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De Klerk and the Gorbachev paradox



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The comparisons between FW de Klerk, the last white president of SA and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, are striking beyond their roles as “midwives from tyranny to a new politics”. This is what British politician and veteran anti-apartheid campaigner Peter Hain writes in his obituary for De Klerk, who died aged 85 in November 2019, politically twinning him to Gorbachev.

Two years before that I had my final public conversation with De Klerk in Cape Town before a well-heeled international audience gathered under the collonaded grandeur of Cape Town’s Mount Nelson Hotel. During that conversation with a relaxed and animated De Klerk I decided to up the ante by asking him whether in addition to a similar hairline, he suffered from the “Mikhail Gorbachev paradox”.

Like the last Soviet leader, I suggested, he had dismantled the system of privilege he’d been entrusted to safeguard, earning both the scorn of those who benefited from the change and the enmity of those who lost out in the process. Indeed, the gathering of uberrich global worthies De Klerk and I addressed that afternoon pointed to another uncomfortable parallel between the two statesmen, both Nobel peace prize laureates: like biblical prophets, neither enjoyed in their lifetime much honour in their own lands. Though both received more acclaim abroad.

De Klerk rebuffed the suggestion, advising the audience: “The difference between Gorbachev and me is that I apologised for apartheid and in respect of communism he did not.” The nature and quality of De Klerk’s “apology” would be the subject of huge public controversy months later, when he told an interviewer that he did not “fully agree” that apartheid was a crime against humanity. By the time of his death both aspects of his public persona, the last apartheid president but the first of his political tribe to dismantle it, were given much airtime. An improbable reformer who inaugurated changes that would sweep him from power was the conventional consensus.

Unlike De Klerk, whose state funeral was headed by President Cyril Ramaphosa, Gorbachev, who died in Moscow aged 91 on August 30, was not accorded a state funeral attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin. His passing aroused similar sentiments at home and abroad to the death of De Klerk. He was a huge agent of change, and while heralded for both the introduction of freedoms in his homeland and the ending of the Cold War in Europe, he believed he could reform a sclerotic system without consigning it to the “dustbin of history”, to borrow Leon Trotsky’s dismissal of the reformist Mensheviks.

As early as January 1993, while De Klerk was in his final year of power, New York Times Johannesburg bureau chief Bill Keller explicitly headlined his analysis of the then SA leader as “De

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Klerk's Gorbachev problem". Both were born into the nomenklatura of their authoritarian systems, just six years apart. Both rose to power as insiders in the party apparatus, never challenging its sacraments on their glide path to the top. Both were in their early 50s on assuming supreme power, Gorbachev on his election as general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, and De Klerk four years later in 1989, when elected leader of the National Party and state president.

Both replaced hard-line predecessors of an older generation (Konstantin Chernenko in the USSR and PW Botha in SA) who both exited offices aged 73 — in the case of the former through death and the latter incapacitated by a stroke. While perceived as fresh gusts of change, the two men inherited systems rotting to their core. De Klerk enjoyed five years in power and Gorbachev six, but towards the end of their regimes both were buffeted by the very forces of change their respective reforms had inaugurated, and their authority was finally more vestigial than real.

The domestic political afterlife of Gorbachev and De Klerk also had similarly baleful outcomes. Gorbachev's candidacy for the presidency of Russia in 1996 got a bare 0.5% of the vote. In 2004, De Klerk — formally retired by then from politics — returned to the hustings in support of the New National Party's election campaigns, for which he was its most credible campaigner and fundraiser. (He later quit the party when it joined the ANC). It received just 1.6% of the national total, suggesting that once "natural parties of government" under authoritarianism have distinctly time-limited lives afterwards.

Though Gorbachev and De Klerk overlapped for only two years in power, the effect of Russia's *glasnost* and *perestroika* had profound consequences for SA's passage to democracy in the early 1990s. As De Klerk wrote of the fall of the Berlin Wall and Moscow's exit from the battlefronts of Southern Africa just as he assumed office: "Within the scope of a few months, one of our main strategic concerns for decades — the Soviet Union's role in Southern Africa and its strong influence on the ANC and [SACP] had all but disappeared. A window had opened up, which created an opportunity for a much more adventurous approach than had previously been conceivable."

What Putin would later term "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" would on the southern tip of Africa have far more positive outcomes, as SA's last white president confirmed. Gorbachev and De Klerk did not intend the full consequences of their initial steps. Both reformers wished for different outcomes. Gorbachev hoped in the dying days of the Soviet Union that he could maintain the apparatus through an intricate federation of states with checks and balances — but he never survived Boris Yeltsin's ruthless desire to supplant him and terminate the Soviet Union.

De Klerk tried at the constitutional negotiations to achieve what he termed "permanent power sharing" through rotating presidencies and minority vetoes in the new system. This too failed, and he had to make do with limited power sharing and a deputy presidency for just two years after the end of minority rule in 1994. Nelson Mandela, De Klerk's uneasy partner in the run-up to 1994 and his acclaimed successor, described these attempts as "sharing power and not surrendering it".

In the cases of De Klerk and Gorbachev, who both had far greater access to hard power than their opponents often acknowledged, it was the fact that they surrendered office peacefully at crucial moments in their countries' trajectories, and against the weight of both history and expectation, that set their countries on new and totally unexpected courses.

The consequences in both places have been decidedly different. Russia's makeshift democracy never took root and Putin is determined to rebuild the Soviet empire in some form. SA's

democratic outcomes have been far better, and more enduring, but the ANC government has almost lived up to the dreadful consequences in terms of economic impoverishment and infrastructure collapse that De Klerk's hard right opponents predicted.

Gorbachev and De Klerk lived to great ages and saw with some concern what followed on their reforms. Their contribution to history was to inherit power in strong but failing systems and then to read the writing on the proverbial wall. And not assume it was addressed to someone else.

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