

## Nobel winner F. W. de Klerk on Nelson Mandela and what makes a good leader

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The friendly, gum-chewing elderly gentleman sitting across from me was easy to talk to, so much so I nearly forgot I was interviewing a Nobel Peace Laureate.

Mr Frederick Willem de Klerk – better known as F.W. de Klerk – was South Africa's President when he released anti-apartheid leader and the world's most famous prisoner, Mr Nelson Mandela, in 1990.

Three years later, he and the famously gentle and soft-spoken Mr Mandela were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in dismantling their country's racial segregation policy.



Mr Frederick Willem de Klerk – better known as F.W. de Klerk – was South Africa's President when he released anti-apartheid leader and the world's most famous prisoner, Mr Nelson Mandela, in 1990. -- ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

The track record of Mr de Klerk, now 77, is testimony to the former president's tendency to ride against the tide.

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He freed Mr Mandela, who had spent 27 years in jail.

He lifted the ban on Mr Mandela's African National Congress (ANC), then a fractious armed rebel group which enjoyed immense public support.

And he called elections in the black-majority country in 1994 knowing full well that his own white supremacist conservative National Party did not stand a chance against the ANC, which eventually won the election and is the ruling party to this day.

South Africa needed to change to save itself from isolation on the world stage, Mr de Klerk once said in explaining his decisions.

On Monday (Mar 25), he told a packed auditorium at the Singapore Management University (SMU) that the mark of a leader is, among other things, his ability to know when to step down and hand over the baton to others.

He listed others, including a willingness to take calculated risks, getting the timing right and perseverance.

His speech was part of the Leadership in Asia Lecture Series by SMU.



Former President of South Africa, Mr F.W. de Klerk giving his public lecture at the Mochtar Riady Auditorium at the SMU Administration Building. -- ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Mr Mikhail Gorbachev of the former Soviet Union, China's late leader Deng Xiaoping and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher got honorary mentions as 20th century leaders who, through their policies, brought meaningful changes to the society and a significant difference to the quality of life of hundreds of millions of people.

He called Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew "an artist painting on the largest canvas that society can provide".

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“Without his leadership, Singapore might have been just another city in Malaysia. But... Mr Lee made the right decisions for his country, he chose the right values and the right principles to ensure development of a successful society,” he said.

As for Mr Mandela, Mr de Klerk described him as “a principled man and a great communicator”.

The two men were responsible for navigating through the minefield to end decades of apartheid in South Africa and steering the country in the right direction.

But it is well known they also do not see eye-to-eye on many issues.

Mr Mandela once called Mr de Klerk “a man of integrity” only to retract his remark later.

Mr de Klerk also reserved his most candid observations for his friend-cum-foe.

Mr Mandela “was by no means a saint”, he told the SMU audience in a frank assessment of his 94-year-old compatriot, who was a tough and relentless negotiator during South Africa’s transition to democracy.

But he was also gracious enough to rise above political passions to come to a reasonable compromises whenever required, Mr de Klerk added.

Mr Mandela, who was President from 1994 to 1999, is currently being treated for a lung infection in a hospital in Pretoria.

During the interview with The Straits Times that followed his speech, Mr de Klerk was asked who among the present crop of politicians show potential.

“Frankly, I do not see any one leader (at present) straddling the world stage,” he told this reporter.

He refrained from criticising his country’s current leadership, which has often stumbled over itself in policy matters, as the country shows disappointing growth figures and falling education and living standards.

“I prefer to play the ball and not the man,” he said.

“I don’t want to analyse specific individuals and list their weak and strong points.”

Nevertheless, he described President Jacob Zuma as a nice and friendly guy.

He also said he hoped a new action plan – on achieving higher growth and improving the quality of education, among others – that is now under consideration by the Zuma government will see the light of day.

“If it is implemented and resources are made available, then it will assure that South Africa reaches its full potential,” he said.



Former President of South Africa, Mr F.W. de Klerk being handed a stalk of flower by student , Jean Chiew, 19, as a belated birthday gift during the question-answer session at the Mochtar Riady Auditorium at the SMU Administration Building. -- ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

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