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Editorial

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Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela's death on 5 December 2013 and his funeral ten days later were taken as an occasion in the global media to discuss the merits of political leadership for human security, with occasional comments on its pitfalls. This particular leader is not the most politically safe object of discussion, as, for a long time, he openly advocated civil disobedience and resistance, initially of the non-violent kind, but later becoming violent. Predictably, the local hegemon reacted with great brutality and sweeping measures to the resistance of the ANC, policies that shocked many in the western world. This reaction by the government and its supporters and the counterreaction it incited amounted, in the long run, to little more than a vast reduction in human security for most citizens of South Africa, lasting until the ANC's victory and Mr Mandela's ascendance to the presidency in 1994.

Mr Mandela's example illustrates how responsible leaders of political resistance movements must assess the centres of power without any illusions about the innate legitimacy of sovereign governments. They must navigate carefully among the institutions of power, their directives, laws, and enforcement agencies, always seeking maximum damage to the holders of power and minimal harm to the rest of the citizenry. If they lose sight of that balance, they cease to be responsible moral leaders. This ethical principle clashes vehemently with common conventions about the inviolability of the rule of law, the taken-for-granted legitimacy of state authority, and the currently fashionable glorification of the no-holds-barred 'war against terrorism'. The convention holds that the state is the only institution powerful enough—and morally legitimised—to counter anarchic movements and the threat to human security such movements supposedly pose. Yet the ethics of civil resistance clearly holds the moral high ground in cases where the hegemon has abandoned procedural justice and widely violates human rights in his (precedents are mostly male) increasingly desperate efforts to preserve the power imbalance on which his position depends.

In our recently published textbook on human security [1] we enclosed a discussion section entitled "What if the Law is Wrong?"—What course of action, based on what ethical platform, can rescue human security in such a situation? The examples of apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, and numerous other horrific precedents remind us that the moral stance of the law abiding citizen loses its normative eminence under those conditions. Instead, virtue is exemplified by the counter-hegemonic activist, from the common German citizens who hid Jewish refugees in their attics all the way to people like Nelson Mandela. In the ensuing struggle, 'terrorism' becomes an obligatory strategic instrument on either side in the eyes of the other. And yet, if the revolution is successful, the ultimate blame goes entirely to the former hegemon, and the leadership qualities evident in the victorious revolutionary are elevated to the highest ideals of human endeavour. Though his victory is not an essential requirement (witness Che Guevara), as a martyr, his heroic reputation tends to be less universal and less officially shared. In contrast, the leaders of autocratic states,

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whether they were violently deposed or peacefully died in office or retirement, end up being judged more harshly by posterity. No-one, I hope, would think of advertising a Pinochet or Battista as a model leader to students.

The upshot is that leadership is by no means an absolute ideal, contrary to the many educational programs and mission statements that brandish its virtues unconditionally. Likewise, respect for the dominant authority—state-mediated, corporate, religious, or otherwise organised—is not an unconditional virtue. I feel this obvious truth requires restating because the differences between 'good' and 'bad' leadership, morally legitimate laws and those that perpetuate injustice, government by the people and government by plutocrats, are blurred by the corporate media and entertainment industries to the extent that raises some concerns about the effects of their message in the consciousness of future generations. This is why the Mandelas of history are so eminently important: they are the counterexamples; they show us what true leadership should and could be, and that bad leaders are worth fighting against. The absence of good leadership gives rise to business-as-usual scenarios that range from the noxious (when highly educated Saudi women rely on their chauffeurs and do not think twice about injustice) to the horrific (when entire communities lynch homosexual men in Uganda). And its presence visibly elevates human security from a descriptive parameter to a normative criterion of moral excellence—the criterion that distinguishes good leadership. Witness its status as a popular ideal in present-day South Africa.

Counter-hegemonic leadership, of course, attracts formidable risks. During the second week of February 2013 a mullah in Yemen spoke out publicly against Al Qaida. A day later, when he and two other members of his congregation were meeting with two Al Qaida members to discuss the issue, all five were incinerated by a US drone attack. Which side their families are rooting for now seems predictable. The risks are obvious with other numerous examples of counter-hegemonic leadership—the wikileakers and whistle-blowers, the FEMEN women in front of the Saudi embassy in Davos, the Pussyriot activists in Moscow. Not even the boycott of the mainstream media can obfuscate the idealistic accomplishments, personal risks, and excellent leadership shown in these examples.

In contrast, the primary reason for the absence of leadership is its attractiveness to the multitudes of the risk averse. This gives rise to the phenomenon of immoral consensus, where ordinary people conform with views and practices that clearly contradict their own values. Immoral consensus sometimes goes as far as making people refrain from showing support for leaders who dare protest its injustice, even within the private circles of friends and families, and even making a show of disparaging and ridiculing those leaders in public. The phenomenon was and is

particularly evident with examples of unconventional moral leadership shown by abolitionists of slavery, suffragettes demanding the vote for women, animal welfare activists protesting abuses in the food and cosmetics industry, and protectors of the last stands of old growth forests. Who has not heard of the disparaging labels of nigger lovers, tomboys, treehuggers, and worse? The absence of good leadership and immoral consensus is what preserves the conversational buoyancy of such despicable labels.

The examples of absent leadership that I find personally most vexing are those that result in the abject failure of governance. At the municipal level such failure is evident in my home town in the lack of any community-owned recycling operation. At the regional level it is commonly evident in the sell-out of precious natural resources to overseas corporate takers at prices that reflect neither their cultural value nor the ecological costs of their extraction. At the national level it is evident, for example, in the failure of governments to enact adequate protection of consumers against harmful food products and additives, against the interests of their corporate suppliers. Early in 2010 the New Zealand Labour Party, egged on by the Green Party, proposed a bill prohibiting the supply of junk food at schools. The ruling Conservatives defeated this bill stating that it would interfere with free choice —an ideal they have little respect for when it comes to choices of GE-free food, of recreational drugs or the choice to end one's life. The government refused to take the lead on proactive health care, an undisputed human security good.

At the global level the absence of responsible leadership seems quite the rule. The global trafficking in arms, drugs and people can be effectively combatted only through initiatives based on counter-hegemonic leadership. Restraining the emission of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, fairly distributing scarce resources, testing and restriction of drugs and household chemicals, preventing human rights violations all represent examples of human security regimes that would best be facilitated by responsible global leadership. Such leadership is also counter-hegemonic because it threatens powerful entrenched interests. Its absence presents as the intuitive explanation why those projects are not making adequate progress. Counterexamples where such leadership makes a wealth of difference, as in the case of Captain Paul Watson and his Sea Shepherds fighting ecocide and cruel exploitation of the world's oceans, occur rarely but shine brightly as examples of how much better a place this world could be if we had more responsible leadership.

The failure of responsible global governance sometimes takes grotesque proportions. Negotiations continue among representatives of Norway, Denmark, Canada, the US and Russia to align their maritime boundaries according to the topology of continental shelves in the Arctic ocean. At stake are vast deposits

of minerals and hydrocarbons. We are mystified by the excitement about more fossil fuel deposits. They cannot burn them, can they? Or rather, if they do get burned it makes no difference who does the burning. This example illustrates how the absence of responsible leadership leads to a failure of governance, to the detriment of all.

I salute all those of our colleagues around the world and their students who are practising unflagging leadership in the aforementioned positive ways, and I hope with all my heart that ultimately their causes will carry the day.

Have a peaceful and happy New Year 2014!

Best wishes,
Sabina W. Lautensach

References

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