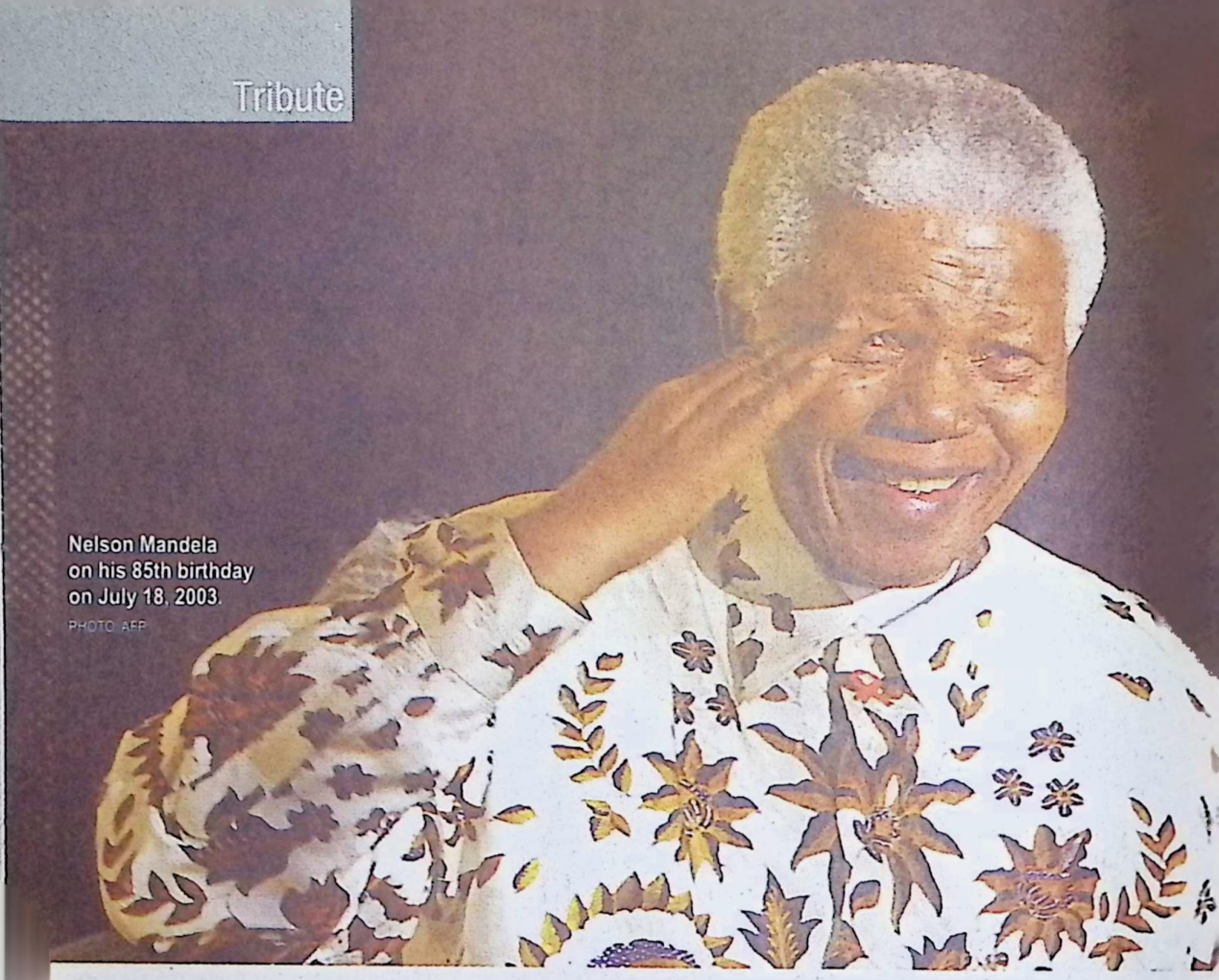


Nelson Mandela on his 85th birthday on July 18, 2003.
PHOTO: AFP

Nelson Mandela
Man and Superman

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

In these dangerous, uncertain times we live through, the passing of Nelson Mandela only makes our circumstances a little more parlous than they have been so far. By the time he died, Mandela did not wield political authority, but there was about him a charisma that exuded moral power. It was power that not all men, indeed not all politicians, can call forth in themselves. And because they cannot, they do not rise to the stature of statesmanship. Mandela was a statesman, the last in our times, in every sense of the meaning.

In all this talk of the statesman in Mandela, there comes alive the natural individual that resided somewhere inside him. Twenty seven years in prison are enough to radicalize a man, enough to have him mutate into an individual removed from all signs of rationality. In Mandela's instance, it was precisely the opposite that happened. He transformed Robben Island into a centre for discourses on politics and philosophy with his fellow African National Congress prisoners. They were dedicated men, fiercely loyal to him and, more importantly, loyal to the cause of majority rule in South Africa.

But what gave Mandela a moral superiority above so many other politicians of his time was the dignity with which he carried himself in jail. He would not hate his jailers or even the government that had, to all intents and purposes, pushed him into a situation he could not possibly emerge from alive. He was getting old in prison; his mother died and he was not permitted to be at her funeral. His son too died and yet the father in him was compelled to stay away from the last rites because the evil that was apartheid would not let him see his child's coffin lowered into the grave.

Did that hurt? Of course it did, but Mandela would not have his emotions get in the way of his growth into a philosophical man. He told off those jailers who deliberately tried humiliating him and yet he made sure that his anger did not decline into contempt. Again, there were jailers to whom he