

# NELSON MANDELA

Considered by many as the father of South Africa, Mandela's leadership and dedication not only inspired a nation but also millions of people worldwide

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**R**olihlahla Mandela was born on 18 July 1918 in the village of Mvezo, near Qunu, on the banks of the winding Mbashe River in what is now the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. 'Rolihlahla' in Xhosa, literally translates to English as 'pulling the branch of a tree'. It is also sometimes understood to mean 'troublemaker'.

Mandela's father was the principal counsellor to the leader of the Thembu people, Jongintaba Dalindyebo. With nature as his playground, young Mandela enjoyed practising the rural art of stick fighting. On his first day of school, aged nine, Mandela's teacher said he needed a 'Christian' name, and he was known as Nelson from then on.

After his father's death in 1930, Mandela moved to Mqhekezweni under the guardianship of Chief Jongintaba, sharing a room with the chief's son, Justice. After school, when not running or boxing, Mandela would visit the elders and listen to their stories of the resistance.

In 1939, Mandela began studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Fort Hare. Here, he met Oliver Tambo, a brilliant debater and aspiring lawyer. Living up to his 'troublemaker' namesake, Mandela was suspended for joining in a student protest over food quality.

Jongintaba had arranged marriages for Mandela and Justice, so the two young men fled to Johannesburg in 1941, a city booming



with thousands of people arriving in search of employment. They found accommodation in a mining compound and then with a family in the Alexandra Township.

Mandela was introduced to Walter Sisulu, an estate agent and African National Congress (ANC) activist. Formed in 1912, the ANC was the oldest and largest South African political party opposing oppressive White-minority rule.

Working as a clerk at a law firm, Mandela attended Communist Party gatherings and was impressed that different races and

nationalities seemed able to mix as equals. He began studying law at the University of the Witwatersrand, facing direct racism as the only Black student.

In 1944, Mandela joined the ANC and helped form the Youth League (ANCYL), reconnecting with Oliver Tambo. That year he also married Sisulu's cousin, Evelyn Mase, and the couple later had four children.

The South African election of 1948, in which only Whites could vote, was a victory for the racist National Party. By this time the White





Nelson Mandela finally walked free from prison on 11 February 1990 after 27 years behind bars



minority in the country already controlled over 90 per cent of the land. The party was formed mainly of Afrikaners - descendants of Dutch colonisers - and they quickly passed laws to further embed long-standing practices of oppression and introduce apartheid legislation.

Mandela was part of an ANC group who advocated for more direct action, such as boycotts and strikes. Having dedicated so much time to politics, Mandela failed his final year at Witwatersrand several times and was denied his degree in 1949.

In 1952, Mandela helped lead the Defiance Campaign, a plan for civil disobedience focused on six laws. It was the largest non-violent resistance ever seen in South Africa and the first under joint leadership of the ANC and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC). Around the country, people openly defied unjust laws. After six months, more than 8,000 people were arrested, including Mandela who was found guilty of 'statutory communism'. His sentence included a six-month ban from attending meetings or talking in groups.

That year, Mandela also completed a diploma in law and he and his old friend Oliver Tambo set up South Africa's first Black law firm, Mandela & Tambo.

In December 1956, Mandela was one of 156 people arrested in a countrywide swoop and charged with treason. The trial lasted over four years, during which time Mandela got divorced and married a social worker called Nomzamo Winifred (Winnie) Madikizela, with whom he had two daughters. He was one of the final eight to be acquitted in March 1961.

Meanwhile, resistance continued. In March 1960 police opened fire on a peaceful protest organised by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in the Black township of Sharpeville. 69 people were killed and over 180 injured, mostly from having been shot in the back. The massacre brought international condemnation, including from the UN. In April 1960, both the ANC and the PAC were banned in South Africa and it became illegal to be a member of either. Many organisers went underground.

Until this time, the ANC had been nonviolent, but in an interview from 1961, Mandela said solemnly, "It is useless and futile for us to continue talking peace and nonviolence against a government whose reply is only savage attacks on unarmed and defenceless people." The PAC and ANC began to prepare for an armed military struggle against the government.

In 1962, Mandela secretly left the country. Upon returning to South Africa, he was arrested and sentenced to five years imprisonment. Less than a year later, several of his comrades were found with ammunition and documents that incriminated Mandela. They were all charged with high treason.

In October 1963, Mandela went to court in what became known as the Rivonia Trial. Instead of testifying, Mandela captivated the courtroom for over three hours with a speech ending, "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."

The trial gained international attention and there were calls for release from the United Nations and World Peace Council. But on 11 June 1964, Mandela and seven others were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Mandela would remain in prison for 27 years.

After finally being released in 1990, Mandela immersed himself in an effort to end White-minority rule and was elected ANC President in 1991. The National Party was by this time run by President FW de Klerk, and in 1993 Mandela and de Klerk jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize. With politics taking up so much of Mandela's



Mandela naturally entertained and commanded respect, helping him succeed when campaigning for the presidency in 1994







## 27 YEARS BEHIND BARS

Mandela served the first 18 years of his sentence at Robben Island, a maximum security prison off the coast of Cape Town. The Rivonia Trial prisoners were isolated from other inmates in small, damp cells and were routinely harassed. They spent long days working in a lime quarry. Mandela was locked in solitary confinement several times.

Contact with the outside world was very limited, with one visit and one (heavily censored) letter every six months. Mandela's mother died in 1968 and his son in 1969, but he could not attend their funerals. In 1980 'Free Mandela' became an international campaign, increasing worldwide pressure to end apartheid. The National Party refused, relying on the backing of its allies US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who both at the time considered ANC a terrorist organisation.

In 1982, Mandela was transferred to Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town. Violence was escalating across the country and the economy was struggling as a worldwide boycott gained support. Mandela rejected several conditional offers of release because the ANC, "the organisation of the people", remained banned.

On Sunday 11 February 1990, nine days after the bans were lifted, Mandela was released from prison, aged 71. The event was broadcast live worldwide.



Nelson Mandela's former prison cell on Robben Island, photographed as part of a press conference in November 2003

time, his marriage had become increasingly strained. The situation only worsened when Winnie was imprisoned after being involved in a kidnapping, and in April 1992 Mandela publicly announced their separation.

On 10 May 1994, Mandela became South Africa's first democratically elected president. His inauguration was attended by 4,000 guests, including several world leaders. In December he published *Long Walk to Freedom*, an autobiography that he'd started writing in prison.

Throughout his life Mandela was known for his gentle demeanour and his emphasis on reconciliation. During his presidency he personally met with ex-senior figures of the apartheid regime. He also passionately encouraged support of the South African rugby team, the Springboks, and when they won the 1995 Rugby World Cup on home turf, Mandela presented the trophy to the Afrikaner captain Francois Pienaar. His efforts won the hearts of millions of White rugby fans and helped alleviate some Afrikaners' fears.

Mandela retired as ANC President in 1997, and in 1998, on his 80th birthday, married his third wife, Graça Machel. He gave his farewell speech to parliament and retired in March 1999 after one term as president.

Mandela kept up with public engagements and work with the Nelson Mandela Foundation (founded in 1999) focusing on development, education and combating HIV/AIDS. His philanthropic activism included setting up the Mandela Rhodes Foundation and the 46664 campaign. In 2005, to defy stigma about discussing the disease, Mandela publicised AIDS as the cause of his son Makgatho's death.

In June 2004, aged 85 and with his health declining, Mandela announced he was "retiring from retirement", retreating further from public life. Even so, Mandela's 90th birthday in 2008 was celebrated across the world. He made his final public appearance during the 2010 FIFA World Cup and received a huge round of applause from the crowd.

On 5 December 2013, at the age of 95, Mandela died at his home in Houghton surrounded by his family. Ten days of national mourning followed, with Mandela's body lying in state in Pretoria until his state funeral on 15 December. Almost 100 representatives of foreign states travelled to South Africa to attend memorial events and the worldwide media was awash with tributes.

Mandela was widely considered as "the father of the nation" of South Africa and a global icon for social justice and equality. In 2009, the UN General Assembly declared that Mandela's birthday, 18 July, would become 'Mandela Day'. It called on individuals around the world to spend 67 minutes volunteering, to acknowledge the 67 years that Mandela fought against oppression.