think he mentioned the posts that were available and I suggested people.

TT: When you had to act as president, did he discuss the issues with you, personally, or did you rely just on the government structures?

MB: There was a SADC meeting in Mauritius [at which the situation in Lesotho was discussed] and he was due to go to the United States and Mr Mbeki the deputy president was going to Singapore. So we were in his hotel until very late at night, he was consulting very late that night. South Africa at that time was chairing SADC, so he was chairing SADC.

And an interesting thing took place just before 12 midnight. It was a time when he and Mr Mugabe had rather a frosty relationship. Madiba looked at his watch and he said to me, 'Look, it's after 12, you are already acting president, talk to transcript_mangosuthu buthelezi.docx

Mr Mugabe.' So I talked to Mr Mugabe about the SADC troops that I was to send to Lesotho because the situation that exists now had taken place where they tried to stage a coup d'état.

We talked about the issues in his hotel until after midnight. I talked to President Mohae and so on. You will remember, subsequently I sent troops to Lesotho from Botswana and South Africa. Just the other day Cyril Ramaphosa was making a joke about the fact that I reminded him that I was acting president of the Republic and acting chairman of SADC at that time when I had to intervene in Lesotho. So he was joking saying, 'Yes the people in Lesotho, they joke about someone who invaded them at that time!' He was just joking about it. So I said, 'In fact it's not true because even then I consulted with Mr Mandela that I was going to take that step.' And in fact when King Letsie III got married I was a guest at the stadium and when the VIPs were introduced and my name was mentioned the whole stadium shook, women ululating and so on. And when we were having lunch after the wedding of the king, many prominent Lesotho citizens like judges and magistrates and the elite who were at lunch thanked me because, they said, I prevented a bloodbath in Lesotho by sending those troops. I said to Cyril Ramaphosa it was not true that I just invaded without consulting Madiba.

So I always say, of all things, he was not obliged to ask me to act, in fact relations then were very delicate between Inkatha and the ANC, but he entrusted the country to me and of course I know that some of my ANC colleagues were quite furious.

TT: Were there other moments at which you had to act as president when his input and guidance was significant?

MB: This Lesotho one I highlighted because of the situation, but there were many other occasions when he did so. He made it automatic that when the deputy president wasn't there he would appoint me.

TT: There's a perception of him as a hands off president who wasn't involved in governance, but was more just an icon.

MB: That is partly true, I'm sure you must have heard him, it was his joke all the time, that 'The de facto president of the country is Thabo, I am the de jure president'. But as far as the Cabinet is concerned it was true, because the person who was managing the country was Mr Mbeki and he was involved in the big things like visiting Orania and doing this and that and other big things internationally.

TT: Did he chair cabinet?

MB: Hardly. I don't remember. When he came sometimes, Mr Mbeki sat on this right and I on his left, especially after Mr De Klerk left. I remember in particular when this bill banning corporal punishment was discussed, I remember raising the issue of how wrong it was to ban corporal punishment and I said, 'You know', addressing other ministers, 'Madiba wouldn't be sitting where he is now if he didn't get corporal punishment.' He said 'He's right, he's right, he's right!'

TT: Looking at your role as minister of home affairs – was it mainly Thabo Mbeki who interacted with you or did Madiba engage with you as minister?

MB: No, it was Mr Mbeki, not so much Madiba.

TT: There were some issues where there were big differences and difficulties, such as the violence in KwaZulu Natal; the constitution and the place of traditional leaders – to what extent do you remember his involvement in handling these issues?

MB: Just before Christmas, I have forgotten what year it was, I and Nkosi Holomisa, who is a member of the ANC but is a traditional leader, had made an appointment but were told that Madiba had gone to Transkei for Christmas and our memorandum was received not by him but by someone else. We were promised that our memorandum would be responded to fully – but it was never responded to.

TT: I think he had a view of the future of traditional leaders that was different from yours or Holomisa's.

MB: Well I think he was under pressure. I think you must appreciate that here were many things that Madiba would have wanted to do – just as it was an open secret he wanted Ramaphosa to be general secretary but the ANC wouldn't allow it. There are many other issues where he would have acted in a different way but there was a lot of pressure from ANC colleagues.

TT: My understanding is that he had great respect for traditional custom and for the role of traditional leaders in the struggle . . .

MB: Yes, I agree with that.

TT: . . .but that he felt that in the democratic system we were moving into, they would have a cultural but not a political role. I think that you would take a different view

MB: Well, I do. In fact I say that if there is anything that the black government has failed to do it is to address the issue of the role, powers and functions of traditional leaders. They dodged it, because the Municipal Structures Act, section 181 states that a certain portion of traditional leaders in a district may, may participate in district meetings but cannot vote. This is the position up to now. And in 2000 – it was no longer him, it was now Mr Mbeki – an agreement was made and a cabinet committee was set up under Mr Zuma which came to the conclusion that in order to address the issue of the role, powers and functions of traditional leaders, chapters 7 and 12 of the constitution needed to be amended, and it was agreed. But it was no longer under him, it was under Mr Mbeki. That agreement was never honoured.

TT: The House of Traditional Leaders and the Provincial Houses have no executive functions . . .

MB: Nor do they have any budgets

TT ... from your experience do you feel that was his view?

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MB: I have said that I don't think it was his view. He respected his traditions. He was a great democrat but he had great respect for our own indigenous things, genuine respect.

TT: When Mr De Klerk left the Government of National Unity, you stayed.

MB: I stayed. He tried to persuade me, but I stayed

TT: What was your reasoning for staying? Was it because the constitution says there should be a Government of National Unity?

MB: Not only that. A lot of our people had died, more than 20,000 people died. For us as black people it was more important to seek reconciliation than risk escalation of violence

TT: If you were to assess the achievements and shortcomings of Madiba's Presidency, would you say that reconciliation was one of the achievements?

MB: Yes. But over the years I complained that it was more the white-black thing which I think is to his credit, rather than black and black. Before 1999 there were invitations for him and myself to visit Thokoza in the East Rand in order to unveil a monument which had the names of all ANC and IFP people who had died in the violence. But somehow he never gave a date. I don't think it was deliberate but he just had too much on his hands. It didn't happen. It was not until October 1999 that Mr Mbeki, as President of the ANC and myself went to Thokoza to unveil that monument.

I have forgotten what meeting it was that took place – he was going to board the official plane and I was asked to accompany him to the airport. I sat with him in the back of the car, and he regretted very much that he and I were prevented by others from meeting and so on – it was at a time that he was still president.

But there is a very important incident involving Madiba which I can never forget. It happened here in Durban. We had been supporting the King, accompanying him to Pretoria, when he saw President De Klerk and when he came here to the City Hall to see Mr De Klerk and Mr Mandela. There was a lot of tension at that time, but somehow through Mr Zuma, who was introduced to the king by myself, I took the trouble to take Madiba with me to the king's palace. And then he struck a very warm friendship with the king.

There was the issue of international mediation, which was one thing that is very important, that did not augur well for Madiba. It was not a good thing. You will remember that international mediators were already here in 1994 but they were sent out of the country because of the interaction between Mr Ramaphosa and Mr Roelf Meyer and they left without mediating, whereas we had agreed about that. We went to Skukuza, with the king and Mr De Klerk, myself and ministers and we agreed that there should be international mediation. When they came they were not allowed to mediate. Then that academic from Kenya, Washington Okumu, intervened. Then on April 19, 1994, a few days before the election Mr De Klerk, Mr Mandela and myself signed an agreement saying that

we accept going to elections on condition that as soon as possible after the elections international mediation would go ahead. That was never honoured. That was dishonoured by Madiba. When I asked Mr De Klerk about it he said that whenever he raised the issue with Madiba he got very angry with him and scolded him. That agreement was never honoured.

The subject was the issue of the place of the king in a democratic dispensation. The king did have his own memorandum, which had nothing to do with me and the IFP, which was making more demands than those I was prepared to go along with about his position. Somehow the king and Madiba got very close and when that happened Madiba didn't think that it was necessary to honour the agreement on mediation.

Then, one thing that I always say, Madiba was a man of integrity, and that also highlights our friendship.

There was uproar in Parliament when Madiba passed away and I paid tribute to him and cited as examples of his integrity – the fact that in 2002 he actually said, talking about me, that we used all sorts of ammunition to destroy him, but we failed, he is still there, we cannot ignore him, he is a formidable survivor. That made ANC people very angry, how can he talk like that, but he said so, he was a man of integrity, and I respect him for that.

Another thing I quoted which caused an uproar in parliament after his death was related to those Zulus who were demonstrating and who were shot at Shell House, when Madiba stood up in Parliament and said that he had given instructions to shoot to kill, on record. I said, even though that may not be wise, it shows the kind of integrity the man had, a person without courage like his would not have admitted that, politically, but I quoted him myself to show what a man of integrity he was.

TT: Any other things that come to mind, that we haven't touched on?

MB: Also about our friendship. Some people might say that since Madiba is an icon I am merely claiming that he was my friend. But for instance, when I turned 80 he couldn't come to the dinner here in Durban, but he asked me to come up so we could have a cup of tea, just the two of us. Again, to prove his friendship, when Josina Machel, his stepdaughter, got married, he and Mrs. Graca Machel invited me to Maputo to the wedding, as a friend.

All the things that happened never extinguished the friendship between the two of us.