’Humpty Dumpty’, Ahmed Kathrada, and the death of a conscience

The Roving Reader Files


It may not have felt like it at the time, but on 28th March this year we all lost something special. No, I don’t mean our wallets or our smart phones. What we lost was something even more important – a bit of global conscience. What do I mean? It was the day South African veteran of the anti-apartheid struggle Ahmed Kathrada died, aged 86.

Ahmed Kathrada may not be a name you’re very familiar with. Yet even as a youth this man had stood shoulder to shoulder with Nelson Mandela and other great anti-apartheid leaders right from the beginning of the campaign against the consolidating apartheid state in the 1940s. He was also with Mandela throughout his long incarceration.

Ahmed Kathrada in 2016. Source: Wikimedia Commons
The shadow of Mandela’s imprisonment stretched even as far as Manchester, here in the UK. Many of us will remember the anti-apartheid demonstrations, the boycotts of banks and other businesses with interests in South Africa, the endless playing of the catchy song ‘Free Nelson Mandela’. Yes, in those distant days before the internet and Spotify, everyone had their ears glued to weird contraptions called radios and even record players. Those were the days...

We’ve ruminated on this blog about the struggle against apartheid before, from the point of view of its effect on the Black population of South Africa. In fact, we took a long look at Nelson Mandela himself after he passed away in 2013, including sharing with you the poetry written for him by Manchester schoolchildren during the Anti-Apartheid Fortnights of 1988 and 1989. Maybe you were one of those schoolchildren...

Much of the human detail that we know about the trials, imprisonment and long ordeal of the early leaders of the anti-apartheid movement, is thanks to Kathrada. Without him Mandela’s celebrated autobiography The Long Walk to Freedom (published 1994) would not have been written. Mandela himself recognised Kathrada as what he later called “an important depository of organisational memory,” and Kathrada became involved in archival, historical and legacy projects after his own decades-long imprisonment came to an end, and the apartheid regime fell.

Mandela further acknowledged the significance of his friend’s contribution in a Foreword to Kathrada’s own autobiography No Bread for Mandela. Memoir of Ahmed Kathrada. Prisoner No. 468/64 (published 2004), saying,

“It is important that the history of our struggle... be recorded as fully and with all the different perspectives and nuances. Kathy was always analysing and trying to understand, even while he was an active participant.”
Ahmed Kathrada was a South African whose family origins were in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore *No Bread for Mandela* provides a significant alternative perspective on the experience of apartheid from the point of view of someone of Muslim Indian heritage. Apartheid was built on institutionalised distinctions between the races, and even during incarceration prisoners were treated differently along racial lines.

Kathrada remembered with indignation that as an Indian he was given long trousers and socks to wear when imprisoned on the infamous Robben Island – whilst Mandela and the other Black prisoners had to bear the indignity of shorts. Food was also allocated according to race, with Kathrada basking in the ‘luxury’ of being handed bread even as his Black comrades remained without.

The memoir records the ups and downs of a life spent in activism. However, my abiding memory will be of Ahmed Kathrada as a man who was brave enough to admit his weaknesses, and self-reflective enough to recognise his own human frailty. He had personally struggled with the reality of looking the fear of death in the face, and he did not seek to glorify that experience. Recalling his state of mind in the early days of solitary confinement, he eloquently described the debilitating anxiety, the preoccupation with his own fate above that of others, the gnawing conviction that he would die. He recalled the dread of letting his comrades down were he to break under torture. To shut out these fears he spent hours reciting whatever poetry or songs he could remember. Anything to preoccupy his mind. Years later, he exclaimed,

> “Whoever would have imagined… that in adult life, ‘Humpty Dumpty’ would make such a positive contribution towards keeping one’s mind occupied and sane?”

Who indeed.
Despite the privation and mistreatment, Kathrada and his comrades emerged from their enforced isolation even more convinced that the only way forward for their country was as a non-racial homeland for all South Africans – valuing the contribution of all, whatever their colour. The Rainbow Nation was what they had lived, sacrificed and been prepared to die to for.

To the last this gentle, kind and humble man spoke out against racism, calling for justice and a better future for all. At the opening of the Robben Island Exhibition in Cape Town in 1993, he had said:

“While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness; a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness; a triumph of the new South Africa over the old.”

With the death of Ahmed Kathrada, an eloquent advocate for justice and peace has been silenced. Part of our collective conscience as human beings has gone. We should hope that his legacy lives on.