S. Africa’s flawed heroine

Winnie’s life was marked by struggles as well as controversies

Hailed as mother of the ‘new’ South Africa, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s legacy as an anti-apartheid heroine was undone when she was revealed to be a ruthless ideologue prepared to sacrifice laws and lives in pursuit of revolution and redress. Her uncompromising methods and refusal to forgive contrasted sharply with the reconciliation espoused by her ex-husband Nelson Mandela.

During Mandela’s 27-year incarceration, Ms. Madikizela-Mandela, who died on Monday at the age of 81, campaigned tirelessly for his release and for the rights of Blacks. She punched the air triumphantly in the clenched-fist salute of Black power as she walked hand-in-hand with Mandela out of Cape Town’s Victor Vester prison on February 11, 1990. It led four years later to the end of centuries of White domination when Mandela became South Africa’s first Black President.

Legal, political troubles

But for Ms. Madikizela-Mandela, the end of apartheid marked the start of a string of legal and political troubles that kept her in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons.

As evidence emerged in the dying years of apartheid of the brutality of her Soweto enforcers, the “Mandela United Football Club”, her sobriquet switched from ‘Mother of the Nation’ to ‘Mugger’.

Blamed for the killing of activist Stompie Seipei, who was found near her home with his throat cut, she was convicted in 1991 of kidnapping and assaulting the 14-year-old because he was suspected of being an informer. Her six-year jail term was reduced on appeal to a fine.

She and Mandela separated in 1992 and her reputation slipped further when he sacked her from his Cabinet in 1995 after allegations of corruption. The couple divorced a year later, after which she adopted the surname ‘Madikizela-Mandela’.

Appearing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) set up to unearth atrocities committed by both sides in the anti-apartheid struggle, she refused to show remorse for abductions and murders carried out in her name. Only after pleading from anguished TRC chairman Archbishop Desmond Tutu did she admit grudgingly that “things went horribly wrong”.

Four years later, she was back in court, facing fraud and theft charges in relation to an elaborate bank loan scheme.

Winnie caught the eye of Mandela at a Soweto bus-stop in 1957, starting a whirlwind romance that led to their marriage a year later. But the relationship was torn apart six years later when Mandela was arrested and sentenced to life in prison.

She later described her marriage as a sham and the birth of their two daughters, Zindzi and Zenani, as ”quite coincidental” to her one true love — the struggle against White rule. “I was married to the ANC. It was the best marriage I ever had,” she often said.