

Mandela Against Mandela; South African Cabinet Split Sets Up Political Test Of Strength

By **BILL KELLER**

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JOHANNESBURG, March 28 — The caller identified himself as a former anti-apartheid guerrilla, now a brigadier in South Africa's newly integrated army. He had a warning for the white radio host who sounded so pleased about the dismissal of Winnie Mandela.

Enjoy your moment, the caller said, because when Mrs. Mandela becomes President there will be no more pandering to whites, and carping critics will be silenced, as they are in Uganda and Kenya.

“People like you should actually be castrated,” he added.

President Winnie Mandela? It is white South Africa's ultimate nightmare — although she has not declared her intention of muzzling critics, let alone castrating them. The prospect also alarms many blacks who share President Nelson Mandela's vision of reconciliation.

With Mr. Mandela's announcement on Monday that he was expelling his estranged wife from his government for flouting party discipline, Mrs. Mandela has been pushed closer to outright opposition, reviving the debate over whether she is South Africa's future or just a noisy voice on the margins.

Mrs. Mandela has repeatedly said she would not break with the African National Congress, which as the cherished vehicle of black liberation (and now the dispenser of official patronage) is virtually invincible.

The last faction to split from the A.N.C., African nationalists who created the Pan Africanist Congress in 1959, remained stuck on the fringe. They won 1.2 percent of the vote in the first free elections last year.

A somewhat more plausible precedent is the internal coup Nelson Mandela and several friends pulled off within the A.N.C. in 1949. They toppled the organization's president, whom they considered overly timid, and put the anti-apartheid campaign on a more confrontational course.

The question, then, is whether Mrs. Mandela could wage a successful campaign within the A.N.C. against her husband's line of racial reconciliation, pro-business

economics and gradual social upliftment.

The case for taking her seriously rests on a simple calculation: that beneath the veneer of racial harmony lies an explosive charge of black resentment. The more time passes without blacks feeling that they are moving toward economic equality, the easier it will be for a populist like Mrs. Mandela to tap their anger.

She is a charismatic speaker, skillful at demonizing her opponents and portraying herself as a lonely champion of the downtrodden. She is a regular presence at the township funerals, protest marches and local rallies that other political celebrities are now too busy to attend.

When 3,000 A.N.C. delegates voted in January for the Congress's governing executive committee, Mrs. Mandela and two allied firebrands placed in the top five.

Kaizer Nyatumba, the black political editor of the country's largest newspaper, *The Star*, which is white-owned, contends that Mrs. Mandela is being silenced for attacking white privilege.

"Now, it is not popular to point these things out in this era of putative equality and bending over backwards to accommodate so-called white fears in order to perpetuate the myth of a newly found racial harmony in South Africa," Mr. Nyatumba wrote this week.

Mrs. Mandela is also an icon for many blacks elsewhere in Africa and in the West, including African-Americans, who are inclined to sympathize with her as one of apartheid's most valiant victims.

Those who take Mrs. Mandela less seriously say the black impatience on which populists hope to feed is greatly exaggerated. Polls show that blacks have abundant faith in Mr. Mandela and his program of compromise.

"Yes, our people want to identify themselves with people like Winnie Mandela who have suffered but have also triumphed, who are seen as fighters," said Cyril Ramaphosa, secretary general of the A.N.C. and a strong critic of Mrs. Mandela.

But as for representing a potent alternative force, he said in a recent interview: "No, no, she doesn't. Clearly not. There is a temptation in the A.N.C. for people to want to be populist. But the traditions that have evolved in the A.N.C. keep most people walking along the straight and narrow path of party policy."

Indeed, the African National Congress and its partners in the anti-apartheid movement quickly closed ranks on Monday behind Mr. Mandela's decision to dismiss his wife as deputy minister of arts and culture.

While Mrs. Mandela's penchant for race-baiting makes her especially reviled by whites, Asians and mixed-race voters (one election-time poll found her by far the most unpopular politician among those groups) she is not universally loved among blacks.

In the growing black middle class, to which most of the political leadership now belongs, Mrs. Mandela is regarded as a patron of the violence that, in many black townships, began as rebellion and deteriorated into crime and general disorder.

Her neighbors in the Soweto neighborhood of Orlando still speak with fear and distaste of Mrs. Mandela's coterie of bodyguards that terrorized the neighborhood in the 1980's.

At times Mrs. Mandela's worst enemy is herself. She has a history of putting incriminating things in writing, as though she considered herself invulnerable. In one letter to a lover, leaked to a newspaper, she discussed embezzling money from the A.N.C.

Above all, critics say Mrs. Mandela's popularity will wane if people face a choice between her and her husband. The loyalty he commands is profound.

Tokyo Sexwale, a bellwether politician who has himself veered between populism and moderation, on Sunday fiercely scolded Mrs. Mandela (without actually naming her) for the ultimate sin — undermining the president.

"We loved you, don't abuse our love!" Mr. Sexwale, the governor of the province centered on Johannesburg, told an audience of mine workers who had no doubts whom the speaker meant. "If you fight Mandela, you are declaring war on the people."

The big question is, what would happen in the absence of Mr. Mandela? Who else would stand up to her?

Mr. Ramaphosa, who has the will, does not excite the rank and file the way she does.

Thabo Mbeki, Mr. Mandela's diplomatic deputy president and the current favorite to succeed him, has made peace with the militants to advance his own career. Mr. Mbeki reportedly argued against dismissing Mrs. Mandela for fear of a possible backlash.

If her challenge is to outwait her 76-year-old husband, Mrs. Mandela has one advantage: she is 16 years younger.