



mandela - the struggle is my life

The release of Comrade Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela is almost certain to happen in the near future. Over 20 years ago, when the government sentenced Mandela to life imprisonment they thought he would be forgotten by the people of South Africa, and by the world. Unfortunately for the apartheid jailers, their evil hopes have not been realised. Today PW Botha and his government are, in fact, desperate to find some easy way to release Mandela. This is not as a result of any charity on the apartheid regime's part. On the contrary, it is because of the massive pressure within and outside South Africa.

In order to understand the great significance of Mandela's probable release, it is necessary to look at what it is that Mandela symbolises.

Great liberation struggles are often closely associated with the names of outstanding leaders - George Washington, Ho Chi Minh, or Fidel Castro, for instance. Leaders like these come to symbolise in their persons the unity of purpose, the courage, discipline

and defiance of millions of fighters for liberation in their respective countries. In the case of the South African liberation struggle, there are many important names that we honour, men and women, heroes like Albert Luthuli and Dora Temana, martyrs like Johannes Nkosi and Solomon Mahlangu. But there is one name, more than any other, that has come to symbolise our great struggle, both inside our country and all over the world. That name is, of course, NELSON ROLIHLEHLA MANDELA. There are many things for which he stands.

symbol of an unbroken tradition

At the beginning of the 1960s, when the apartheid government cast Mandela into jail, when they banned the ANC, and arrested tens of thousands of patriotic South Africans, the regime thought they had smashed the people's resistance forever. They thought that the long traditions of militant struggle would be forgotten for all time. It is true that our struggle was dealt very heavy blows at this time.

But the fact that Mandela's name is now in the news headlines around the world, that he is spoken of with admiration in every township of our land, shows that the government's evil dreams have come to nothing. In our struggle we have survived the bleak years of the late 1960s and early 1970s. We have proved that our traditions of struggle are unbreakable.

The re-emergence of Mandela's name marks the resurgence of our traditions of struggle.

Nelson Mandela went to jail as a leader of the ANC. Founded in 1912, the ANC is the oldest modern national liberation movement on the African

continent. It has now been in the field of struggle for nearly 74 fighting years.

But Mandela's roots, like our own struggle, go back further than 1912. In his 1964 statement, while on trial for his life, Mandela told the court about his youth in the Transkei. As a young boy he had listened to the elders of his tribe telling the stories of the old days. Among the tales that moved him were those about the wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the land against the robbery of the colonialists. The elders spoke not just of their own Xhosa heroes, but of all the fighting heroes of southern Africa. The names of Dingane and Bambata, Hintsa and Makana, Squngthi and Dalasile, Moshoeshoe and Sekhukhuni, were all praised for bringing glory to the whole African people. The young Mandela was greatly inspired by these stories. Hearing these accounts made him wish to serve his people and make his own contribution to the ongoing struggle against oppression in our land. Looking back to his childhood, Mandela told the court that the heroes of the past were a great motivation for all his actions.

In the 1940s and 1950s, right up till his arrest in 1962 Mandela came to be actively involved in every component of the liberation struggle. He was an organiser in the development of mass-based democratic organisations, he was a diplomat in the service of the movement in his famous trip through Africa, he was an underground cadre, and he was a soldier-leader in the National High Command of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

The struggles in which we are engaged in the 1980s are not new struggles. In the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s Mandela was actively associated with the students struggle against bantu education, and with the struggle against passes.

Just as we have opposed the 'new' constitution of 1984, so Mandela went to jail for his leading role in the mass campaign and national stayaway against the 'new' racist constitution of 1961. At this very moment, when comrades in many areas are building organs of people's power, street by street, we remember it was Mandela who first proposed such a plan, the 'M' Plan, in 1953.

In the first place, then, Mandela symbolises our great unbroken traditions of struggle.

symbol of national unity

The white 'leaders' of South Africa have always only enjoyed the support of a tiny minority of South Africa's people. These minority leaders have attempted to create other, 'viable' (i.e. tame) black leaders - like Buthelezi, Hendrickse and Rajbansi. But these puppets are merely figures of division and disunity.

Mandela stands above all tribal and racial divisions. He is recognised by an overwhelming majority of South Africans as their national leader. Even a growing number of whites see in Mandela the hope for peace and security in our land. These are not empty claims, the apartheid government's own public opinion surveys have had to recognise Mandela's overwhelming support.

The leadership of Mandela symbolises our demand for majority rule in an undivided, non-racial South Africa. Just before the end of the Rivonia Trial, knowing that the white court could sentence him to death, Mandela refused to renounce his basic principles:

Mandela was rooted in our majority African traditions of struggle against white domination. But Mandela also always fought against replacing white domination with simple black domination. It was a democratic, free and non-racial South Africa that he stood for, in which all South Africans could live together in harmony as equals. The whole courtroom was silent, you could hear a pin drop, when Mandela had outlined his ideals. It was clear that he had lived for these things, and wanted to go on fighting. But it was also clear that, if necessary, he was prepared to die for his ideals.

symbol of unity within the ranks

Mandela's own political development drew heavily upon the two main streams within our liberation struggle. An African patriot, as a young man a militant nationalist, he came also to be deeply influenced by older African comrades, like J.B. Marks and Moses Kotane, who were socialists and rooted in the trade union struggles. In his court speech Mandela reflected upon these two major influences on his outlook.

Mandela was attracted by the idea of a classless society. This ideal was partly a result of the Marxist books he had read. But it was also rooted in his admiration for the structures and organisation of early African societies in South Africa. In the days before colonialism, the land belonged to the whole tribe. There were no rich or poor, and there was no exploitation.

It is this depth and combination of traditions, endorsed by Mandela, that lies at the very heart of our national liberation struggle. In the 1950s, and now again in the

1980s it is the combination of the national liberation struggle and the workers' class struggle that has always produced the most militant and most sustained struggles.

symbol of a new society

Ours is not a struggle for civil rights. We do not struggle for a few more crumbs, a few more concessions within the structures of apartheid South Africa. We are struggling to bring about a new South Africa, in which the people shall govern.

In and through struggle that new South Africa is being built. The present crisis of the apartheid government is not a crisis that can be resolved by reforms. No adjustments from above ; imposed over the heads or behind the backs of our people, can work. White minority rule that goes back to the colonial occupation of our land, that was confirmed in the 1910 Union Constitution, and that was intensified after the 1948 election of the NP - this minority rule has now run its course. It is in a cul de sac, a straat loop dood. Only a completely new order can solve the problems of our land. Mandela symbolises this new society, he symbolises the only way forward, and even PW Botha knows this. As one British newspaper put it: "Botha has become Mandela's prisoner".

leader of the people, servant of the people

Mandela has always seen himself as a servant of the struggling people of South Africa, not as a

free-floating individual. He has consistently refused to place his own individual liberty over and above the freedom of all oppressed South Africans. At the beginning of 1985, when Mandela refused to accept Botha's offer of a conditional release it was made clear that he would not and could not give any undertaking at a time when both he himself, and the majority of South Africans were not free. He linked his own freedom with the freedom of all the people.

They offered him freedom in the Transkei. They offered him freedom if he 'renounced violence'. They offered him freedom in exile. They even offered him a 'cooling off' period in Lusaka. Mandela has remained unshakable in his principles. He has even insisted that all his comrades in prison be freed before him.

Mandela is a remarkable person, but he is not just an individual. The heroism of Mandela reflects the great heroism of our people. The maturity, the political depth and steadfastness of Mandela reflects the maturity and depth of experience of our traditions of resistance.

It is OUR struggle that has forged a leader of the great calibre of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

It is OUR struggle that will liberate him from prison.
