

Nelson Mandela's Final Battle: Dying With Dignity

By [Danny Schechter](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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Durban, South Africa: If I was an ailing Nelson Mandela, and, at all conscious of the storms surrounding me, I might not be in such a hurry to open my eyes.

My diagnosis of “critical but stable” might change rapidly were I to find out how fiercely members of my own family are battling over my remains, and the funds I had provided for them in a special trust administered by people I trusted.

This spectacle could kill me!

As thousands of South Africans hold prayer sessions outside “his” Pretoria hospital, and with the world media still on an escalating ‘death watch,’ inside, there’s been a clash among and between family members, government officials trying to control and spin health information, and, even, doctors who have been cited, wrongly, in court battles about his condition. (The latest news from family members that he is “doing better” cannot be too encouraging to a media anxious to bring this expensive to cover story to its conclusion.)

There had been an official denial of a claim that he is in a vegetative state, along with unsubstantiated rumors that he is being kept alive at least until July 18, his 95th birthday, a day marked worldwide as “Mandela Day” to encourage community service.

Meanwhile, a sideshow sparked by warring family members robs the occasion of any of the dignity it deserves with one daughter of an earlier marriage, and her daughter, lashing out in an obvious bid for money and even to control media coverage with a demand that CNN, a foreign network, should be given “preferential access” to cover the funeral possible upstaging the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the national broadcaster.

There have been hints of a deal between CNN and members of the Mandela family which the network has now denied, a decision that would not surprise media critics who have of late been condemning the tabloid direction the once might news network has taken that includes marginalizing foreign stories—something the Mandelas might not be aware of.

Explains Dylan Byers, media critic of Politico, pandering for ratings and revenues drives coverage decisions. “The truth is,” he writes, “CNN’s programming decisions aren’t a reflection of CNN so much as a reflection of the American people, more of whom care about a domestic court trial than about the historic events taking place overseas.”

Of course, left unspoken are the years of neglect of the world by news channels, and an educational system that reinforced American parochialism and a lack of global empathy.

Already, all of this sounds more like show biz than news biz in an industry that long ago watered down the serious content of its news. The South African soap opera surrounding

Mandela's long goodbye plays in the trivialization of what should be a more solemn occasion.

Perhaps, that 's why this whole unseemly family feud is being denounced by the likes of Archbishop Tutu while gobbling up acres of newsprint in the world press.

Mandela is being given the dying celebrity treatment with the focus on personality, not politics, on his iconic status, not his role as freedom fighter sent to prison for organizing armed resistance.

His universally loved smile and heroic story has been downplayed in the narrative of grim health bulletins and angry accusations by some in the family who never seem to miss an opportunity to insert themselves in what should be a solemn media moment. Some of the Mandela kids even have their own reality TV series carried locally on Fox.

The man who survived 27 years of imprisonment and earlier medical emergencies behind bars, had to cope with the resentment of some of the people who knew him best.

Here are some of the players in this daily drama.

There's Makaziwe Mandela, the oldest daughter from the first wife who seems to be still nursing anger at not being acknowledged enough. Articulate and well educated, she's been given interviews for years not so subtly criticizing her dad for being the father of the nation more than her father. He has acknowledged not always being there for his children, but the bashing goes on.

She's also been a lead actor in the law suit against the administrators of a trust that include George Bizos, the legendary defense lawyer and lifetime Mandela friend, He expressed public disgust by what he described as an outrageous demand for money,

Then, there's a battle between his nephew Mandla who claims to be tribal chief and was caught unburying members of the Mandela clan. He is battling with both a tribal King who has fired him from his chieftancy, and the daughters who see him as an embarrassment. This conflict is headed for court on a serious charge of grave violation.

At issue right now is the question where Mandela and his relatives should be buried. The Mail & Guardian's Phillip de Wet asks:

"Who is winning the grave fight? Everyone but Mandla Mandela. Almost all the rest of the family have lined up against him, including (according to court documents) (his Wife Graca) Machel and (ex-wife) Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Mandla had a weak legal case to begin with, but was completely out-played in court. He has also seen his traditional standing weakened with abaNtombu King Buyelekhaya Dalindyebo [publicly denigrating him](#) and his claim to chieftaincy."

You can't make non-stop dueling up, or tune it out in the media din.

Meanwhile, a government inter-Ministerial Committee is planning the funeral with family members while construction workers upgrade the airport and roads near his rural home anticipating a tourist invasion to a grave that is already being viewed as a shrine, even as Mandela himself has said repeatedly he was no saint or savior.

Already media watchers are concerned that all of this discord surrounding his status could impact on his image. “it remains to be seen whether the media tone will recover and portray the icon in a positive light,” suggests Stephano Radaelli, senior researcher at Media Tenor. “Should the media tone remain at such dire levels, this could potentially have an impact on Mandela’s popularity ratings in opinion polling in months to come,”

“Understandably so, the media’s interest in the critical state of Mandela’s health is generating the negative tone but for a person who has been relatively quiet on the international front for so long, many might only be left with an image of suffering and ill-health of the legend,” continues Mr Radaelli.

“Therefore, perhaps the international media needs to follow in the footsteps of Le Journal, a French TV news broadcast, where the former president’s past achievements and leadership qualities are taking precedence over his health.”

Fat chance.

Most of the media coverage focuses on what’s new, the more outrageous, the better, that is often confuses with real news. Already some documentary makers who want to tell parts of the Mandela story that is not well known, are being told by American media companies to stick with famous names and familiar stories.

“We have never heard of some of the people you show,” i.e—leaders who have been close to Mandela and who he credits as being part of the collective “team” that overthrew apartheid. Because they don’t know who they are, they assume the public won’t be interested.

This is in line with the all too familiar axiom in the news world—“KISS”—keep it simple and stupid.

What is worth considering is that Mandela’s fame grew throughout the years when the South African government blocked his image from being shown or him being quoted in the press. His legend blossomed in the absence of press coverage, even as now it may be diminished by the expected media oversaturation that will follow his death.

I have been covering the South African story for many years and recall, with disgust, the many calls I received from TV program bookers who heard I had made films with Mandela and thought I could get them what is known in the trade as “ the big get, “ an exclusive interview.

When I pressed the callers on what they wanted to learn, I was told, just having him on was as important as anything he might have to say.

They were like the big white African hunters who saw him as game, just another “personality” to buttress their wannabe credibility.

Who knows? For them, bagging such big prey could lead to a raise.

Meanwhile, the TV Networks have to staff the their round the clock stakeouts. That’s why Nelson Mandela is known among journos as an “FBR,” the freelancers best friend. You can bet that once Mandela is gone, so will be their interest in South Africa.

News Dissector **Danny Schechter** is a writer and filmmaker who is working in South Africa on a documentary about the forthcoming Mandela bio-pic *Long Walk To Freedom*. He blogs at Newsdissector.net and edits Mediachannel.org. Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org.

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Articles by: **[Danny Schechter](#)**

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