

## **Nelson Mandela**

Even though he was a political prisoner for many years, Nelson Mandela has become known as one of the most influential leaders in the world.

South Africa had been colonized by the Dutch, who dominated the political and economic life of the country. Whites had instituted a policy of apartheid, which meant a strict separation and segregation of whites and blacks. The majority of the South African population was black, but they were not allowed to vote, they were not represented in the government, and they were forced to live in separate communities with inferior health care, poor education, and little access to jobs.

Nelson Mandela was born into this system of segregation in 1918. As a young man he studied law and worked as an activist against apartheid. The African National Congress (ANC) was a political group advocating for the rights of blacks in South Africa. Mandela joined them in 1944 and founded the ANC Youth League. He trained as a lawyer and started the first black law firm in the country in 1952 with Oliver Tambo. The two of them campaigned against apartheid and in 1956 Mandela was charged with high treason and plotting to overthrow the government. His trial, along with 155 other activists who were charged, lasted four years before all the charges were dropped.

In 1960, the ANC was outlawed by the apartheid regime. Tensions grew worse and violence between activists and the government was sparked when 69 black people were massacred in Sharpsville, one of the restricted townships where blacks were required to live. Mandela began a campaign of economic sabotage aimed at pressuring the government. As a result, he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. He spent 18 years there and was transferred to a prison on the mainland where he stayed until 1990. He was in prison for a total of 27 years.

During his trial he said, "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."

While he was in prison, his friend and law partner, Oliver Tambo, began an international campaign to free him. In addition, his wife, Winnie, worked tirelessly to raise public awareness about apartheid. After 10 years of international economic boycotts against South Africa, Mandela was freed.

Once released from prison, Mandela worked tirelessly with many of the same people who had imprisoned him to end the practices of apartheid. As a result, he became the first black president of South Africa. It was also the first time all races were allowed to vote in South Africa. He seemed to have a complete lack of bitterness and anger over his brutal treatment in prison. In 1993 he received the Nobel Peace Prize, sharing it with Frederik Willem de Klerk, who was the former president of South Africa.

The official Nobel Prize award stated,

*“From their different points of departure, Mandela and de Klerk have reached agreement on the principles for a transition to a new political order based on the tenet of one man-one vote. By looking ahead to South African reconciliation instead of back at the deep wounds of the past, they have shown personal integrity and great political courage.”*

Nobelprize.org “The Nobel Peace Prize 1993.” Press Release.

[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1993/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1993/press.html) (accessed September 15, 2012).

In 1999, Mandela stepped down as president but he has continued to be an influential leader throughout the world, helping to negotiate peace settlements in several African countries. He has been an activist for HIV/AIDS research, was influential in bringing the 2010 World Cup to South Africa, and convinced a number of world leaders to form a group, called The Elders, to provide advice on global issues.