



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

THE WORLD NEEDS ANOTHER MANDELA MOMENT

By Daryl Swanepoel

The world has become remarkably good at disengagement.

Nations are disengaging from one another. Political parties no longer seek to persuade; they seek to defeat. Communities retreat into ideological echo chambers where disagreement is increasingly treated as betrayal, rather than an opportunity for dialogue. Even within families, difficult conversations are avoided, because people no longer know how to disagree without damaging relationships. The language of public life has become increasingly absolutist, leaving little room for compromise or mutual understanding.

Perhaps we have misdiagnosed the problem. We speak constantly about polarisation, yet the deeper challenge may be disengagement. We are steadily losing the willingness to engage constructively with those who think differently from ourselves.

It was against this backdrop that the theme of a recent conference in Dakar - *Disengagement and a Shifting World: Re-reading Mandelaism to Recreate Bonds and Meaning* - could hardly have been timelier. The question it poses is not simply whether Nelson Mandela remains an admired historical figure. History settled that long ago. The more important question is whether the principles that guided his politics still offer a way through an increasingly fragmented world.

That requires first understanding what Mandelaism actually is.

Too often it is reduced to admiration for Mandela himself, as though it were simply a celebration of an extraordinary individual. That misses the point entirely. Mandelaism is not about the man. It is about a method of politics. It is the conviction that legitimacy matters more than victory, that dialogue is ultimately stronger than domination, that reconciliation is not a sign of weakness, but of confidence, and that leadership exists to serve society, rather than the ambitions of those who hold power.

Those are not merely attractive ideals. They are practical principles for governing divided societies.

South Africa's democratic transition demonstrated that sustainable peace is seldom achieved, because one side defeats another. It emerges when former opponents conclude that their shared future matters more than their divided past. The constitutional settlement that followed did not require unanimous agreement. It required something far more important: the acceptance that every participant possessed equal political legitimacy.

That was Nelson Mandela's greatest contribution.

He transformed reconciliation from a moral aspiration into a governing strategy. He understood that people do not have to abandon their convictions in order to build a common future. They do, however, have to recognise one another's humanity and accept that no democratic society can endure if political legitimacy belongs only to those who prevail.

Perhaps no quotation captures this better than Mandela's observation that no one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, background or religion. Hatred, he argued, is learned behaviour, and if people can learn to hate, they can also be taught to love.

These words are often quoted because they are compassionate. They deserve equal attention because they are politically profound. If hatred is learned, reconciliation can also be learned. If division can be cultivated, so too can trust. The health of a democracy therefore depends not only on its laws or institutions, but on whether its citizens continue to believe that engagement is preferable to permanent confrontation.

That lesson extends far beyond South Africa.

Across the world, institutions are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. Citizens increasingly distrust governments. Political parties question election outcomes. International organisations struggle to command confidence from both established and emerging powers. Social media rewards outrage far more readily than understanding, while political rhetoric increasingly frames opponents not as competitors, but as enemies.

These developments are usually described as struggles over power. Increasingly, however, they are struggles over legitimacy.

Emerging powers seek greater influence, because they believe today's international institutions no longer reflect contemporary realities. Established powers fear that weakening existing institutions may reduce their effectiveness at precisely the moment global cooperation is most needed. Both concerns are understandable. Neither can be resolved through domination. Lasting solutions will depend upon rebuilding institutions that command confidence across both developed and developing worlds.

This may be Mandela's most enduring lesson for international politics.

The opposite of conflict is not agreement. It is legitimacy.

People are remarkably capable of accepting decisions they dislike when they believe the process was fair, that their voices were heard and that their dignity was respected. Conversely, even favourable outcomes become unstable when people lose confidence in the institutions that produced them. Legitimacy is therefore not simply a constitutional principle. It is the foundation upon which peaceful societies, effective governments and durable international cooperation ultimately rest.

There is another aspect of Mandela's leadership that deserves renewed attention. Servant-leadership.

Modern politics increasingly rewards performance over purpose. Success is too often measured by electoral victories, media attention or ideological purity. Mandela approached leadership differently, in that he understood that the true measure of political success lies not in the authority leaders accumulate during their lifetimes, but in the strength of the institutions, relationships and opportunities they leave behind.

That understanding appears increasingly rare.

Leadership has become transactional at precisely the moment the world requires leaders capable of building trust across profound political, cultural and ideological divides. Democracies cannot function without opponents who recognise one another's legitimacy. International cooperation cannot succeed if nations approach every negotiation as a zero-sum contest. Social cohesion cannot flourish where compromise is portrayed as surrender.

When Mandela declared at his inauguration that "the time for the healing of the wounds has come," he did not suggest those wounds had disappeared. He recognised that healing is never an event. It is a continuous process requiring patience, humility and sustained engagement. Democracies are no different. They require constant renewal, because legitimacy itself must continually be earned.

The consequences of forgetting these lessons are already becoming visible. Politics becomes increasingly tribal, institutions steadily lose public confidence, international cooperation weakens, economic inequality fuels political instability, and technology advances while trust declines. The world becomes more connected than ever before, yet increasingly incapable of meaningful engagement.

The challenge before us, therefore, is not whether we continue to admire Nelson Mandela. It is whether we still possess the political imagination and moral courage to practise the principles that defined his leadership. Every generation confronts its own moment of choice. It can retreat into disengagement, allowing mistrust to harden into permanent division. Or it can choose engagement, recognising that legitimacy, dialogue and servant leadership remain the only durable foundations upon which peaceful societies can be built.

That is the enduring essence of Mandelaism. And that is why the world needs another Mandela moment.

This article draws on a presentation delivered by Daryl Swanepoel, Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute, at the international conference Disengagement and a Shifting World: Re-reading Mandelaism to Recreate Bonds and Meaning, held in Dakar, Senegal, from 18–20 July 2026.