

## **Transcript of an interview with Thami Mazwai, Sandton, 7 October 2015**

TT The aim is to get your insights regarding Nelson Mandela's relationship with the media.

### **Mandela: Statesman and politician**

TM My take is that Mandela, on the one hand, respected the independence of the media as an institution. That was Mandela the statesman. But then Mandela the politician tended to react very forcefully where he thought that there was an unfair interpretation either of the ANC or the government or of himself.

But he tried to walk the tightrope and to react in such a way that there was no invasion of the right of the media to write and tell it as it is.

What he then tended to do would be to invite specific journalists to a breakfast. Then he would say, 'Look this is what you said but this is in reality what the situation is.' He invited me to one of those breakfasts but he shrouded it well when he said that 'No, I must come with my new bride.' I had just recently got married so he wants to have breakfast with my new bride, just to meet her and so on. When we're there with my new bride he then broached the issue that he had wanted to broach in the first place which was an interpretation of what he had said. I don't remember what it is that I had written. So that was how he tried to manage the situation.

### **Mandela's meetings with journalists**

But he did have at least two meetings with journalists that I can recall. One was at the Indaba Hotel and we, SANEF, had requested the meeting to express our disquiet at the fact that there was a tendency on the part of the ANC to disregard black journalists and the role they had played under very difficult circumstances. It was a very, very positive meeting and I recall that we were all eating out of his hands. It was a very positive meeting in which he committed himself to doing everything that he could to get the appropriate transformation in the media.

Then we had another meeting with him. He invited us to a meeting at Shell House. Mandela was raising specific issues on the way that journalists had reported on certain issues. It was 20 years ago so I don't remember the actual stories. It was quite a robust exchange. And then the third or fourth time, was when one of the politicians had made a disparaging remark about black journalists. He phoned me personally that evening and said, 'Look. Don't take this personally. You are definitely not the person being referred to, because we know what your outlook is.'

## **South African National Editors Forum**

And then there was – as you mentioned - his reference to my resignation from SANEF

Post-1994 and post-1995, what happened was that, as happened in other aspects of our lives, the more conservative people, white people, were pleasantly surprised. And this also applied to white journalists who then tried to inculcate a certain definition of objectivity which sort of placed their view of the world, of what press freedom meant, over any other interpretation and outside of reality on the ground.

Now the incident that I can recall was when Denel had made a bid to sell some arms to Saudi Arabia. Denel did so, some UK arms manufacturers did so as did arms manufacturers from various other countries. Now the conditions of the bid imposed by Saudi Arabia was absolute confidentiality. The *Mail & Guardian* decided to mention that Denel had submitted the tender which then meant that Denel was disqualified.

I challenged that in the media to say, 'What type of objectivity is this because the people who are disadvantaged in the process is South Africa.' And I also then mentioned the fact that UK newspapers ignored the UK bid - it's not that they didn't know, they knew about it but did not publish. But our brand of media freedom in South Africa is not good for our development. I published that. My colleagues in SANEF were quite upset and I also stuck to my guns. So the best for me - I was chairman at the time - was to quit because there was no meeting of the minds as to what developmental journalism is, as something that I was writing about at the time.

So those were the dynamics of the time and I think that people like Joel Netshitenzhe and Mandela sort of agreed with my views at the time. Perhaps it was out of self-interest because they also wanted a media that was more receptive to the dynamics of change than one which wanted to impose a certain interpretation of media freedom that seemed to say that you just publish and be damned.

### **Differences among black journalists**

TT It seemed things got off to a good start in '94, then in '95 the ANC starts feeling it is being unfairly criticised over particular issues. Mandela starts saying as long as there was white ownership of the media, black journalists were not free. And he put it in ways – including saying that white owners were using black journalists - that some black journalists felt was calling their integrity into question.

- TM I think that there was a time when there was a split in the ranks of black journalists. There were those journalists who were obviously very accommodating of the ANC and then there were others who said the ANC must be held to account. This was the time when the *Mail & Guardian* led the charge in that respect. So there was a time when black journalists did indeed feel that they must be judged in terms of their own, and that they cannot be seen to be manipulated by whites. There were strong feelings around that.
- TT The incidents arose over instances where he felt he was misinterpreted; or where it was said he was more sensitive to white fears than black needs, and he would react strongly. But he somehow had the gift as a politician of fighting with people but still respecting them.
- TM Ja, that's why I said there were two Mandelas, Mandela the politician and Mandela the statesman. That's how I used to see it. He would become a politician at times, be very anti-media, if one can use that phrase. But at the same time he was the protector of media rights and so on. So that you can't take away from him and his government. No other president has had a more profound respect for the media than Mandela. But he used to fight it at the same time.

He used to phone individual editors. He knew them by their first names, both black and white. He would phone them and say, 'Hey man, I don't like what you wrote. This is my point,' and even invite you for breakfast. He understood the culture, the environment within which we operated.

But the media had its own internal contradictions - and I use that word advisedly because, and I feel to this day, those contradictions are as yet unresolved. It was very easy to be anti-apartheid, for everybody, including the media. So we come from an era where the media was either pro-apartheid or anti-apartheid. When there was a new order the media failed to really define its role in that changing environment.

So then you had the extremists who came with their religious interpretation of media freedom, that is unbridled freedom without any obligations to societal dynamics, the 'publish and be damned' thing. And there was then the school which some of us belonged to, which was: 'You've got to be part and parcel of the change; and you've got to be tolerant of the fact that there are certain issues that are going to emerge which you've got to understand why, and then provide that context'.

### **The issue of ownership**

There was an historical evolution. Newspapers were owned by Argus and South African Associated Newspapers. The one was more conservative, the other was more liberal, and so on. But what was common to them was that they

operated on the basis that they knew what was good for black South Africa, for South Africa. It was that type of approach which created the contradictions that we are now talking of because of that ownership pattern that really determined the relationships between the ANC and the media, because these were conservative white houses. Both were owned by Anglo American so when Anglo American sold both to overseas interests it was a message that that blacks cannot be trusted with media freedom. And the takeover of the media by Zimbabwe which turned it into a poodle didn't help. So instead you find that the South African media house was on its guard, that what happens in Zimbabwe, what happens in Namibia must not happen here in South Africa. They have got to play that role of holding government to account, must keep the ANC on its toes. The white ownership eventually encouraged that type of thinking because it's difficult to separate a white owner from being an ordinary threatened citizen because now there's this black government. So those are the patterns that were running amok in society.

TT So you suggest that the ownership and management of a media house does make it difficult say for a black journalist to work in a way that conforms to a different conception from that of the media house? It does make itself felt?

TM It does. And the owners are investors, don't forget that. They are investors and they have got to protect their investment. They don't have to say it outright but journalists are smart people. They know what's going to annoy the boss and what is not going to annoy the boss. That's reality, and that's human nature.

TT So Mandela's emphasis on ownership was not misplaced?

TM No, I don't think it was. It was not misplaced.

TT Both sides felt their integrity was at issue. Do you think the friction was unavoidable at that stage?

TM You've also got to ask yourself perhaps, did the ANC in its own back-room discussions discuss what the effect of such statements would be in terms of making black journalists their allies in whatever sense? I don't think the ANC itself did enough thinking. I recall it was the ANC that said it's going to engage with white journalists because the black journalists do not own, they basically do what their master tells them to do. I remember we had a whole meeting to discuss that, to say, how can they say this? We had a whole meeting to discuss that statement, when the ANC took a decision that no they're going to deal with white journalists.

That's why we then called that meeting with Mandela at the Indaba Hotel. And also there was another meeting that was held, I think in Rosebank – the people representing the ANC there were Pallo Jordan, Valli Moosa, Walter Sisulu. Walter Sisulu was there and we appealed to him, because he was

Zwelakhe's father, to say, 'Look, the ANC's attitude is unacceptable.' It was as a result of those statements that the ANC made, that we've got to deal with the white people because the blacks are just pawns in the whole set-up. That meeting was followed by the meeting with Mandela at the Indaba Hotel.