Negotiators and Nation-Builders

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Mandela, Awolowo, and Azikiwe

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918-2013), South Africa

Nelson Mandela was not born a revolutionary. He was born into a royal family of the Thembu people and was being groomed for a position as an adviser to the chief. His early education at Fort Hare University — then the only university in sub-Saharan Africa open to Black students — exposed him to African nationalist politics and Pan-Africanism. But it was the daily reality of apartheid that turned the young lawyer into a militant. He co-founded the ANC Youth League in 1944, helped lead the Defiance Campaign of 1952, and after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 — in which police shot dead 69 Black protesters — concluded that non-violence alone could not defeat a regime that used violence without restraint, founding Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC's armed wing, in 1961.

Arrested in 1962 and sentenced to life imprisonment at the Rivonia Trial in 1964, Mandela served twenty-seven years, mostly on Robben Island, where he and his comrades turned imprisonment into a political space — debating, educating, and demonstrating through discipline that no prison could diminish their humanity. He refused a 1985 conditional release offer that required renouncing violence, declaring: 'I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I and you, the people, are not free. Your freedom and mine cannot be separated. I will return.'

What made Mandela truly extraordinary was what he chose to do with his freedom when it finally came in 1990. He could have led South Africa into the racial civil war many had predicted — a war in which the moral weight of history was overwhelmingly on the Black majority's side. Instead, he chose negotiation: a painstaking process of building a constitutional democracy through dialogue with the very people who had imprisoned him, including shaking the hand of F.W. de Klerk and guaranteeing the safety and economic interests of white South Africans. Elected South Africa's first democratic President in 1994, he governed for a single term defined by reconciliation over redistribution — the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the 1995 Rugby World Cup gesture, the patient conduct of governance. The criticism that economic transformation

was too slow is valid, but must be weighed against the alternative: without Mandela's leadership, South Africa might have become a different, far bloodier story.

> *"I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."*
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> **— Nelson Mandela, Statement from the Dock, Rivonia Trial, 20 April 1964**

Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987), Nigeria

There is something rare about a leader who not only dreams of a better world but builds it. While many of his contemporaries left behind speeches and manifestos, Obafemi Awolowo left behind schools. He left behind hospitals. He left behind a philosophy of governance — Awoism — forged in the daily work of running a government for the benefit of its people, resting on a simple, radical conviction: a nation's greatest wealth is the minds, health, and dignity of its people, not the resources beneath its ground.

As Premier of Nigeria's Western Region from 1954, he introduced universal free primary education in 1955 — the first government in sub-Saharan Africa to do so — followed by free healthcare for children and the elderly. His administration built roads and industrial estates and established the Western Nigeria Television Service in 1959, the first television station on the African continent. In his 1947 book The Path to Nigerian Freedom, he argued that Nigeria was not one nation but a federation of distinct peoples, and that genuine unity required genuine justice and a federal structure in which no people dominated another — earning him the title Father of Nigerian Federalism.

Awolowo's tragedy is that the man who understood Nigeria most clearly was repeatedly denied the chance to lead all of it. Imprisoned from 1963 to 1966 on charges widely seen as a political trap set by a federal government that feared his popularity, he twice ran for president — in 1979 and 1983 — and is widely believed to have won the first, only to be denied by a disputed court ruling. He died in 1987 before Nigeria's third attempt at democracy. The generation that grew up under his free-education system never forgot what he had given them, and still calls him 'the best president Nigeria never had' — a verdict, not a sentiment, delivered by people who lived under his governance and spent the rest of their lives watching Nigeria stumble without it.

Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996), Nigeria

Before Nnamdi Azikiwe became a politician, he was a journalist — and it is as a journalist that he made his most durable contribution to African liberation. Returning from a decade of Pan-African intellectual formation at American universities in 1934, he founded the African Morning Post in the Gold Coast, attacking colonial rule with a ferocity the British had not encountered in the West African press; his 1936 article challenging the Christian missionary project led to sedition charges. Back in Nigeria from 1937, he built the West African Pilot newspaper chain into the most powerful instrument of nationalist education in colonial Nigeria, reaching Nigerians who had never attended a political meeting and teaching them, in his own words, to 'show the light' so that 'the people will find the way.'

Azikiwe did not merely write about Pan-Africanism — he practised it. His friendship with Du Bois and other Black American intellectuals, his early career in Ghana, and his insistence on seeing Nigerian independence as part of a continental project all expressed a lived, not abstract, Pan-Africanism, reflected in his sobriquet 'Zik of Africa.' He co-founded the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons in 1944, served as Premier of Eastern Nigeria and Governor-General, and became the first President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria at independence in 1963.

His most lasting institutional legacy is the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which he founded in 1960 on the model of the American land-grant university — designed to produce engineers, agriculturalists, and scientists who would build Nigeria, not clerks who would administer it for foreign powers. Overthrown in the 1966 coup, Azikiwe retired from active politics but remained a symbolic national father figure until his death in 1996, the last surviving member of the triumvirate — alongside Awolowo and Ahmadu Bello — that had negotiated Nigerian independence.

Negotiators and Nation-Builders: At a Glance
Nelson Mandela: 27 years imprisoned; chose reconciliation over retribution; South Africa's first democratic President (1994-99).
Obafemi Awolowo: delivered sub-Saharan Africa's first free universal primary education (1955); twice denied the Nigerian presidency despite popular support.

Negotiators and Nation-Builders: At a Glance
Nnamdi Azikiwe: pioneered the African nationalist press; first President of Nigeria (1963-66); founded the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
Shared lesson: institutions — constitutions, universities, free education systems — outlast individual leaders and are the most durable form of liberation legacy.

Key Takeaways

Mandela, Awolowo, and Azikiwe each built something that outlasted their time in power — a constitutional democracy, a free education system, a university — through negotiation, governance, and institution-building rather than armed struggle alone. Each also paid a price: imprisonment, political persecution, or denial of power they had earned. The next lesson turns to a different path entirely — the revolutionaries who pursued radical economic sovereignty and were killed for it.