

Remembering Mandela today

VALUES OF AN ICON:

South Africa, like nations elsewhere, lacks the spirit of compassion and empathy espoused by its late leader

SPEAKING at the Talloires Network Leaders Conference 2014 in Cape Town last week, we were reminded of the late Nelson Mandela, who passed away a year ago today.

This cannot be more telling than when reading the South African *Sunday Times* about how much a good leader is dearly missed, especially at a time when there seemingly is a vacuum at many leadership levels, including globally.

The emptiness can be sensed in a "Dear Khulu" open letter, written by Mandela's former assistant of more than 19 years, Zelda la Grange. She laments a "sharp decline in mutual respect" among the people — friend and foe, something that Malaysia can resonate with, if not the world over — even among so-called world leaders today.

"I remember how you disliked it when people were submissive before you, but at the same time, how disrespect angered you," she wrote.

If this is not enough, the same issue of *Sunday Times* front-paged the headline: "SA's fat cat just got fatter."

The country's mega-rich just kept getting richer, despite the slowing economy and a wave of mining strikes, it noted.

In contrast, mine workers "continue to fight for a 12,500-rand (RM3,860) monthly minimum wage", as compared with the billions of rand that the mining bosses take home, being among the top 10 richest in the country.

"In all eight, South African firms paid their chief executives more than 300 times the salary sought by miners, while 31 companies paid their leaders more than 100 times as much."



The vacuum of leadership in many countries is testimony to how much a leader like the late Nelson Mandela is missed.

Yet, the miners are shunned away. Not surprisingly, this brought widespread condemnation.

More so, when Professor Peter Alexander, chair of social change at the University of Johannesburg, was quoted as saying: "Ironically, in South Africa, the share of total income going to the top one per cent declined under apartheid and has been rapidly increasing since then. With the exception of a tiny black elite, the people who have benefited the most from African National Congress rules are wealthy whites."

Again, Malaysia may need to reflect on a similar reality back home, as socioeconomic inequality continues to be an issue of concern across class and ethnic lines.

As though this is not enough, the country's president, Jacob Zuma, has filed a notice to oppose Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's claim to the Mandela family home in Qunu, a place where Mandela was buried.

When they divorced in 1996, Mandela, in his will, wanted the Qunu property to be used by the Mandela family "in perpetuity in order to preserve the unity of the Mandela family".

Allegedly, Madikizela-Mandela, Mandela's second wife for 38 years, was left out of his will after he died in December last year.

Perhaps, the best summary to the state of affairs post-Mandela is the editorial in another daily, *Cape Argus*, last Monday, posing the question: "Where is our Ubuntu?"

This well-known indigenous term is the pride of the country in expressing "its compassion and empathy for others".

"These days, though, the lack of Ubuntu displayed by so many of our compatriots is sickening," remarked the editorial.

In this context, it is instructive to lift some memories from la Grange's open letter when she recalled what Mandela used to say to her. For example: "It is easier to change others than it is to change yourself."

Yet, we know that true and lasting change starts with oneself.

Another: "We require disciplined leaders and members with respect for their organisations, who care equally for all South Africans and for all people who live within our borders."

As she also aptly asserted: "It is not only for you (Mandela) that we grieve, but also for our own loss — most importantly, loss of self-respect, which strains our respect for one another."

Hence, as we recall the legacy of this rare iconic leader of not just South Africa, but the world, it would do good to re-emphasise the importance he placed on respect and the spirit of Ubuntu that exists in society.

Indeed, the leaders conference, in its deliberations and debates on contextualising civic and community engagement towards sustainable development as its overarching and core goal, cannot but recognise that the "respect" and "trust" that come with it are fast slipping away. It is imperative that they be revitalised in a value system that badly needs recalibrating, if not an overhaul.



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