

# Nelson Mandela - an African nationalist

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**The death of Nelson Mandela removes a renowned political leader and world figure from the South African and international stage writes South African socialist Norman Traub. As a political leader of the African National Congress (ANC) from the late 1940s , he played a key role in the national liberation struggle. Following the negotiated settlement and the first democratic elections held in South Africa in 1994, he became president. The democratic rights achieved by the oppressed black population was a big step forward. However, the social conditions of severe deprivation which they had to endure under the rule of the racist regimes remain and is devastating the lives of millions.**

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Mandela was the son of a chief, who was an adviser to the king of the Thembu tribe. He was born in the Transkei in the Eastern Cape, educated in missionary schools and then attended Fort Hare University. He came into conflict with the university authorities and was expelled before he could complete his degree. He left for Johannesburg, where he studied to become a lawyer and he joined the ANC. This was soon after the end of the second world war. He and Oliver Tambo, who later became president of the ANC in exile, set up a joint law practice in Johannesburg. Mandela, together with Robert Sobukwe and other young radicals in the ANC formed the ANC Youth League, a militant pressure group in the ANC. I remember as a student at the university in Johannesburg, attending a meeting addressed by Mandela and Sobukwe and being struck by the commanding presence of Mandela and the charisma of Sobukwe. At the time of its formation in 1912, the ANC was the first organisation formed to unite Africans. Its leaders saw its political role as appealing to the Great White King in Britain to undo the injustices inflicted on Africans by successive white regimes in South Africa. Its policy was to participate in elections to dummy institutions, such as Advisory Boards in the towns and Bungas in the countryside and whose advice was ignored by the White Parliament and City Councils, where the real power lay. The petit bourgeois leadership of the ANC was tied to the white liberals, the representatives of British capitalism in South Africa. The Youth League came up with a Programme of Action to struggle for the rights of national freedom, political independence and self determination and the rejection of white leadership and all forms of segregation. This was at a time when the National Party, controlled by the Afrikaner petit bourgeois, funded by the Afrikaner bourgeoisie and influenced by Nazi ideology, was elected to run the white

government.

In 1949 the ANC conference adopted the Programme of Action and called for a boycott of inferior political institutions. The long serving members in the ANC executive including those who had joint South African Communist Party(SACP) ANC membership, were against the boycott. Mandela had in 1948 visited IB Tabata, who was his senior, also came from the Eastern Cape and was a leader of the All African Convention(AAC). In 1935, when the franchise was taken away from African males in the Cape and replaced by the Native Representative Council(NRC), a dummy institution; the All African Convention(a federation of African organisations) was formed to oppose the legislation. It rejected the discriminatory legislation introduced by the white government and adopted a policy of non collaboration with the oppressor and the boycott of all inferior institutions. As Tabata explained in a subsequent letter to Mandela, [1] the ANC, which at the time had been organisationally in the doldrums, was resuscitated to smash the unity achieved by the formation of the AAC and its policy of non collaboration. He went on to explain that politically the Youth League did not belong to the ANC and that if it followed its political principles it would find itself outside the ANC. In spite of the adoption of the Programme of Action, the ANC continued its policy of working within the dummy institutions, created by the white government.

### **South Africa a police state**

When the National Party came to power it passed increasingly repressive legislation, such as the Group Areas Act, which extended residential and occupational segregation for the blacks. The laws which the government passed came to be known as apartheid laws, though they were an extension of the segregation acts passed by previous white governments. Other government legislation, such as the Suppression of Communism Act and the banning of organisations and individuals, was designed to cripple the struggle against racist oppression. South Africa was fast becoming a police state. Faced with this situation, the ANC, turned increasingly to working together with the Coloured and Indian organisations and the SACP. Influenced by Gandhi's tactics of passive resistance, the ANC and its allies launched the Defiance Campaign. This was a passive resistance campaign which involved volunteers defying unjust laws and courting arrest by marching into "white entrances" of post offices, railway stations, breaching curfew regulations and pass laws. Mandela as "National-Volunteer- in-Chief" played a central role in this campaign. This campaign was designed to exploit the divisions in white politics, appealing to the English section of the electorate to pressurise the government to change course. This tactic did not seriously inconvenience the white government or population. Thousands of the volunteers were arrested and many were imprisoned. The laws remained in place, disillusionment spread among those taking part in the campaign, which collapsed. The problem was that as a reformist organisation, the ANC did not view the struggle as a whole and protested against separate acts of oppression. Without a co-ordinated strategy against oppression and the necessity of building the organisation into a fighting instrument, there was no prospect of overturning the system. Not understanding that racial oppression was an instrument of class exploitation, the struggle became an "anti-apartheid struggle", not one for the overthrow of the capitalist system as a whole.

The racist regime in response to the Defiance Campaign and other protests ,passed further repressive laws aimed at crippling the resistance of the black population. The oppressed people were subject to a merciless onslaught by the police state, including mass imprisonments, killings, torture, banning of the political organisations and emergency rule. Following the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960, the ANC and its ally the SACP, turned from passive resistance to sabotage. Sabotage consisted of blowing up telephone lines and transportation links, and other targets that would "frighten National Party supporters, scare away foreign capital and weaken the economy. This

we hoped would bring the government to the bargaining table”(Mandela- Long Walk to Freedom p.336). A special organisation “Umkhonto we Sizwe” was set up to carry out this programme . Nelson Mandela left the country in January 1961 and travelled to various African and Western European countries to negotiate military and diplomatic support for the sabotage campaign. In the course of his 6 months journey, he received military training in Ethiopia but was summoned urgently back to South Africa before he could complete the course of training. Over 200 acts of sabotage, from setting fire to post boxes, attacks on public buildings and attempts to destroy railway signal systems, were carried out. The sabotage campaign did not get very far in fulfilling its aims. The impact on the white community was limited by the scanty press coverage and the usually superficial damage that resulted from the bombings. Nelson Mandela operating clandestinely, was arrested shortly after his return to South Africa in August 1962. The police were able to infiltrate a number of their spies into Umkhonto. As a result of infiltration and betrayals most of the national high command of the organisation were identified and captured, many of them at Rivonia in 1963. Ben Turok of Umkhonto subsequently said ‘the sabotage campaign failed on the main count-it did not raise the level of action of the masses themselves’. How could it, when the masses were not involved in the decision to engage in or carry out acts of sabotage?

### **Mandela on trial**

Mandela and the leaders of Umkhonto captured at Rivonia were brought to trial in 1963 on a charge of sabotage. The lawyers defending those charged feared that the death sentence would be imposed at least on some of the accused and in particular on Mandela. When he gave evidence in his defence, Mandela ended his speech in court with the following “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.” His brave stand was reported widely in South Africa, despite the fact that by law he could not be quoted in the media in his own country. The world had been paying attention to the trial and night long vigils were held at St Paul’s Cathedral in London before the verdict was delivered. He was found guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was to spend 27 years in prison, mostly on Robben Island.

While the sabotage campaign in the country had been smashed , as part of the ANC programme, 300 recruits were sent across South Africa’s borders for military training in sympathetic African countries, the Soviet Union and China. However, Umkhonto had not gone beyond the planning stage of a guerrilla war and disaffection occurred among those, who having received military training were confined to the ANC training camps in East Africa, with no immediate prospect of returning to South Africa to engage the enemy. The ANC conference at Morogoro in 1969 stressed that it was necessary to convert urban based sabotage to guerrilla war based in the countryside. After 1975, with the support of Frelimo in power in Mozambique and MPLA in Angola, it was once again possible for Umkhonto to establish regular contact with its supporters in South Africa. It was able to infiltrate military trained cadres into South Africa, who carried out acts of sabotage, mainly in the urban areas. Without the involvement of the masses there was no prospect of engaging in guerrilla war. The few hundred sabotage attacks carried out by trained military cadres equipped with powerful explosives, created more damage than those carried out in the first sabotage campaign. However, at no stage was the ANC sabotage campaign a serious challenge to the functioning of the South African state, its army and its economy. The ANC in exile came increasingly under the control of the SACP, which with its connections to the Soviet Union was able to ensure a steady flow of finance and military equipment from the USSR. Both the ANC and the SACP had many contacts in Western Europe and the US and organisations in solidarity with the oppressed black South Africans, like the Anti- Apartheid Movement in Britain, were established in many countries. Countries, like Sweden

and Norway provided financial aid, scholarships and other support for the ANC.

On Robben Island, the political prisoners fought against the harsh regime imposed on them by the prison authorities and over the years had to resort to hunger strikes and other forms of resistance to try to gain the status of political prisoners. They won significant concessions, such as ending manual labour and better conditions for studying. Mandela studied for a further law degree from London University. He was able in prison to provide legal assistance to many prisoners, although prison regulations strictly forbade this. Inside the country South Africa was experiencing a dark period of severe repression. The widespread resistance of the peasantry in the countryside against the state reached its height in Pondoland in 1960, where eleven men were killed at Ngquza Hill by the police. In the towns, it was not before the early 70s that African workers, having all the years been denied the right to form trade unions, challenged their bosses and the state by engaging in what were then unlawful strikes in Durban. Within a short time they had established a number of trade unions. By 1979 they had formed the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), which was the foundation stone of the non racial trade unions. The flame of rebellion spread to the African children in 1976, who in what came to be known as the Soweto uprising, heroically resisted the Bantu Education Act, with its compulsory provision that certain subjects such as arithmetic be taught in Afrikaans. The rebellion against this compulsory teaching started in Soweto, and the reaction of the state was the killing of two children, shot by the police. The revolt spread from Soweto to other parts of the country. The police showed no mercy in putting down the rebellion, at the end of which it is estimated there were 575 dead and 2389 wounded.

### Mass strikes

In the 80's the apartheid regime was in crisis. The vacuum in black politics following the slaughter at Sharpeville in the early 60s, had been broken by the Soweto uprising and the advent of the black trade unions in the 70s. There were many strikes and the youth led the fight against racist education, setting up committees, which welded them into a disciplined force. South Africa was in deep recession, with a balance of payments crisis and increasing foreign debt. Thousands of workers were sacked and wage reductions imposed on many of those employed. Having rejected dummy institutions, such as the tricameral parliament for Coloureds and Indians and township councils for the Africans, the blacks engaged in a series of mass struggles. The government responded by sending in the police and army to the black townships to try and break the resistance of the population. The youth, trade unions and community organisations called a regional strike centred around Johannesburg in November 1984, with a set of economic and political demands. About a million people participated in the strike. For the first time in an action of this scope the independent workers movement, through the main trade union organisations, emerged as the backbone of the struggle against the apartheid regime. Outside the country, the campaigns of disinvestment from South Africa and the cultural and sports boycotts organised by the solidarity movements in many countries, were very effective. Businesses and institutions such as universities were refusing to invest in South Africa and the damage done to sport and culture in the country, was causing disaffection with the government among sections of the white population. Perhaps the greatest blow to the South African economy was the refusal in 1985 of foreign banks such as Chase Manhattan to roll over South African debt. The message from overseas finance capital to the South African government was loud and clear, either you come to terms with the black South Africans or we will no longer do business with you. What the capitalists feared most was that a revolutionary situation was developing in South Africa and that they were in danger of losing not only the capital they had invested in the country but the opportunity for further profitable investment in the country.

In South Africa, the white bourgeoisie, faced with the crisis on their doorstep, had reached similar

conclusions to the imperialist bourgeoisie. They too believed it was necessary to talk to the black leaders. In 1985 a top level delegation of white businessmen, including mining and industrial magnates flew to Lusaka to meet the leaders of the ANC in exile. When they returned to South Africa they expressed their belief that they "could do business with the ANC leaders". Further meetings between white business leaders and intellectuals with the ANC leaders took place. In prison, Nelson Mandela independently, had reached the conclusion that it was necessary to approach the government with a view to them initiating negotiations with the ANC. He was able to speak to a cabinet minister, Kobie Coetzee but initially there was no response to his request for negotiations. But as the crisis facing the racist regime deepened, the government formed a special committee, headed by Coetzee to engage in secret negotiations with Mandela.

### **“Protect the minorities”**

A "satisfactory" solution to the crisis in South Africa was one of the top items on the agenda for US imperialism. The US sponsored a conference in Bermuda in 1989 attended by members of the US Congress and Senate, at which representatives of the National Party, ANC, Inkatha and other South African parties were present. The conclusion the conference reached was that "All parties now accept that the conflict will be resolved through negotiation". The US and the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, played a key role in the negotiations, which led to the agreement reached on the withdrawal of Cuban and South African troops from Angola and the settlement of the Namibian conflict. Chester Crocker, the spokesman for the US acknowledged its indebtedness to the Soviet Union for its role in the negotiations "There is no doubt that the Soviets have indeed used their role and influence not on two but on the three parties to the agreement(International Herald Tribune 11<sup>th</sup> December 1988)". The South African government were also not slow to commend the role the Soviet Union was playing in the world. The South African Defence minister, Magnus Malan was reported to have said that the USSR had broken its mould of "confrontation seeker" in favour of economic and technological advances and closer ties with the West.

The pressures for a negotiated settlement in South Africa intensified. F.W. de Klerk replaced Piet Botha as South African president and soon after his appointment he had a meeting with Mandela. Mandela raised the question of "group rights" in the National Party five year plan, which would "protect the freedom of minorities" in a new South Africa. He told de Klerk that this was a way of preserving white domination and was unacceptable to the ANC. He called for the unbanning of the ANC and all other political organisations, lifting the State of Emergency, release of political prisoners and allowing the exiles to return. Two months later, in February 1990 in Parliament, de Klerk announced the lifting of the bans on the ANC, PAC, the SACP and 31 illegal organisations, the freeing of political prisoners and other measures to dismantle the apartheid state. The time for negotiations had arrived. It would be a further 4 years before the first democratic elections in 1994 took place. Over 10,000 people were killed in the black townships from the time of de Klerk's inauguration as president in 1989 till the holding of elections. Infighting among black political organisations accounted for some of the killings, mostly between the ANC and Inkatha, whose leader was Chief Buthelezi. Inkatha had been used by the racist regime as an instrument of divide and rule. The government instead of trying to calm the situation, by its actions was egging the parties on. It hoped that through this policy it would be able to weaken the ANC and strengthen its position at the negotiating table. It consistently advocated group rights and a federation of states. It tried to establish a position, whereby minority parties had veto powers in the new political dispensation. It was mass action, which culminated in a general strike in August 1992 with four million workers staying at home, which catapulted de Klerk into breaking the deadlock in the negotiations and signing a Record of Understanding with Mandela. In further negotiations, it accepted the demand of the ANC for full democratic rights in a unitary state. However, tribalism was kept alive artificially by

the entrenchment of the rule of the chiefs in the constitution. The property rights of the whites, who owned most of the wealth of the country, the mines, the factories and 87% of the land, were guaranteed in the new constitution. In February 1993, the government and the ANC announced an agreement in principle on a five year government of national unity and a multiparty cabinet.

## **President Mandela**

In April 1994, the first democratic elections were held, the ANC receiving 63% of the votes. Mandela was sworn in as president of South Africa and Thabo Mbeki and de Klerk as deputy president. Just before the election, the ANC and the SACP had unveiled a document, whose purpose was redistribution of some of the wealth to the black population. The foreword to the document stated, "No political democracy can survive and flourish if the mass of our people remain in poverty, without land, without tangible prospects for a better life". The title of the plan was the "Reconstruction and Development Plan"(RDP). As part of the programme, one million houses were to be built in five years, 350,000 houses were to be electrified in the first and four subsequent years and clean water, sanitation and health care were to be available to all by the end of the fifth year. Primary health care was to be extended and ten years of free education to be provided to all South Africans. The land was to be redistributed through a land claims court and the value-added tax on basic foodstuffs ended. The RDP document however committed itself to fiscal discipline and macro-economic conservatism. It stated " We must finance the RDP in ways that do not cause undue inflation or balance of payments difficulties." It added "The vast bulk of the RDP will be financed by existing resources organised, rationalised and directed within the RDP guidelines, without additional borrowing or a rise in general taxation." Not a word about nationalisation of the mines or industries promised by the ANC in the 1955 Freedom Charter. Mandela's State of the Nation address to the new democratic parliament in August 1994 revealed the real nature of the ANC economic policy. In place of nationalisation, Mandela promised to maintain financial discipline and reduce the budget deficit, which then stood at 6.8% of gross domestic product. He said he would do this without raising taxes. There was no hint in his speech of refusing to pay the illegitimate debt accumulated by the apartheid government in trying to maintain apartheid and awarding huge pensions to cabinet ministers and civil servants. Commenting on Mandela's speech, Patti Waldmeir of the Financial times said " Such has been the revolution in the economic rhetoric of the ANC that President Mandela might have drawn yesterday's State of Nation address to the multi-racial parliament from a textbook on orthodoxy."(My Life Under White Supremacy p.297-Nikani)

A totally inadequate sum of R2.5 billion was budgeted for the first year of the RDP. There were no definite sources for funding the programme, the funds were to come from savings from the various ministries. It took just one year for the RDP to be discontinued and its tasks taken over by the line ministries. Far fewer than the one million homes were built during five years. The cost of electrifying homes was to be borne by Eskom, the electricity public utility. Mandela claimed that 63% of households were connected to the electricity grid at the end of his term of office. However, of the 2.5 million homes with no electricity on Mandela's coming into office, hundreds of thousands of homes remained without electricity when he left office. As far as the 'substantial funds' for land distribution that the RDP had called on the government to provide within the framework of the new constitution, they were just not there. The Ministry of Agriculture had to take over and worked out a land reform plan. In terms of the original land distribution target, the government was to transfer 30% of the country's agricultural land(30 million hectares) to black ownership by 1999. The actual number of hectares the government had transferred by 1999 was 355,000 to 39,000 households, which works out as 0.6% of the land. This project had to be abandoned because of the lack of funds. Black poverty is rooted in land deprivation and failure to deal with the land question showed that the government was unable to make any real impact on solving the problem of poverty. On

unemployment, instead of reducing the level of unemployment, which was estimated to be 5 million, when the ANC led government came to power, the job losses at the end of Mandela's term of office were more than 500,000.

### **ANC sides with the bosses**

After the failure of the RDP, the government closed down the RDP office and terminated the RDP special budget. In June 1996, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Policy(GEAR) statement was issued. It was designed to cement neoliberal orthodoxy. While the RDP was doomed to failure from the start, the government was determined to do all in its power to make GEAR work. A major aim of GEAR was to achieve an economic growth rate of 6% by the year 2000. In order to do this the government aimed to keep wage increases down to no more than 0.8% above the official inflation rate, at least until the year 2000. This meant that the majority of workers, who were grossly underpaid, would find the government siding with the bosses against them in their ongoing struggle for a living wage. Another key strategy of GEAR was the privatisation of state assets, which went hand in hand with a programme to cut government spending. Both meant a large scale loss of jobs.

The late Neville Alexander, in the fourth Strini Moodley Annual Memorial Lecture in 2010, [2] made the point that "the bourgeoisie and a few of the leaders of the Congress Alliance were clear that the 1993-94 agreements were in essence about stabilising the capitalist state and system in South Africa and creating the conditions for its expansion as a profitable venture." Professor Terreblanche's summary of the hidden negotiations dealing with the economic aspects of the negotiated settlement in his " A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652-2002" said that there was no innocence on the side of the leadership of the ANC and of prominent leaders of the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions(COSATU), the federation of trade unions which had been established when FOSATU joined up with other unions in 1979. This was the case in spite of disagreements on policy, which fact became evident most dramatically with the eventual imposition of the macroeconomic policy of GEAR. The following statement gives a crystal clear picture of what actually happened.

*"At stake was not only the economic policy of a democratically elected government but also the nature of South Africa's future economic system. Given that South Africa was the most developed country in Africa, the stakes were extremely high, and the negotiations were strategically hugely important for the corporate sector. For almost 20 years all the joint attempts of the corporate sector and the NP [National Party] government to find a new accumulation strategy had been unsuccessful. After almost 20 years of prolonged stagflation, the latter was desperate to convince the core leaders of the democratic movement what the economic ideology and economic system in a democratic South Africa should be.*

The strategy on which the corporate sector and the ANC agreed during the informal negotiations in 1993 can be described as the fourth phase of the AAC-led [Anglo-American Corporation] search for a new accumulation strategy. [...] The main characteristic of every phase of the AAC-led search for a new accumulation strategy was that the supreme goal of economic policy should be to attain a high economic growth rate, and that all other objectives should be subordinated to this. By convincing ANC leaders to accept the AAC's approach, the corporate sector in effect persuaded - or forced - the ANC to move away from its traditional priority, namely to uplift the impoverished black majority socially and economically." (Terreblanche, Sampie. 2002. A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652-2002. pp. 95-96)

As Alexander concluded in his lecture " There ought to be no doubt in anyone's mind after a close reading of this text that, and why, the bourgeoisie, the self same capitalist class of yesterday, is in

command of all the strategic position, no matter what the “democratic posturing of the politicians might be.” Today, the ANC, SACP coalition government, presides over one of the most unequal societies in the world . In a talk I gave to Socialist Resistance earlier on this year dealing with the present situation in South Africa, I said the following,

*“ Mass unemployment and poverty wages , continue to plague post apartheid society. In fact , unemployment has doubled since 1994. When those workers who have given up looking for work are taken into account, the figure is a massive 40% of the total work force. One third of workers earn less than R960(£75) a month, while half the workforce earn less than R2,400(£185). Today , 15 million South Africans are saved from starvation by the social grants they receive. Shanty towns spring up everywhere, particularly in the big cities and it is estimated that 17 million people live in shacks, where there is inadequate access to water electricity and sanitation. The HIV pandemic affects more people in SA than any other country in the world, over 5 and a half million people, just under 12% of the population(2007). However, there has been a dramatic 5 year increase in life expectancy from 54 years in 2005 to 60 in 2011. thanks to the biggest programme of HIV drug treatment. Crime and violence are horrific, over 15,000 murders are committed yearly.”*

Mandela’s political career starting after the end of the second world war when he joined the ANC, spanned a long period of time. He was at the centre of the politics of the ANC from the time he helped form the ANC Youth League in the 40’s till the completion of his term of office as South African president in 1999. His role in the liberation struggle cannot be separated from the politics of the ANC. There were more radical policies championed by other political organisations to those put forward by the ANC, SACP alliance during the liberation struggle. The racist regime and the ANC, SACP alliance opposed these policies, each for their own reasons. Internal as well as external forces ensured that the plans of the organisations advocating them were thwarted at every turn.

### **An African nationalist**

Mandela and his government in 1994 had to deal with the dreadful legacy of apartheid. That legacy hangs as a dead weight on the present. The policies of Mandela’s government and those that followed him, while providing social grants to millions of people, saving them from starvation, failed to deal with the causes of continuing social deprivation of the vast majority of blacks. He and his government, dominated by the ANC, SACP alliance together with the governments that followed his, share part of the responsibility for the dire situation the vast majority of black South Africans find themselves in today. COSATU, although not in government, as part of the tripartite alliance with the ANC and SACP, was constrained by that alliance in its defence of the interests of the workers from attacks by the state and the bosses. On too many occasions its leadership was found wanting.

The demand for full democratic rights for the oppressed blacks was central to the national liberation struggle. The achievement of this demand in 1994 was a big step forward for the oppressed. It strengthened their confidence that at last they had a say in the running of the country. The struggles they are now engaged in are being conducted on a higher plateau. There is no longer the colour bar to hide the true nature of their struggle, against class exploitation. The workers and landless peasantry are having to propel themselves forward in the titanic struggle to free themselves from class exploitation. Mandela, as an African nationalist, is recognised for his role in the struggle of black South Africans for democratic rights. He and the leadership of the ANC however, could no longer hide when in government, that their class interests were opposed to those of the mass of workers and landless peasantry in South Africa.

**Norman Traub**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://socialistresistance.org/5331/nelson-mandela-an-african-nationalist>

\* <http://www.apdusa.org.za/nelson-mandela-an-african-nationalist/>

\* The writer of this obituary, published on the website of Socialist Resistance UK and reproduced here, is a senior member of APDUSA who is resident in England.

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**Footnotes**

[1] which can be downloaded from the APDUSA website:

[http://www.apdusa.org.za/wp-content/books/letter\\_to\\_mandela.pdf](http://www.apdusa.org.za/wp-content/books/letter_to_mandela.pdf)

[2] See on ESSF (article 17478), [South Africa - An unfinished revolution?](#).