



## Nelson Mandela: from the fighter to the peacemaker

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, called “Madiba” too, was a South African great statesman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “Rolihlahla” means “troublemaker”, perhaps that’s why he participated to the equality of his country. Since his childhood, he dreamed of contributing to his people’s struggle for freedom. Today, he is often viewed like a symbol of the fight for the humans’ emancipation.



Therefore, we can ask ourselves how Mandela, a fighter, became a peacemaker.

First, we will see his fight until his imprisonment then we will talk about how he spent his time in prison and finally we will study his strategy as a president.

### Nelson Mandela before 1964: his fight until 1963

Mandela became more and more involved in the African National Congress (ANC), a nationalist political party trying to bring political change in South Africa. The ANC presented a campaign of nonviolent resistance against apartheid laws. But, in 1956, Mandela and other members of the ANC were arrested for treason and liable to death. Because of this, the ANC wanted to start using violence. It is in 1960 that this change caused an important event: police killed black anti-apartheid demonstrators at Sharpeville; there were 69 dead and 186 wounded.

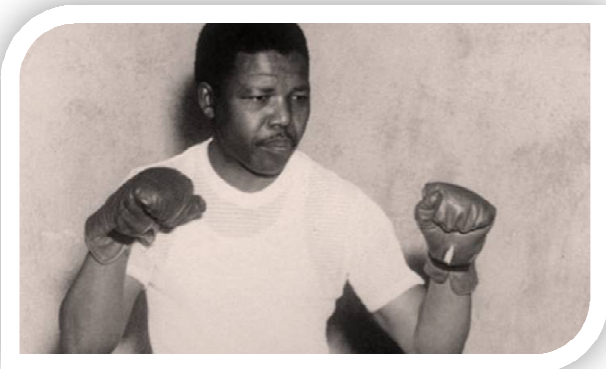


*Massacre at Sharpeville, 1960*

It is at this time that the organization abandoned its policy of passive resistance for good. Then, with some help, Mandela created the ANC’s military branch “Umkhonto we Sizwe” or “The Spear of the Nation”; with this name, we can see the beginning of Mandela’s life as a fighter. He was designated



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commander-in-chief and he received military instructing to be able to fight and support the ANC better. In 1963, a raid occurred where Mandela and other ANC's members worked. Police said they found documents implicating that Mandela had planned to depose the government of its power. Then, Mandela was found guilty of four acts of sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the government: he was sentenced to life in prison. Before his imprisonment he said:

*"I was angry at the white man, not racism... While I was not prepared to hurl the white man into the sea, I would have been perfectly happy if he climbed aboard his steamships and left the continent of his own volition."*  
– Nelson Mandela, autobiography.

This shows Mandela didn't really want equality between whites and blacks: he is not a peacemaker yet. Goldberg, who was also arrested during the raid, believes the MI5 had been spying on Mandela and the farm for a long time.

*"We believe that there was a British intelligence agent in the nearby caravan park. Everyone thought he was a birdwatcher because he would climb up a telegraph pole with binoculars every day. But I think we were the birds he was watching."* –Goldberg, 50 years after he was arrested during a raid in July 1963

So, what happened in prison for Mandela to become a peacemaker?

### Years in prison: time for thoughts

In 1964, Nelson Mandela was sent to Robben Island Prison. This prison was built for political prisoners. Its treatment of those prisoners was hard: there were 60 imprisoned persons in a cell made for



Mandela's cell in Robben Island prison

20 people; they had to do exhausting hard labors like working in rock quarries. In their "bedroom", they didn't have beds and used buckets instead of toilets. Of course, prisoners rarely communicated with the outside. Mandela was a "Class D" prisoner: he could only have one visit and send two letters per year and he worked in the limestone quarries. He was sentenced to life in prison, but, in spite of the humiliation imposed by the wardens, his



spirit couldn't be broken. He was offered conditional freedom but he refused. In 1990, the South African government responded to intentional pressure and ameliorated Mandela's conditions: he could write and receive one letter every six months. He put his pride aside and even became friends with guards and the warden who kept him in prison and who would finally improve prison conditions too.

*"To sit down with them, to exchange views was one of the most revealing experiences I have." –Nelson Mandela when he was in prison.*

Thanks to his intelligence, his charm and his attitude of resistance, Mandela subjected the most brutal wardens to his will, he was considered as a leader by his comrades and he became the master of his own prison. He emerged from it the mature leader who would fight and win the great political battle that would create a new democratic South Africa. Nelson and other prisoners began a hunger strike to receive better food. They succeeded. And during the winter, Nelson demanded long pants but the guards refused. He continued and after a week, he woke up and found a pair of pants in his cell. He noticed that no one else had them in their cell, so he gave back the pants. The wardens were confused about his intention, but they realized that Nelson Mandela had a big heart. Mandela's imprisonment was "an experience that steeled him". It was in prison that he learnt his most important lessons: he confessed that the prison changed him in a way that he became stronger.

*"It enriched your own life. It fortified your morality. It gave you courage to do better than you best." –Nelson Mandela, interview with O magazine, 2001.*

Before prison, he was persuaded that the only way of getting his people's freedom was by force of arms. But he learnt through his relationship with the guards that black and white people didn't have a lot of differences, that they had many things in common. He learnt that forgiveness, generosity and respect are weapons of political persuasion as powerful as any gun.



*Mandela in prison, becoming a peacemaker*

*"I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal for which I hope to live for and to see realized. But my lord, if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." –Nelson Mandela, defence statement during the Rivonia Trial, 1964. Also repeated during the closing of his speech delivered in Cape Town on the day he was released from prison 27 years later, on 11 February 1990.*

## After prison: his strategy and achievement as a president

After his release from prison in 1990, Mandela had a choice: to choose revenge or reconciliation. Mandela opted for reconciliation because he knew it was the only way to build a democratic system





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in South Africa. The prison changed his manner of thinking. Mandela's imprisonment was an ordeal that forged him: Stengel said

*"He was a tempestuous, compassionate man who went into prison and prison just molded him and forced him not to show any of that emotion. And the man who emerged was a different man." –Stengel, Mandela's biographer.*

We notice that prison changed him, he acquired self-control. He managed to stay impassive facing white people. During his prison years, he had secret visits with the president of South Africa and he talked with him about their country. Mandela was ready to "collaborate" with the government and to change his kind of fight against apartheid. This, among other reasons, is why he was released from prison.



*« The man who emerged was a different man »*

Then, he was appointed Deputy President of the ANC and in 1991 he became President of the ANC until 1997. He modified their constitution which expressed from now on that racial discrimination is against the law. Still, he remained an anti-apartheid activist.

*"We are not anti-white; we are against white supremacy... We have condemned racialism no matter by whom it is professed." – Nelson Mandela, defense statement during the Treason Trial, 1961.*

He was elected president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999. He was the first black chief in South Africa, and the first elected in a fully representative democratic election. Mandela would change mentalities.



*The first time Mandela voted, guess who he voted for?*

*"Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another..." –Nelson Mandela, Inaugural Address, 9 May 1994.*



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To unify his country, Mandela had the idea to juxtapose the two anthems: he wanted this new anthem to be a powerful symbolic message of national harmony. Mandela was able to forgive the old enemy and he was able to put aside his hatred, the vengeful impulses towards white people he might have accumulated during his 27 years in prison. Thanks to Mandela's actions, South Africa could achieve its transition from tyranny to democracy using persuasion, not repression.

*"We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world" –Nelson Mandela, 9 May 1994*

With this behaviour, Mandela was seen as a peacemaker. His anti-apartheid struggle was definitively different from the one before his imprisonment. Mandela has handed down his nation the rule of law, freedom of speech, free and fair elections. He showed that one can be a great human being and a great politician at the same time, provided one is respectful of both friends and enemies. He revealed that one can associate power and magnanimity.

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To conclude, Nelson Mandela never forgot his devotion to democracy, equality and learning. Despite terrible provocation, he never answered to racism with racism. His life has been an inspiration to all, who are oppressed and deprived, to all who fought for freedom and equality.





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