

Speculation about Mandela's fate seen as cultural taboo

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Will native son and national hero Nelson Mandela survive his latest bout with illness? That is the single question dominating headlines, speeches, Twitter and conversation throughout South Africa.

It's an unusual situation in a country where death is an off-limits topic due to local culture. But as locals brace themselves, anxious and hopeful, they remain stoic and protective, insisting on Mandela's privacy as he battles a lung infection. And they say he has a right to be left alone.

"This is a man who gave so much of himself to this country," said Roseline Wilson, 30, an insurance company representative in Johannesburg. "He must rest. He has suffered too much in his old age."

Mandela on Monday (June 17) spent a 10th day in the hospital where he is being treated for a recurring lung infection.

Mandela, 94, is revered in this country and throughout Africa for his dedication to the freedom of South Africans. He spent 27 years in prison for leading civil disobedience campaigns and for his role in acts of sabotage to violently overthrow the government. But when he emerged from prison in 1990, he led a campaign of reconciliation with the repressive white regime that had institutionalized racism in a system known as apartheid.

He and the white president at the time, Frederik Willem de Klerk, received the Nobel Peace Prize for shepherding democratic reforms and the peaceful abolishing of apartheid. The reforms led to free and fair elections in which Mandela became the country's first black president in 1994.

"He saved a bloodbath in the making," said Sam Omar, 72, a doctor in the small town of Vereeniging. "Most importantly, he forgave. This is a message for the country."

Over the past few months, Mandela has been repeatedly hospitalized for respiratory problems originating from tuberculosis he contracted during his captivity. He was readmitted to the hospital for fluid in his lungs.

Locals are skeptical about reports that Mandela's health is improving. Mandela's family has been a constant presence at the hospital. Wife Graca Machel and his grandson Mandela arrived at the Pretoria facility last week.

Omar said that many of his patients don't talk about Mandela being sick but focus on the man himself and the future. Talk on the street is not about his illness but about "letting him go."

According to Isintu, a Zulu word for traditional South African culture, the very sick can't let go from life unless the family "releases" them, or gives them permission. If they do, the family is essentially telling their loved one that they will be able to survive their passing. Then the dying can find peace and surrender to death.

African culture also holds that people do not talk about a person's death until they die. This is called "ubuntu"

or respect.

Some people are unhappy about how Mandela's illness has played out in the public. In this culture, they say, the matter should be a private one between the dying and their families.

"I don't think he is getting the right respect that he deserves," said Darko Destanovic, 28. "Everyone is sitting on the edge waiting for him to die as if he was a spectacle. People want him to stay alive for themselves, not for him."

[Zaheer Cassim and Catherine Featherston write for USA Today.]

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